

**Design of a New-Age Conglomerate: Examining Amazon INC's Infrastructure and the
Evolution of the Contemporary Digital Conglomerate**

by

Ambrose Neroh Curtis

Bachelor of Arts, University of Rhode Island, 2013

Master of Arts, University of Rhode Island, 2015

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2021

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

DIETRICH SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

This dissertation was presented

by

Ambrose Neroh Curtis

It was defended on

November 16, 2020

and approved by

Dr. Waverly Duck, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology

Dr. Gordon R. Mitchell, Associate Professor, Department of Communication

Dr. Caitlin F. Bruce, Associate Professor, Department of Communication

Dissertation Director: Dr. Brenton J. Malin, Associate Professor, Department of Communication

Copyright © by Ambrose Neroh Curtis

2021

Design of a New-Age Conglomerate: Examining Amazon INC's Infrastructure and the Evolution of the Contemporary Digital Conglomerate

Ambrose Neroh Curtis, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2021

Amazon is a corporation that is tremendous in its infrastructural breadth and ambition. The company is a part of class of new-age conglomerates that includes contemporaries Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, and Google (known as FAANG). In order to maintain its exponential growth, the new-age conglomerate must rely on an exponentially expanding labor force. This work force includes all types of laborers, running the gamut from more traditionally employed laborers to independent contractors. This work examines the ways in which Amazon as a modern conglomerate proliferates new labor precedents for those who may lend their labor to the company in the hopes that these jobs will provide them economic prosperity, as Amazon promises via much of its career opportunities communications.

This project argues that despite the promises that Amazon makes to its army of laborers and potential laborers, the realities of the working conditions, expectations, and compensation are starkly different. Moreover, this project examines the ways in which these laborers cope with the precarious realities of their labor. Specifically, this project argues that these laborers often engage in acts of “precarious pre-labor” or ancillary labor necessary to mitigate the uncertainty brought about by their Amazon labor. I focus mainly on one type of precarious pre-labor that is prevalent amongst these workers, which is engagement with each other through online communities in order to provide support and tips for survival. Through digital ethnographic research on the Reddit.com platform, I explore both older threads and more contemporary conversations that demonstrate the

survival techniques that these laborers engage in as they labor to help Amazon reach its expansion goals.

My ultimate ambition is to also add a more humanistic viewpoint to the ongoing discussions about Amazon, its expansion, and the labor that powers it all. By examining the ways in which a new-age conglomerate situates itself as a producer of labor and also within the contemporary economic landscape this work seeks to answer questions about how these modern conglomerates are shifting labor paradigms and the impact that is having on those who are most victimized by these shifts in labor norms.

Table of Contents

Preface.....	viii
1.0 Introduction.....	1
1.1 Anatomy of a New-Age Conglomerate	3
1.2 Labor and the New-Age Conglomerate.....	9
1.3 Precarity and Precarious Pre-Labor	12
1.4 Methodology.....	15
1.5 Chapter Descriptions	19
1.6 Conclusion	22
2.0 Are These Hits Worth Turking For?	24
2.1 The Promise of MTurk	29
2.2 Precarity and Human Intelligence Tasks.....	31
2.3 Precarious Pre-Labor: The Work of Laboring Efficiently	40
2.4 Conclusion	46
3.0 Traversing the Dangers of Amazon's Last Mile.....	47
3.1 Amazon and the Evolution of it Delivery Operations	51
3.1.1 Logistics Networking.....	53
3.1.2 Amazon Logistics: Own Your Success.....	55
3.1.3 An Introduction to Amazon Flex	58
3.2 The Promise of Amazon Flex.....	60
3.3 The Reality of Amazon Flex Labor	64
3.3.1 “Great Earnings” and the Last Mile	66

3.3.2 Agency, Flexibility, and Being your own Boss	70
3.4 r/AmazonFlexDrivers and the Precarious Pre-Labor of Avoiding Risk	74
3.4.1 The Danger.....	76
3.4.2 Covid-19: The New Danger	81
3.5 Hybrid Precarities: Fear of Bodily Harm, Competition, and Expendable Labor	102
3.6 Conclusion	106
4.0 The Human Costs of Conglomeration	110
4.1 Innovation and the New-Age Conglomerate	113
4.2 Outward Expansion and Core Strengthening	117
4.3 Amazon + Whole Foods Market: Brick and Mortar Expansion E-Commerce Intentions	124
4.4 r/wholefoods: The Human Costs of Conglomeration.....	134
4.4.1 Whole Foods, Amazon and Employee Health	137
4.4.2 Infrastructural Changes and Increasing Precarity	146
4.4.3 Financial Insecurity and Planned Obsolescence	156
4.5 Differently Precarious	162
4.6 Conclusion	165
5.0 Conclusions	167
Bibliography	174
Bibliography of Reddit Threads.....	185

Preface

I am blessed to have incredible people in my life who have contributed greatly to my every success. My family deserves all of the glory for their continual support: my unconditionally loving parents Mangee and Emanuel; my sister Samantha, whose example has always been my guiding light; and my brother Emel who inspires me more than he will ever know. Five years ago you all drove me from Rhode Island to Pittsburgh in a U-Haul and have gone above and beyond to be there for me throughout this entire process.

To my friends who always keep me grounded, thank you. Hil, Jay, Sabrina, Brito, Jen you have all done so much to keep me connected to home base. All of you have been in my life since before this entire journey was ever a thought in my mind, and I know that I will always be “Brose” to you guys no matter how many degrees I acquire. It means the world to me to have people who know me and love me for who I am. My academy friends have also been instrumental to my growth and development as a person. Emma and Ryan, you both started this journey with me at the University of Rhode Island, and it has been wonderful to see you both embark on your own personal and academic journeys. To my PITT brother Dan, thank you for keeping me sane out here. We have been the best of friends since day one and one day we will laugh in disbelief about this whole experience. Because of your comradery I never felt alone on this journey.

I am extremely lucky to have had many people see the potential in me before I ever did. Rachel DiCioccio, you taught me nearly everything I know about pedagogy. I will never forget the day that you called me aside after class as an undergrad and told me that I was a “rock star” in the classroom. That day changed my life and when I think back to it, I can pinpoint that as the moment I began to believe in myself as an academic. Adam Roth, you have been not only a teacher

and mentor to me, but also the older brother I never had. I remember the night that you took me out to dinner and convinced me to embark on this graduate school journey. You have been instrumental in my development as a man, and taught me the ropes as an academic. I am in awe of all that you have accomplished in the 10 years that I have known you, and I know that I will continue to be.

Truly, I am fortunate to have worked with extraordinary professors and scholars at the University of Pittsburgh, 4 of whom are on my dissertation committee. Thank you Caitlin Bruce, Gordon Mitchell, and Waverly Duck for being such inspirations over the years. This includes in the classroom and as committee members during this dissertation process. I would like to especially thank my advisor Brent Malin. You were the first person I met with when I arrived in Pittsburgh and you have guided me from that day forward. Thank you for being patient with me as I have worked through this project from its point of inception. Your attention to detail always let me know that you were giving as much of yourself to this project as you expected of me. I know that I would not have survived this process without your support and mentorship. You gave me the freedom to make this project my own, and I will never forget all that you have done for me in Pittsburgh.

It took a village to get to this point, and while I know I have forgotten many, I want to thank everyone who has contributed to this project and this moment. Lastly, I would like to thank my students. I hope that I have inspired you all as much as you have inspired me over the years.

1.0 Introduction

In September of 2018 Amazon.com Inc. (or Amazon) became the second company in history – only behind Apple – to cross the trillion-dollar valuation threshold (Streitfeld, 2018). The e-commerce company, which was founded in 1994, has come to reinvent and redefine the modern conglomerate. In addition to this, founder Jeff Bezos now holds the title of the world's richest man with a net worth of over \$150 billion, making him more wealthy than Bill Gates and Warren Buffet combined. As of right now there seem to be no signs of slowing down for the e-commerce giant, which now captures 49 cents of every e-commerce dollar spent in the United States, employs more than 560,000 people, and generates \$178 billion in annual revenue (Lunden, 2018; Streitfeld, 2018). Moreover, the conglomerate is continually growing in scope and breadth as the design of its infrastructure continues to shift and evolve.

Today Amazon owns over 40 subsidiaries, which make up the ever-expanding infrastructure of the company. These include such varied services as Amazon Maritime, Beijing Century Joyo Courier Service, the live-streaming platform Twitch, Audible audiobooks, and CreateSpace. Additionally, in 2017 Amazon purchased the supermarket chain Whole Foods Market, which now allows the company to compete directly with Wal-Mart in the retail grocery sector. These subsidiaries paint only part of the picture of the diverse industrial tapestry that is the current Amazon framework. In addition to its subsidiaries, under the Amazon brand umbrella there are many services that are being offered to consumers by the conglomerate. This includes its core e-commerce website, Amazon Prime, Amazon Web Service, the Amazon Prime Video streaming service, and the brick and mortar Amazon Go and Amazon Books stores. This also includes the Amazon “sharing economy” labor platforms Mechanical Turk, in which online workers can

complete tasks such as filling out surveys or identifying objects in a picture for small amounts of money and Amazon Flex, which pays people to work as contracted drivers delivering Amazon products. For Amazon, the engine that drives a large majority of its industrial growth and makes its continual dominance as a conglomerate possible is an exponentially expanding human labor force. For this reason, a better understanding of the dynamics and realities of this labor, particularly from the perspectives of the laborers, is imperative.

When considering the rapid and multi-sectorial expansion of Amazon one of the main questions that emerges is in regard to the impact Amazon's seemingly unregulated growth is having on the dynamics of traditional labor and digital labor. As Amazon continues to extend its reach and in turn reshape the parameters of acceptable labor practices, how is the common laborer affected by Amazon's ambitions? In this project I argue that as Amazon continues to proliferate and increase its dependence on cheap labor this only increases the precarity of those who labor for the company. This work builds on previous scholarship about precarity, specifically that of economist Guy Standing and his examination of the "precariat" as a social class "consisting of millions of people facing unstable, insecure labour, a lack of occupational identity, declining and increasingly volatile real wages, loss of benefits and chronic indebtedness" (2017, p. xi). This aptly describes countless Amazon laborers despite being in direct contradiction with many of the promises made by Amazon about decreasing the financial anxieties of its workers. Due to this, these laborers must engage in acts of "pre-labor" in order to navigate their increasingly precarious working conditions. This pre-labor includes the creation and maintenance of online communities where these laborers seek to provide support for each other. Overall this project explores the ways that Amazons position as the standard for new-age conglomeration is impacting existing labor paradigms and laborer experiences.

What I found and continue to illuminate throughout the three main case studies of this dissertation is that Amazon's labor and laborer dynamics are shifting continually as a direct result of unmitigated, and unregulated expansion afforded to it as a new-age conglomerate. More importantly, these shifts are subjecting Amazon laborers to precarious, and oftentimes dangerous working conditions. This extends far beyond the often discussed Amazon Warehouse laborers and permeates many levels of Amazon labor and many statuses of laborers. Despite all of this the case studies within this dissertation demonstrate the ingenuity of these laborers in utilizing pre-labor strategizing, particularly online message board community building, in order to mitigate the harsh realities of their precarious labor situations.

1.1 Anatomy of a New-Age Conglomerate

In recent discussions of economics, the idea of the conglomerate firm has for all intents and purposes become passé. Outside of a few examples including Birkshire Hathaway, G.E. and 3M, the glory days of conglomeration have seemingly come to an end in favor of a more focused plan of attack for corporations. Prior to this shift in thinking conglomeration had become an aspirational approach to business expansion. As economics scholar Matthias Knecht summarizes in his 2013 book *Diversification, Industry Dynamism, and Economic Performance*:

Triggered by a strict antitrust policy in the United States and fueled by the growth of business school-trained executive talent, the rise of diversified conglomerates began in the 1960s with numerous acquisitions undertaken by large American corporations. While the firms grew in size and global reach, new portfolio management techniques provided the necessary tools to manage these increasingly complex organizations. Although these

organizations were admired at first for their supposedly superior management methods and advanced organizational design, performance problems caused share prices to decline significantly during the 1970s. Investors learned an important lesson: as the benefits of corporate diversification rose, so did its costs. Admiration of the sophistication and power of conglomerates gave way to skepticism about their performance. The conglomerates of that time were accused of a variety of problems, among them excessive organizational complexity, agency problems, overspending on corporate headquarters, and cross-subsidizing value-destroying investments (pp. 2-3)

These problems eventually manifested into an era of failures and buyouts that “prompted a shift towards refocusing and divesting unrelated and non-performing businesses in order to free up resources and focus on the firm’s core competencies” (p. 3).

This fear of collapse under one’s own recklessly acquired weight made many companies once again focus first on strengthening their core business through a strategy of deconglomeration. As further explained by Varadarajan et al, deconglomeration consists of:

the divestiture behavior of a conglomerate firm and the transformation of its business portfolio from one composed of several largely unrelated businesses to one composed of relatively fewer and interrelated businesses. It constitutes a corporate-level strategy decision to retain in a firm’s portfolio only those businesses that, in the assessment of the top management of the firm, have the potential to leverage the firm’s core competencies to emerge as major players in the global marketplace (2001, pp. 15 – 16)

Essentially, the strategy here is addition by subtraction. An example of this would be PepsiCo. divesting its ownership of the restaurants Pizza Hut, KFC, and Taco Bell in order to focus on its core beverage business and its interests in the salty snack sector that could be promoted with those

beverages (Howe, 1997, p. 1). This type of strategizing would become commonplace until the rise and pervasive expansion of the digital economy and the rise to power of the key players within it.

Today it seems that we are witnessing a case of what was old becoming new again in regard to attitudes about conglomeration on the part of both economists and investors. As pointed out by *New York Times* contributor Andrew Ross Sorkin in 2017, “The conglomerate was supposed to be dead, a relic of a bygone era of corporate America. Investors, we have been repeatedly told, want smaller, nimbler, more focused companies. And yet there is Amazon.” He adds that “Amazon is just one of these new-economy conglomerates. Alphabet, the parent company of Google, is another. Facebook is quickly becoming a conglomerate, too” (p. 1). This declaration of the resurgence of conglomeration among the titans of the digital economy suggests that history could be repeating itself as these corporations continue to focus on increasing infrastructural breadth and growing industrial reach. Sorkin ends his investigation with a foundational question about this new cohort of expanding conglomerates, pondering that “when it comes to Amazon (or Alphabet, or any of the new conglomerates), the question is whether there is something fundamentally different about these businesses given their grounding in digital information” (p.1).

This question drives much of the conversation about the new-age conglomerate. Is this novel or is this a recapitulation of a cycle that we have already seen with the conglomerates of that bygone era? This work argues that there are specific business philosophies and strategies that separate the new-age conglomerate from those of the past. These include an ability to thrive in both the digital realm and more traditional business sectors. There is a duality to these companies that is new and novel. All of this is powered by ever-decreasing government oversight, which gives these companies license to “play by their own rules” in many instances. It is important to more fully understand the inner workings and motivations of these new-age conglomerates for the fact

that these may factor into both the ways in which a corporation carries out its day to day operations and the designs of its infrastructure. In the case of Amazon, I argue that it is crucial to understand the company's focus on expansion as a new-age conglomerate because of how this produces evolving and simultaneously de-evolving labor conditions for its employees and the contractors who are necessary for maintaining the company as it continues to grow.

As stated above, there are specific companies that fall under the banner of new-age conglomerates. The preeminent companies in addition to Amazon are Google, Apple, Facebook, and Netflix. This specific quintet of companies has been christened with the acronym FAANG (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, Google). This is further explained in a 2018 article by financial analyst Mickey Kim of the *Indiana Business Journal*, who argues that FAANG companies are unique in that they are modern corporations “whose market values (number of shares outstanding multiplied by stock price) soared to stratospheric levels on the promise of certain growth, regardless of the state of the economy, interest rates, tariffs or other factors affecting ‘mere mortals’ of corporate America” (p. 1). These are companies that at a glance seem to be infallible in that they have a higher immunity to the whims of the economy. Essentially these are the companies that are shifting the rules of conglomeration while setting new precedents for those to come.

One way this is illuminated is through examinations of the debt ratios of these companies, who all have either been or currently are highly leveraged in terms of debt, yet are still considered to be tremendously successful and appealing to investors. For example, a 2019 article titled “Why Debt Isn’t Killing Netflix Any Time Soon” explains that “Netflix's debt to equity ratio has been increasing since 2015, reaching 1.81 in Q1 of 2019.” As the article further explains, Netflix chooses to finance its business with more debt to optimize its cost of capital” with much

of this debt being allocated to the creation of and acquisition of content. The article continues that “financial indicators signal that Netflix is leveraging its capital efficiently. Netflix has increased its return on invested capital since 2017. Compared to competitors, Netflix's ROE is also performing well, an indicator of a company's long-term health and the effectiveness of its current operating structure to generate cash” (Denning, p. 1). In short, despite continually taking on amounts of debt that would crush many other companies, Netflix continues to leverage this debt in order to grow its subscriber base at a rate that justifies its credit liabilities and continues to grow the value of this company. An example of this debt accumulation paying off took place during the Covid-19 pandemic when Netflix was able to increase its subscriber base by 16 million people due to the lockdowns (Thomas, 2020). As in this case, the company has continually bet on itself in taking on this debt, and so far these bets have paid off. In the case of Amazon the company “does have debt, approximately \$24 billion in debt” a number that would be unmanageable for a large majority of companies “but this debt is dwarfed by more than three times that amount with shareholder equity of \$84 billion” (Berman, 2020, p. 1). The \$13.7 billion dollar Whole Foods acquisition serves as an example of Amazon betting on itself and taking on debt in an endeavor it is confident will be successful in the long-term. While the company had enough free cash to acquire this new asset free of debt it did not. As *Washington Post* columnist Thomas Heath explains:

Amazon preferred to borrow money at low interest rates over as long as 40 years instead of tapping its \$21 billion cash hoard... Amazon.com most surely doesn't want to use cash because having a “battleship balance sheet” of \$21 billion makes shareholders breathe easier and gives the company flexibility to make future acquisitions or endure downturns (2017, p. 1)

Since this acquisition, Amazon has been able to extend itself into the grocery sector and expand the reach and value of its Amazon Prime subscription service. These are just two examples of these new-age conglomerates taking on debt in a way that ironically substantiates their value in the eyes of investors. They bet big, leveraging large debts, and the payoffs are often even bigger. This would not be possible if they were not allowed, and even encouraged, to gamble in ways that would be frowned upon for other businesses. This license to gamble (win or lose) puts these companies in an increasingly advantageous position over more traditional businesses.

There are two additional prevalent themes that consistently re-emerge in delineating new-age conglomerates from previously established ones. The first is a focus on innovation, or the company's presumed capacity for, or history of innovation. As tech columnist Reinhardt Krause points out:

The digital-age conglomerate is a different animal than the classic conglomerate. Gulf & Western and others like it cobbled together diverse, mature businesses that churned out free cash flow. Alphabet (Google's parent company), Amazon and Facebook are focused on innovation. For them, there's risk in missing out on the next big thing (p.1).

This commitment to innovation, and creativity is a main point of distinction between conglomerates of old, and these of the new-age. These new companies believe that growth comes from not only expanding, but from creating new products, sectors, categories and experiences. They are able to leverage debt effectively in order to achieve these goals, which makes them all the more attractive.

The second re-emerging theme is the idea that these companies paradoxically grow "outwardly in." This means that expansion into new sectors are typically in the name of

strengthening a core business, or the infrastructure of the corporation's flagship business. Expansions and acquisitions are often in the service of broadening the scope of an already existing and publicly recognizable ecosystem. As University of Michigan professor, and author of "The Decline and Fall of the Conglomerate Firm," Gerald Davis points out: "Unlike the classic conglomerate, new-age digital ones are often looking for synergies with a core business. Something that looks like a conglomerate on the surface might be a lot more coherent underneath" (p. 1). The commitment to synergistic strategizing in order to continually strengthen their flagship business is viewed as the key to success. An example of this would be Facebook achieving synergy through the acquisition of Instagram for more user engagement and enhanced data collection. Another example of this would be Google achieving synergy through the acquisition of YouTube for similar reasons. In the case of Amazon, although the company has ventured out into many other areas including everything from freight delivery to pharmaceuticals, it seems that one of the underlying motives in all of these cases is to continually strengthen its e-commerce core.

1.2 Labor and the New-Age Conglomerate

As stated above, the importance of Amazon's ever-growing labor force cannot be ignored when discussing its continual expansion. As a new-age conglomerate Amazon is active in producing both digital and more traditional labor conditions, as it depends on laborers in both realms. For example, Amazon Flex drivers must understand and rely on Amazon-designed digital technology platforms to help them complete more traditional labor tasks including delivering Amazon packages. This is why it is important to understand the ways that labor norms are shifting

throughout the spectrum of laborer and labor types. Moreover, we must understand any possible correlations between the increasing ambitions of these new-age conglomerates and worsening labor/laborer conditions. This is especially important as digital labor platforms, like those provided by Amazon, become more ingrained in our collective conception of labor.

Much of the scholarship about the “new” digital economy and digital labor has been concerned with understanding the relationship between digital labor and other forms of labor and compensation exchange (Fuchs, 2014a; Hearn, 2008; McChesney, 2008; Mosco & McKercher, 2008; Bulut, 2011; Scholz, 2013b). Some of these scholars have contemplated whether evolving digital technologies and the partial erosion of traditional physical labor is possibly symptomatic of a shifting labor paradigm. Others have pointed to the ways in which this is more of the same, or an extension of an existing labor paradigm. Huws (2014), for example, argues that:

the existence of a separately visible sphere of non-manual labor is not evidence of a new “knowledge-based,” “immaterial,” or weightless realm of activity. It is simply an expression of the growing complexity of the division of labor with a fragmentation of activities into separate tasks both “mental” and “manual,” increasingly capable of being dispersed geographically and contractually to different workers who may be barely aware of one another’s existence (p. 157)

For Huws, traditional labor is being transformed alongside forms of digital labor, blurring the presumed line between these kinds of work. Fuchs (2014) approaches this conversation from a familiar yet distinct set of questions and propositions about the digital economy and digital labor. He focuses on the link between labor and economic value, stating that in order to fully understand this link in the contemporary economic moment the following questions must be addressed in regard to digital labor: “What is labour? What is economic value? How does labour create value?

How is labour changing in the age of computers, the Internet and ‘social media’ such as Facebook, Google, YouTube and Twitter” (p. 6).

This link between digital labor as a commodity and the influence of technologically mediated labor/laborer relationships on perceptions of value is central to a deeper understanding a conglomerate like Amazon and how it is contributing to changes in labor protocols. In the case of Amazon, some of the main questions are in regard to the value of both labor and the laborer. Amazon platforms like Mechanical Turk (which relies on intellectual labor completed through Amazon digital platforms), and Amazon Flex, which rely on the labor of independent contractors, are at the forefront of these conversations about the digital economy. In addition to this Amazon relies heavily on the accumulation of consumer data and activity to power its infrastructure.

This is not a new conversation in the study of digital labor and it is not specific to Amazon. Building on these questions, another prominent topic when discussing digital labor is the emergence of the “prosumer,” a term coined by Alvin Toffler in 1984, in reference to a consumer who both consumes and produces (sometimes unknowingly) at the same time. In the modern age of data accumulation, the term has come to take on new meaning when used in regard to the realities of digital labor and social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. As Ng (2014) points out: “The technical, functional and social capabilities of mobile media mean that there are more varied forms of commodifying our digital labour practices. We contribute ‘creative,’ ‘intellectual’ and emotional and intellectual labor through the ways we interact. These digital labour practices are made ever more possible through smartphones” (p. 205). Under the guise of simply signing up for many popular online platforms the consumer is really becoming a producer of lucrative information (Scholz, 2013). This discourse about the usurping of personal data and the creation of unknowing laborers is fundamental to examinations of the digital economy.

These are just some of the discourses surrounding digital labor and, more specifically, digital labor in the era of the new-age conglomerate. The Amazon infrastructure is supported by a diverse workforce, including independent contractors for their sharing economy endeavors, a digital workforce for platforms like AWS and Prime Video, and more traditional laborers in their warehouses and brick and mortar stores like Whole Foods. This dynamic workforce is made up of over half a million employees. These diverse types of labor are the backbone of Amazon and this project is concerned with further studying the ways in which all of this labor is foundational to the design and operation of the Amazon infrastructure. In understanding how Amazon utilizes this labor I seek to intervene in the aforementioned scholarship about traditional labor, digital labor, laborer precarity, and also conversations about new-age conglomeration.

1.3 Precarity and Precarious Pre-Labor

This dissertation argues that despite promises made about economic autonomy, Amazon labor itself is the cause of much economic uncertainty and feelings of financial precarity. As stated, this project utilizes the framework for precarious labor established by Guy Standing in his analyses of the ‘precariat’ as a social class. As Standing explains in his 2009 book *Work after Globalization: Building Occupational Citizenship* the precariat is a social class best described as “flitting between jobs, unsure of their occupational title, with little labour security, few enterprise benefits and tenuous access to state benefits” (pp. 109-110). Standing continues:

Those in the precariat lack employment security, being in jobs usually regarded by employers as short-term or casual, and seen that way by those doing the work. Often they have no employment contract, or if they do it is casual. They are thus declined labour

protection by virtue of status (not classified as employees) and by precariousness.... And they lack Voice – representation security – because they are denied the opportunity to join unions or because they are either ‘in service’, subordinated in precarious labour, or ‘providing services’, where associational bargaining is constrained (p. 110)

This conceptualization of the precariat, and furthermore precarious labor is the cornerstone of how precarious labor is understood, analyzed, and discussed in this work. Additionally, I call upon political science scholar Paul Apostolidis and his book *The Fight for Time: Migrant Day Laborers and the Politics of Precarity* where he explains that the problems that emerge for laborers who must engage in precarious labor range from “daily punches in the gut to dwindling hope for long-term personal security, familial well-being, and social justice” (2019, p. 1). Beyond this, he presents four propositions regarding precarity today, which state that precarious laborers are suffering, out of time, on their own, and on the move. All of this is true of the Amazon laborers exhibited throughout this dissertation. Of particular relevance to this dissertation and Amazon laborers are Standing’s observation that these workers lack a voice and Apostolidis’ proposition that these laborers are on their own. This lack of support and a lack of collective bargaining power, which could help them advocate for increased labor compensation and better accommodations, forces these workers to figure out ways to help both themselves and others in the same predicament.

Building on these conceptualizations of precarity and precarious labor I argue that in order for workers to mitigate the lack of institutional and infrastructural support, they are likely to engage in an arduous series of *pre-labor* procedures that are necessary in order for them to survive. For the purposes of this manuscript, I will refer to this additional work as *precarious pre-labor* because it can be extremely demanding and demoralizing to laborers and thus create new sources of labor-

related anxieties. Simply put, it is the work necessary to more effectively navigate precarious labor. In the case of the Mechanical Turk, Amazon Flex, and Whole Foods laborers observed for this project, this precarious pre-labor included frequenting message boards for support, providing support on those message boards, keeping in constant contact with other workers, and sifting through a hoard of exploitative labor requests in order to locate the most advantageous labor opportunities. These laborers find themselves experiencing a form of “double precarity” (Bentley et al., 2019) wherein the stresses of their everyday lives are compounded by unexpected stresses of performing Amazon labor. What makes precarious pre-labor a unique phenomenon is that it is not a mere extension of the work day, or an act of extra preparation. Rather, I argue that this is a necessary and active exercise in survival, without which many of these laborers believe they could not persist. This is problematic in that it is antithetical to many of the promises Amazon makes towards these workers. These promises often times utilize deceptive rhetorics, including those standardized by the sharing economy and multi-level marketing, which consistently provide false hope, or “cruel optimism,” (Berlant, 2011) that rarely manifests into anything substantive for the laborer.

Finally, Amazon creates a paradoxical experience for laborers in which these people look to the company for an escape from their already precarious situations but instead find themselves faced with labor conditions that only proliferate their precarity. This is due in part to the fact that Amazon workers must deal with low and continually decreasing wages for their labor in a Capitalistic system designed to progressively reduce the value of this labor over time. This is true of the independent contractor labor driven platforms like Mechanical Turk and Amazon Flex. In the case of more traditional laborers including those who work at Whole Foods and consistently deal with dwindling benefits packages, and the constant threats of automation and obsolescence

this is also true. This project explores both precarious pre-labor and the precarious labor conditions that are produced by the Amazon operational infrastructure. I present my findings about what these precarious pre-labor practices more specifically consist of and the toll they take on laborers as recounted by these laborers themselves, including how these workers communicate about and in regard to these pre-labor procedures and Amazon labor itself. Through online ethnographic research I look to provide significant insights about the anxieties and feelings of precarity produced by Amazon labor platforms, including both digital labor and more traditional Amazon labor.

1.4 Methodology

Following in the intellectual tradition set forth by scholars like Nancy K. Baym (*Tune in, Log on: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*; “*The Emergence of On-line Community*”) and Sherry Turkle (*Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*) I situate myself within the ecological landscape of the internet as a researcher and observer. This online ethnographic approach is appropriate for this work because, as Baym (2000) points out, in examining online communities the researcher can demonstrate how a collection of previously disconnected individuals take their shared interest and transform it into a rich and meaningful interpersonal social world. As Rodham et al, explain “the process of actively writing about one’s feelings and emotions has been shown to be beneficial in terms of emotional well-being” (2009, p. 621). This speaks to the possible affective resonance of this online message board regarding their work and pre-labor. As scholar Tom Ferguson points out, on message boards “geographical location is less of an issue because online support can be obtained without the necessity of physical travel if an individual has access to the Internet. In addition, the anonymity afforded by this form of

communication can encourage greater honesty and intimacy” (Ferguson, 1997, p. 30). The opportunity to encounter honest and emotionally vulnerable responses makes these online platforms all the more valuable as resources. The Internet plays a crucial role for many Amazon laborers and contemporary laborers more broadly. It is an outlet where they can communicate with others who are also doing similar labor around the country. For this reason, and important for my research, these online communities are where much of the pre-labor takes place that is necessary to increase earnings, alleviate financial precarity, and mitigate risks for Amazon laborers more generally.

For this project I focus specifically on subreddits on the Reddit.com platform where Amazon employees congregate and interact with each other. As mentioned, these message boards are of particular interest because the platforms facilitate unfiltered conversation, which is further encouraged by the veil of anonymity afforded to users. Although these discussion forums can be problematic in some instances, much of the discourse that occurs in online communities holds value in that it is representative of documented feelings toward a specific moment or event. As explained by Holtz et al:

Usually, these forums are used almost exclusively by members and supporters of the organization or community for discussing matters of concern to the respective interest group. Hence, such forums allow for an analysis of typical discourses taking place within such communities. An obvious advantage of Internet forums is the almost unlimited amount of material for analysis. Some forums, with thousands of users, feature millions of postings in hundreds of thousands of threads. Even small forums usually contain more than enough text material for any kind of social scientific analysis. Because the material exists

already in digital format, labor-intensive procedures like the transcription of audio material are not necessary (2012, p. 56)

This type of documentation is certainly valuable for analytical scholarship, but it is also valuable in that it is a place where people without conventional media outlets shadowing them can be heard by others facing similar plights or who identify similarly. This is the case with Amazon laborers who come together online to share their unique, yet relatable, experiences with each other. These forums also provide a place where laborers can perform the pre-labor necessary to learn how to more effectively provide support for each other as they navigate their labor responsibilities and where they can also find tips for exceling at this labor.

By engaging in online ethnography as the predominant research method for this project I understand that one of the central concerns that may arise is in regard to the privacy of those being observed on these Reddit forums and furthermore the ethics of such research practices. As anthropologist and online ethnographer Nicole Constable explains, “the Internet and its connections to real people and real places provide new multi-sited research possibilities for ethnographers and new contexts in which to revisit older ethnographic, methodological, and ethical concerns that arise when we imagine ourselves as researchers to be both inside and outside the communities we study and write about” (Constable, 2003, p. 62). Additionally, she warns, “the Internet does create possibilities for researchers to be ‘invisible,’ and thus raises serious ethical questions about their right to use the materials gleaned in such a way” (Constable, 2003, p. 51). In contrast Christian Fuchs urges in his 2018 essay “Dear Mr. Neo-Nazi, Can You Please Give Me Your Informed Consent so That I Can Quote your Fascist Tweet?,” that “Privacy fetishism holds the danger of censoring and disabling critical research” (Fuchs, 2018, p. 388). Both Fuchs and Constable are correct in their observations and assertions about Internet driven research. I argue

that online ethnography is a crucial research practice, particularly in an increasingly digitally participatory society.

In thinking about these issues, I invoke the research of Townsend et al. and their essay “Social Media Research: A Guide to Ethics,” in which these scholars contribute a vital framework for ethical research about and engagement within online communities. They explain:

The question as to whether to consider social media data as private or public comes down, to some extent, to whether or not the social media user can reasonably expect to be observed by strangers (British Psychological Society 2013; Fuchs forthcoming). Things to consider here are: is the data you wish to access on an open forum or platform (such as on Twitter), or is it located within a closed or private group (e.g. within Facebook) or a closed discussion forum? Is the group or forum password protected? Would platform users expect other visitors to have similar interests or issues to themselves? Does the group have a gatekeeper (or admin) that you could turn to for approval and advice? How have users set up their security settings? Data accessed from open and public online locations such as Twitter present less ethical issues than data which are found in closed or private online spaces. Similarly, data posted by public figures such as politicians, musicians and sportspeople on their public social media pages is less likely to be problematic because this data is intended to reach as wide an audience as possible. If the data you wish to access is held within a group for which you would need to gain membership approval, or if the group is password protected, there are more ethical issues to take into consideration (2017, p. 10)

This framework for ethical online research guides this project. Due to fact that Reddit is an open discussion forum, which does not require any type of password bypassing or manipulation for access, I argue that the message board posts utilized within this work function more like Twitter

in Townsend et al.'s conceptualization. Additionally, I argue that through posting on these subreddits many of these users are attempting to have their posts be seen by a larger audience, as many are attempting to provide help to others as well as expose the institutional ineptitude and infrastructural shortcomings of Amazon that increase their precarity. This project seeks to further increase the reach of the messages cultivated by these online community members while illustrating and developing my argument regarding the precarious pre-labor in which these posters take part.

While posting on these public message boards is a clear indicator that many of these Redditors seek to spread messages about their experiences, I exercise caution throughout this project through the use of pseudonyms for each Reddit poster profiled in this work. This is in order to protect these posters from potential threats of retaliation, doxing, and job loss from Amazon institutional forces or others. One of the goals of this project is to allow these workers to advocate for themselves, without increasing the precarity associated with their laboring for Amazon.

1.5 Chapter Descriptions

The primary portion of this project is broken down into three main body chapters, which focus on the exploration of labor platforms within the Amazon infrastructure. The first major chapter titled, *Are These HITs Worth Turking for?: The Paradoxical Reality of Amazon's Mechanical Turk and Precarious Labor in the Sharing Economy*, examines Amazon as it relates to evolving digital labor paradigms. One of the major topics of interest for this project is how Amazon positions itself in the digital economy, and also how its drive to continually grow as a conglomerate affects its labor practices. In order to answer these questions, I examine the Amazon

Mechanical Turk platform. MTurk is a crowdsourcing Internet marketplace run by the Amazon conglomerate wherein Amazon acts an intermediary between those in need of labor, and those looking for work. As mentioned there have been many questions raised regarding whether or not Amazon's labor conditions, and compensation rates are fair. In this chapter I explore this question by examining threads from the subreddit *r/AreTheseHitsWorthTurkingFor*, where MTurk laborers congregate and share their experiences and feelings about laboring as independent contractors for Amazon. More importantly, these laborers share survival tips and laboring strategies for maximizing one's time and earnings. Here, I argue that despite Amazon's promises of laborer autonomy and economic prosperity, the reality for these laborers is often much different. Specifically, this means that as opposed to alleviating precarity for these laborers their work as MTurk laborers actually creates additional layers of precarity in their lives that they attempt to mitigate through online engagement with this subreddit.

The next salient chapter of this manuscript titled, *Traversing the Dangers of Amazon's Last Mile* focuses specifically on the Amazon labor platform Amazon Flex, where independent contractors deliver packages for Amazon in order to help the conglomerate mitigate the costs of delivering millions of packages to its growing customer base. This chapter examines how Amazon's growth as a new-age conglomerate is dependent on its ability to decrease its "last mile" shipping expenses, which account for the majority of Amazon's shipping costs. As the company continues to make bold promises in regard to increasingly expedited shipping timeframes for its customers it seems that the burden of upholding these promises is being transferred to a labor force that is increasingly comprised of independent contractors seeking economic security. As with the digital laborers of MTurk, the Amazon Flex labors have been promised labor that will provide them the autonomy of "being your own boss" but what they often find is that instead of reducing

laborer precarity this labor actually increases their precarity. Unlike the MTurk laborers, these contractors must navigate the outside world and the often dangerous terrain of these package delivery routes, without standard employee protections including health insurance. In this chapter I examine how these contractors rely on each other to mitigate this danger through engagement in online communities. Specifically, I examine threads from the r/AmazonFlexDrivers, where contractors come together in order to share tips about how to maximize earnings and also how to mitigate daily risks including everything from unfriendly dogs to traversing deliveries during the Covid-19 pandemic. I argue here that these contractors, like those of MTurk, find it necessary to participate in these online communities as a form of pre-labor that affords them additional security that subsidizes that which is lost due to their employment status as independent contractors. This chapter also examines the differences between those who engage in “intellectual” independent contractor labor (like MTurk) and those who engage in physical independent contractor labor for Amazon and how precarity manifests differently in these labor platforms.

The following chapter of this work, *The Human Cost of New-Age Conglomeration: Examining Precarious Labor Through the Lens of Amazon’s Whole Foods Acquisition* further examines Amazon’s position as a new-age conglomerate and how that affects the working conditions of those who labor for the company. In this chapter I shift the focus from the precarious labor of independent contractors to the labor of Amazon employees, and how that labor is affected by the company’s continual expansion. As a case study I examine Amazon’s 2017 acquisition of Whole Foods Market, and in particular what it meant for those Whole Foods employees to suddenly become Amazon laborers. This chapter further examines the ways in which Amazon’s absorption of Whole Foods into its infrastructure foundationally shifted the reality of labor at Whole Foods. Simply put, I argue that when Whole Foods employees became Amazon employees

they were transitioned from grocery store employees, to employees in an Amazon food warehouse. These changes included shifts to the established organizational structures, changes to long standing labor protocols, and new stress in terms of dealing with the knowledge that automation is in Amazon's future plans and navigating the general aftermath of Amazon integrating Whole Foods into its expedited e-commerce infrastructure. All of this created a new labor landscape for these employees and greatly increased the amount of precarity associated with their laboring experiences. Similar to the aforementioned independent contractors, these employees of Amazon also turn to online community in order to cope with the increasing precarity of laboring for Amazon. In this chapter I examine the exchanges on the r/WholeFoods subreddit where Whole Foods Market employees from around the country gather to express their frustrations about their dynamic positions as employees under Amazon corporate control. These threads are additionally significant because they exist as records of labor norms before and after the Amazon acquisition for these employees. I further argue that while the labor of independent contractors is rife with precarity, so too is that of more traditional Amazon employees; it is simply differently precarious.

1.6 Conclusion

The ultimate aim of this project is to present a clearer picture of Amazon as a new-age conglomerate and its labor structure as the company continues to grow, and therefore need more labor. By examining this specific new-age conglomerate there is much to be learned for the future as new digital conglomerates emerge and become more pervasive in everyday life. Unlike its contemporaries in Facebook, Apple, Netflix, and Google, Amazon has taken steps to diversify the ways that it is encroaching on our everyday lives and the types of labor necessary to power it.

Finally, this project seeks to create and interject in established conversations about digital conglomeration, while fostering new conversations through this research on Amazon's infrastructural design.

2.0 Are These Hits Worth Turking For?

Since its introduction as a crowdsourcing Internet marketplace over a decade ago Amazon Mechanical Turk (or MTurk) has become a staple of the digital economy and representative of rapidly shifting economic and labor paradigms. The company was officially launched in 2005 as a way for Amazon to provide other businesses and institutions with a platform through which they could achieve particular goals with crowd-sourced contributions of labor. To put it simply, through the service Amazon acts as the intermediary in the facilitation of independent contracting opportunities for potential workers. Through this, MTurk has become a tremendous force in not only the digital economy, but, more specifically, in the “sharing economy,” which is a term that encompasses a socio-economic infrastructure that is powered by the sharing of human or physical resources and “recognizes the value of shared creation, production, distribution, trade and consumption of goods and services by different people and organizations” (Matofska, 2012). In the case of MTurk the bartering system involves skilled labor or HITs (Human Intelligence Tasks), for financial compensation. MTurk’s labor contractors are technically referred to as Providers by Amazon but have come to be more colloquially known as Turks (which I will call them throughout this chapter). While not as widely known as other platforms or companies that promote digital labor opportunities in the sharing economy, such as YouTube, Uber or Facebook, MTurk has grown exponentially in both the scope and breath of labor opportunities that are offered to potential Turks.

The name of Amazon’s service tells us much about how Amazon seeks to frame, present, or situate such labor in the public eye. It also reflects how the company views the workers who take up HITs through this site. A Mechanical Turk is a term that dates back to the 18th century,

and refers to a person masquerading as a robot or mechanical device performing tasks that are perceived by the unknowing public to be artificial intelligence. One of the original Mechanical Turks was a chess playing “robot” in which a human chess player would hide, playing chess through a series of gears and pulleys. That is exactly what Amazon initially had in mind with this service. Amazon’s original goal was to have human workers complete jobs that would seem to the public to be performed by computer algorithms or other programs. Before officially launching, MTurk began as an in-house service at Amazon to help them with tasks that could not be accomplished with the computing technology of the time. This began a trend that would eventually define the types of labor opportunities that the service would become synonymous with — identifying objects in a photo or video, performing data de-duplication, transcribing audio recordings or researching data details. The very first task that Amazon outsourced to the general public was a call to rate and select photographs. These pictures were from a Google Maps-style program Amazon was developing at the time. The company needed human eyes to examine the pictures and select the ones that eliminated any view obstruction of street or business signs. In exchange for such work, Amazon offered those who provided their labor modest financial compensation (by some accounts it was .05 cents per picture approved). Despite the pay, the response from those looking to make a little money was tremendous. Amazon went on to utilize this method of obtaining human-quality results in other parts of its infrastructure. This included refining search results and suggesting products for consumers. Feeling satisfied with this sharing economy template and the results they were able to attain, Amazon decided to transition it into an official service through which Amazon and other companies or institutions could outsource jobs that needed human-quality results, evolving into MTurk as it currently operates (Kenney & Chase, 2015).

As of 2015, an average of 1,278 people or organizations were posting jobs to Amazon Mechanical Turk each day (Reese and Heath, 2017). Much has been written about the relationships between MTurk and these other companies in industry trade press publications and the popular press. As the labor platform has become more widely known some publications have become concerned with the ethics of MTurk and crowdsourcing more broadly. In 2017, *Wired* reported that Facebook and their FAIR (Facebook Artificial Intelligence Research) Group ran into problems when solely using their own algorithms to train chatbots to interact with people through their Facebook Messenger application. These problems included chatbots that would use any measures necessary to achieve their programmed goals, such as using deception and offering responses that did not make sense given the context. In response to this, *The Verge* reported in 2018, FAIR would adjust their methodology and utilize MTurk workers to create 160,000 personalized responses with more of a “human touch” for use in training the chatbots. This article focused mostly on the promise of MTurk labor for addressing issues with artificial intelligence, but not all that has been written about the use of MTurk labor has shared this optimistic outlook. For example, in 2016, *Brookings* published an article titled “Can Crowdsourcing Be Ethical?” in which the author focuses specifically on MTurk and those workers whom they describe as undercompensated for their labor. In 2017 the *Baltimore Sun* released an article titled “Crowd-working for Amazon took a Physical and Psychological Toll.” Here, long hours and inadequate compensation are cited as problems with MTurk labor. As the author explains, “Turkers are asked to be journalists, programmers, graphic designers, legal assistants, etc. for pennies a piece. Thousands are willing to take the offer. In the future, thousands more may have to” (Milland, p.13). It is becoming more evident that the ethics of MTurk as a tool for crowd-sourced labor need to be explored more thoroughly. If the labor does

not match the compensation, what is driving workers to engage with these forms of labor and what are the implications and consequences of this work?

Today, in its official website description Amazon describes MTurk as a “marketplace for work that requires human intelligence,” and claims that the “MTurk web service enables companies to programmatically access this marketplace and a diverse, on-demand workforce.” Based on these claims, many companies and corporations (called Requesters in the realm of MTurk) have taken to using MTurk as a way of obtaining intelligent labor for relatively modest investments. For example, Twitter has used MTurk to help refine search results (Holt, 2013). The online clothing company Gilt Group has also utilized the service for survey data that they use in order to make decisions about what garments they should place on sale (Laskowski, 2014). In addition to companies, corporations, and marketing firms another institution has also used MTurk for the promise of cheap and intelligent labor. In the years since the service launched, Universities and academics have become prominent and faithful requesters on MTurk, utilizing it for all types of social scientific research projects. As Sheehan and Pittman (2016) point out in their guidebook, *Amazon’s Mechanical Turk for Academics*, MTurk has become a powerful resource for social science researchers who are often operating under tight and occasionally nonexistent budgets. Here, the researcher can maximize the number and scope of respondents in order to maintain procedural rigidity in their statistical analyses. More importantly, respondents can be courted for modest (at best) compensation rates, making MTurk a powerful location to recruit human participants for research. For that reason, a Turk logging onto the MTurk listserv will likely see HITs from a plethora of different universities asking them to partake in surveys about many different topics. This combination of commercial and academic HIT requests is foundational to the ecology of MTurk.

This chapter focuses on the societal and human ramifications of the economic paradigm illustrated by MTurk and connected to the digital and sharing economy more generally. Most importantly, I examine the role that precarity, as a material condition, plays in the digital economy and in regard to digital laborers. In order to explore these issues, I employ a version of online ethnography, situating myself as an observer in online communities, as a means of understanding how Turks make sense of their labor and the various difficulties it creates for them. For this chapter, I specifically examine the online community Reddit, which contains specific subreddits (or specialized communities) dedicated to MTurk workers. It is this world that I look to situate myself within; in particular, the MTurk themed subreddit “HITSWorthTurkingFor: Finding the best paying hits on mTurk” and other MTurk relevant threads from similar finance-based subreddits. On HitsWorthTurkingFor and the other subreddits workers come together in order to share earning tips and strategies. They also share their own personal stories and experiences. These subreddits include threads in which users ask questions and receive advice about the most economical use of their time as digital laborers in the MTurk marketplace. There are also users who voice their frustrations about unrealistic promises or unmet expectations in these forums. All come together in this community in order to share their experiences with each other. In my role as ethnographer, I position myself as an invisible observer, recording the dynamics of these communities. I engage these threads as a record of MTurk laborer accounts and present them as such. As these posts are public, and broadcast to all Reddit users with the intention of having them seen by a large audience, I view the publishing of these user accounts as a way to help proliferate the messages.

Based on my findings from within this particular subreddit I argue in this chapter that MTurk creates a paradoxical experience for laborers in which these people look to the

crowdsourcing platform for an escape from their financially precarious situations but instead find themselves faced with labor conditions that only proliferate their feelings of precarity. This is due in part to the fact that MTurk workers must deal with low and continually decreasing wages for their intellectual labor, in an Amazon created infrastructure designed to progressively decrease the value of this labor over time. In addition to this, the labor opportunities that are presented by Amazon as “easy” and non-demanding actually require much additional labor to locate and complete. In order for workers to maximize their earning potential through MTurk, they are likely to engage in an arduous series of precarious *pre-labor* procedures. These include frequenting MTurk message boards, keeping in constant contact with other MTurk workers, and sifting through a hoard of exploitative labor requests in order to locate the most advantageous labor opportunities. Simply put, there is much work to be done *before* an MTurk laborer is able to most efficiently find work through the actual service.

2.1 The Promise of MTurk

In the image of more traditional businesses, crowdsourcing platforms rely on the promise of financial compensation in exchange for services rendered. In addition to this, they rely on promises of flexibility, autonomy, and financial stability on one’s “own terms.” That promise of freedom and flexibility is evident with ride-sharing companies such as Uber and Lyft (Chase, 2015). The former now proclaims in their slogan posted on the front page of their website “Your day belongs to you!” (Uber, n.d). In other words, working for them is working in the way that best suits your needs. I cite Uber in particular because of the fact that despite launching five years after MTurk (in 2010), the company has become the cultural and financial frontrunner in

crowdsourcing. As of 2017 Uber reported that its customer base had grown to over 40 million, and that they contracted over 1.5 million active drivers (or laborers) worldwide (Dogetiev, 2018).

In the vein of Uber, on the MTurk front page the expectations are written in bold as well. They proclaim “Make money in your spare time. Get paid for simple tasks.” Adjacent to this is an image of a woman of color sitting comfortably on a couch, using a laptop, above the words: “Want to make money in your spare time? Become an Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk)” (MTurk, n.d). These rhetorical propositions of flexibility and autonomy are not new in the digital economy and are reminiscent of a popular trope. As Ross (2003) points out in his discussion of labor in the early “dot.com” era, the digital economy has often offered promises of autonomy and “much of the personal independence of self-employment, plus all the benefits and monthly paychecks that come with a regular job” (p. 17). In the case of MTurk, as with many modern crowdsourcing platforms the onus is placed on the laborer in that their earning potential is presented as corollary to their work ethic, ambitions and aspirations.

As stated above, the MTurk business model requires the company to also act as the intermediary between labor producer and laborer. This is the reason why their site actually has two entry points. There is the one previously mentioned for potential contractors (or Turks) and another for interested “Requesters” looking to use the site to procure labor. On the Requester front page, the message is different. The headline on the front-page reads “Human intelligence through an API (Application Programming Interface). Access a global, on-demand, 24x7 workforce” (MTurk, n.d). The rest of the page, which features much more specificity than the worker sign-up page, lists subheadings with detailed information for the prospective company or institution looking for labor. These subheadings include “On-Demand Workforce (Available when you need it. 24x7),” “Elastic Workforce (Pay only for what you use),” “Low Cost Structure (Turn fixed cost into variable

costs),” “Quality Management (Everything you need to ensure quality results),” and “Enabling New Business (Helping you make the impossible possible).” This is what makes MTurk distinctive as a service. Whereas Uber focuses on contracting drivers and riders for a pre-established labor task—the driving of cars—MTurk outsources the production of labor as well. MTurk asks Requesters to create modes of production that MTurks can then complete.

This double-sided business model speaks to the fact that MTurk is doubly crowd sourced, both by laborers and the requesters of that labor. In order for this site to function both sides must work in concert. In many ways this is like the online marketplace EBay (another major crowdsourcing site). However, an additional power disparity exists within the Capitalistic MTurk business model, wherein producers of labor tasks reign above the laborers. It is the producers of labor who set the compensation rates for the MTurk tasks. Unlike EBay the lower you set these rates, the more you benefit as the Requester. This in turn produces less than favorable conditions for the laborer, who may complete the task regardless of the low compensation rate, for a lack of other options, and also because it is understood that this type of unbalanced labor dynamic is built into the structure of MTurk. This is where the aforementioned questions of precarity rise to the surface.

2.2 Precarity and Human Intelligence Tasks

As Sheehan and Pittman (2015) note, keeping track of the demographics of the half a million registered MTurk accounts at any given time is difficult because of the fact that the service is constantly growing and accepting new laborers. In addition to this, some people work consistently, while others only work sporadically and that dynamic is in a constant state of flux.

Nonetheless, from their survey research Sheehan and Pittman were able to determine that “for eighty percent of MTurk workers, their activity completing HITs is the time equivalent of a part-time job” (p. 15) with 16 percent spending one to two hours a week, about 21 percent spending two to four hours a week, 25 percent of workers spending four to eight hours, and 19 percent spending eight to twenty hours. Around 10 percent of workers spend twenty to forty hours a week, and around 3 percent spend over forty hours per week. Proportionately, the number of actual jobs done per week ranged from 20 to 500. As their data also shows, in terms of financial compensation, 38 percent of workers are earning between \$1 and \$5 weekly. 26 percent earn less than \$1 a week. 27 percent earn between \$5 and \$25. 7 percent earn between \$25 and \$50, and 3 percent earn more than \$50 a week. According to Ipeirotis (2016), American Turkers are mostly women. In India, they're mostly men. Globally, they're most likely to have been born between 1980-1990. About 75% are Americans, roughly 15-20% are from India, and the remaining 10% are from other countries. These workers represent a vast array of education and income levels. Having said that, the amalgamation of this data paints a picture of an MTurk workforce that is younger in age, educated, and living below the median income.

It is not surprising to see that a service that promises flexibility and supplemental income would draw in the demographics that it does. I argue that this is indicative of an MTurk workforce who turn to this independent contracting work as a way to remedy the realities of their already existing economic precarity. Precarity is a feeling of uncertainty and anxiety related to the instability or lack of employment (Standing, 2011). Berlant (2011) describes precarity as a “condition of dependency” (p. 192) and further explains that “precarity has saturated the consciousness and economic life of subjects transnationally and across populations” (pp. 193/194). Precarity extends beyond a mere economic descriptor. As Berlant explains, precarity is also an

affective state of being. Precarious bodies “are not merely demonstrating a shift in the social contract, but in ordinary affective states” (p. 197), meaning that precarity has bodily implications for those affected, as well. In Massumi’s (2002) formulation, these affects are essentially non-conscious intensities that manifest into feelings by way of our everyday activities—including work. Brennan (2004) insists that these affects may be transmitted through interactions with others and environmentally. According to Tsianos & Papadopoulos (2006), precarious feelings may include vulnerability, restlessness, unsettledness and exhaustion. Building on Brennan, I argue that it is possible that the affects that manifest into these feelings may be transmitted through interactions within online communities, like subreddits. This means that precarity is wide reaching and personal at the same time. That fact is partially what crowd sourcing companies like MTurk look to capitalize upon in their recruitment of new laborers. The fact that feelings of precarity exist in both the larger economic environment and in digital labor itself makes it easier for Amazon to recruit workers to the MTurk site.

My survey of MTurk related discussions on Reddit illustrates how these notions of precarity play out in this digital platform. One of the major issues that many Redditors brought to the forefront was the ever-decreasing compensation for HITs. It is pointed out that as more people join the service as laborers, the less the Requesters feel the need to pay. This creates a certain type of paradoxical relationship with MTurk for the laborers, for now there is precarity tied to their work as MTurk laborers, as well as any other job they may be supplementing. For example, in a 2017 thread titled *Worst year this far on MTurk* Reddit user _Pierre laments:

I have used MTURK for almost 3 years and this year is by far the worst for pay. I am 3K almost 4K down when comparing with previous years. I spend just as much time on here (if not more). Is there really that much more competition or is there really that little work

on here? Here lately most of the HITs I encounter ... are literally 30-40 minutes for a \$1. I hope next year is better! (p. 1)

The sentiment presented in this post is indicative a kind of “cruel optimism” (Berlant, 2011) and of the feelings of precarity that MTurk has now come to evoke in many of its workers. While crowdsourcing platforms like MTurk present themselves as the remedy to a person’s economic anxieties, it seems that in many cases these labor platforms are the architects of a new series of labor-based uncertainties, creating a situation wherein the laborer is now traveling between different varieties of precarious labor situations.

The most upvoted comment in response to user _Pierre’s post is by a user named SammySongs. This user comments: “See all those new people you’re teaching how to Turk? That’s the consequences of the feel-good factor you get from being altruistic” (Reddit, 2017). The next most upvoted post builds on this sentiment and is by a user called Louis_marques. The comment is even more telling in regard to what MTurk workers believe is causing the declining labor conditions described by _Pierre. Louis_marques comments:

There’s a number of reasons for that, first one is a bit harsh to say but it’s true. The Mturk community has been very helpful in teaching others how to turk which in turn they’ve learned all the scripts to use and it makes work less accessible. That’s a why a lot of people don’t go into any details on anything about quals, scripts or work they are doing. I’ve noticed sometimes batches are posted with over hundreds of HITS and they are gone in literal seconds, why? Because everybody now knows about others tips, tricks and secrets, so it’ll continue to get worse. Then looking at everything going on right now, there isn’t a bunch of work to begin with and with so many workers using this platform and running

scripts it's literally impossible sometimes to get a good work flow going, really if we're being honest, AMT is overpopulated (Reddit, 2017)

This rhetoric of overpopulation and newcomers taking valuable labor opportunities is very much reminiscent of anti-immigrant sentiment that emerges as a response to many cases of underemployment. Louis_marques is upset at newcomers and those who help them to succeed while he finds himself struggling. The user also mentions “scripts” which are computer programs (or bots) that allow MTurk laborers to take shortcuts while completing their labor tasks and to select the optimal job listings first. In response to this MTurk laborers are calling for increased loyalty to self and the veteran laborers before any newcomers. These newcomers receive much of the blame despite the fact that it is Amazon that has designed a system that rewards decreasing wages and mitigates against labor organization/collective bargaining.

The sentiments of all of these Redditors are understandable. They are not sure of how much longer the service can sustain itself as there are more and more laborers signing up for the promise of flexibility and easy additional income but the number of requesters and their rates seem to be stagnating or declining. This type of problem is not exclusive to MTurk laborers. Other crowdsourcing platforms are reported to have similar issues with their labor forces. For example, Uber drivers find themselves in a predicament wherein many places have more drivers active than there is a demand for. Therefore, the profitability of this labor decreases (Malin & Chandler, 2017). This may lower the bonuses that Uber has to pay these drivers through a decrease in surges and therefore surge pricing. Uber Technologies Inc. gets paid nonetheless, so this becomes more of a personal problem for the drivers than the company. The same is true of MTurk. The HITs are completed regardless of any possible laborer dissatisfaction, and the Requesters’ goals are met in spite of the plight of the Turks. Noting these kinds of issues, some have even gone as far as to

describe MTurk as a “digital sweatshop” (Graham, 2010). The continued devaluing of their labor certainly contributes to the feelings of precarity experienced by the workers.

In addition to this, much of the labor on MTurk today is about training ever-evolving artificial intelligence to complete tasks that once required human intelligence but no longer do, due to advances in technology. It seems as if Amazon’s system mirrors the harshest realities of Capitalism in that it is actually designed not only to place the power in the hands of the Requester, but also to cannibalize its own work force by making them complicit in their own inevitable obsolescence. Many of MTurk laborers are well aware of this. While some Turks take pride in being the intelligence that is shaping the future of artificial intelligence, others know that they are essentially training the machines and software that will continue to eradicate the need for their labor as mechanical Turks. As *Wired* commentator Miranda Katz point explains:

Today, MTurk is more important than it’s ever been. Its crowd-work model has been adopted by Silicon Valley’s biggest companies to train AI algorithms, spot fake news, and keep violent content off of social media. In the long run, AI might take these jobs over—but right now humans are very much needed for tasks like cleaning and categorizing data.

Turkers know they’re in demand, and some are losing patience with Amazon (p.1, 2017)

All of these factors are fostering anxieties that undermine the promises of crowdsourcing. In the MTurk subreddit user JayRoe started a thread titled *When will MTurk become obsolete?* in which the user asks, “Y’know, computers are getting smarter and stuff, so when will workers not be needed?” (Reddit, 2015). The most upvoted response to this question was by user questions_everything who answered, comically, “When you can show a picture to a computer and it can determine whether the picture is of a pump and NOT a sandal” (Reddit, 2015). This is indicative of the fact that while many MTurk laborers are concerned with the idea of becoming

obsolete to the AI they are training in many cases, others know that complete human obsolescence is still a long way from reality.

While some MTurk laborers have made the decision to remain steadfast and hope for the best, others have made it clear that they will no longer commit their labor to MTurk, and encourage others to follow their lead. Through testimonials about their own anxiety filled experiences some former MTurk laborers paint a clear picture of how the crowdsourcing platform can be exploitative. Reddit user TheRabbit candidly shares their personal experience with Mechanical Turk as a recent college graduate. This redditor recounts:

I did Mechanical Turk for about a month or two about 4 years ago, right after I graduated from college and was completely broke and couldn't find a job. I can't remember completely, but I feel like I must have earned about \$100 in that time ... But I definitely felt completely exploited. I was also scammed out of a \$15 job that probably took about 6 or 7 hours to complete, it was basically scouring through a shitty real estate magazine in Florida and doing data entry on the ads, locations etc. The company had me email them an excel sheet from my personal email, which was my mistake. They were then "unable to open my excel file" and so couldn't pay me the measly 15 dollars for 7 hours of work, sorry! That felt pretty terrible actually. Mechanical Turk is pretty depressing (Reddit, 2016)

Once again, this is an example that demonstrates that instead of alleviating financial anxieties for users, MTurk often creates a new set of financial challenges and obstacles, which only enhance their feeling of economic uncertainty. In addition to this, the \$15 dollars for 7 hours of labor would equate to roughly two dollars an hour for a full-day's work, though for someone in a dire financial situation this may be their only hope. As the redditor states, this type of labor can be demoralizing, especially when a loophole is used to avoid payment. As stated, this type of power inequity

between Turks and Requesters is made possible by the fact that Amazon is silently complicit in an effort to appease the Requesters. This leads to the emergence of a neoliberal marketplace structure within MTurk in which laborers are treated as interchangeable or expendable, and the Requesters are allowed to dictate the value of contracted labor, in addition to creating labor policies that mainly benefit themselves. In addition to this, a major irony of TheRabbit utilizing Reddit as the platform to express their dismay with exploitative labor practices of MTurk is that in doing so this redditor labors as a prosumer for Reddit.

The comments by TheRabbit are posted in response to a larger reddit thread created by redditor Gibby in the Personal Finance subreddit. The thread, posted on May 22, 2016 is titled *Please stop suggesting Mechanical Turk to people in financial need. It is a horrible waste of time.* Like TheRabbit, Gibby engages in prosumer labor to warn others of the dangers of working for MTurk. In the thread (which elicited more than 500 responses) the redditor recounts their own time working as an independent contractor for the service when they were facing financial hardship. Gibby laments:

A few years ago [I] found myself at home unable to find work and unable to get out and look for work in a brick and mortar setting. It was due to health problems with a family member and I was pretty desperate to earn some money... First of all you have to understand that much of the work in the Hits they give you is not really related to honest work. Much of it is psychological profiling and testing and as you will see some of it is not even available to you because they are targeting very specific groups. More so you will find that the hits that are available often pay about 10 cents US or less and take you 15 minutes or so to perform.

The redditor continues “you would be better off just sleeping or cleaning your home or anything more productive than trying to earn money on this site. [T]hat is my experience and I really wish it wasn't” (Reddit, 2016). The frustration and feelings of helplessness articulated by this user really speak to a plethora of larger concerns that many have about a lot of the opportunistic labor that is presented as a god-send for people in precarious situations in the digital economy. In addition to Gibby and TheRabbit many of their fellow redditors share similar stories about MTurk only adding another dimension to their already financially precarious situations. They too felt that this service was nothing more than a way for companies and institutions to exploit the labor of those in desperate situations without fair compensation for the time that was actually being put into the labor being done for them.

While some telegraph more intense feelings and anxieties than others one thing that is made clear by a good amount of these redditor accounts is that in some way or another they are all coming to terms with the rapidly shifting value and dynamics of their labor. For many this is indeed contributing to their feelings of economic precarity. Through their posts on this subreddit, and sharing their anxieties and uncertainties they are transmitting these affects of anxiety to each other. The aforementioned feelings of vulnerability, restlessness, and unsettledness are all made evident within these message board posts and responses, and are pervasive within the community at large. The next section of this chapter further examines these precarious feelings and how they manifest throughout this online community of MTurk laborers. More specifically it examines the ways in which pre-labor practices contribute to the precarious feelings and the overall state of being of MTurk laborers. I explore the subreddits where this precarious pre-labor occurs, and how MTurk laborers interact within these settings. In doing this I look to further examine these laborers’ precarity, and the ways that they respond within their own community.

2.3 Precarious Pre-Labor: The Work of Laboring Efficiently

As stated above, the online community Reddit serves as a haven for many MTurk laborers who gather on the forum in order to share experiences and tips with each other. This is somewhat surprising in that one might assume that the competition for available HITs would discourage such community building and comradery. Nonetheless, the subreddit HitsWorthTurkingFor (Hits Worth Turking For) was created in order to provide help to those who may be feeling a bit overwhelmed by the amount of listings that appear on the MTurk listserv on a daily basis, or for someone new to crowdsourcing. I argue that this subreddit serves as a training ground for new laborers and remains an invaluable resource to them as they continue their work as Turks. Here, they learn to be efficient workers. They also learn that in order to be an efficient worker on MTurk, they must first learn to do such pre-labor tasks as navigating the HitsWorthTurkingFor subreddit for work tips and labor request suggestions. They must also contribute to these communities themselves. All of this is the work that many MTurk laborers realize must be done before successfully fulfilling HITs on the MTurk site. These pre-labor tasks are meant to optimize the experience of those who are engaging with the MTurk interface and maximize their earning potential. In many ways though, these pre-labor tasks create their own set of issues for workers including amplifying their feelings of precarity. More importantly, this subreddit reveals many of the practices that are representative of the precarious pre-labor of MTurk. In addition, on this forum, many of these workers disclose, in a community of their own, how they feel about both this precarious pre-labor and their MTurk labor.

Many of the threads in this subreddit revolve around topics like time management or are leads on surveys that might pay better than the standard HIT. For example, one of the threads I observed was entitled *Answer a survey about your opinions (5 minutes, \$0.80) – Duke Center for*

Behavioral Economics. Another title reads Complete a short survey! – Berkley Social Psych Research \$0.10/30 sec. As discussed, numerous requesters who utilize the MTurk platform are researchers and academics who are looking for an inexpensive means to conduct mass research. Nonetheless, these researchers seem to be providing some of the most financially appealing labor opportunities at the moment. For the most part, on this forum someone will finish a job and then share it with the Reddit MTurk community in order to “spread the wealth” with their fellow contractors. Despite the communal elements, there is still an imperative for the contractors to worry about themselves first.

One aspect of precarious pre-labor involves learning to be quick and efficient. Threads about available HITs appear within the subreddit daily and often. Hits work on a first come first serve basis, so the fact of the matter is that many times someone seeing a higher level HIT on this message board may have already missed their opportunity to benefit from it. This is made clear by a short-hand that the redditors in this subreddit use to relay information about whether or not a HIT is still active or available. The term “alive” is used when the link to the labor opportunity is still active and the term “dead” is used when the HIT is no longer available. This is an efficiency increasing measure that is found in almost every thread in this subreddit. You will also see threads with people who voice frustrations that they have missed an opportunity, or that it has been stated in the thread that the HIT is alive yet when they tried the link did not work for them. This sometimes causes back and forth discussions between redditors. In a thread advertising a HIT called “Grocery Survey – SH Hong \$0.30/2m (HIT approval rate (%) GreaterThanOrEqualTo 95)” user ZeroEX states that the HIT is “dead.” This is followed by user StonesChart rebutting “It wasn’t dead. I did it 2 minutes ago.” To which ZeroEX rebuts “I guess the requester keeps reposting it. I keep missing it.” (Reddit, 2018) The matter is settled by user FOREVER44 who

finally asserts that when he tried the HIT was “dead again” (Reddit, 2018). It must be noted that this back and forth is about a labor opportunity worth \$0.30 cents. It is an easier HIT because of the fact that the survey only takes two minutes, nonetheless ZeroEX is frustrated that he missed out on this money. What makes this case and others like it ironic is that searching this forum for shorter or easier HITs actually requires much more time and labor. This speaks to the type of precarious pre-labor that is common for MTurk workers trying to maximize their efficiency through this subreddit. Moreover, one must question what motivates these redditors to spend so much of their time focusing on these opportunities to make what amounts to pennies. It is likely the fact that every penny matters for MTurk laborers.

Redditors also project their frustrations by downvoting threads posted by community members for HITs that are dead when they arrive to take advantage of the opportunity. In a thread by user TurkWorker_ titled Survey: *Would you pay \$10 out of pocket for a rapid (<30min) STD test? - Janna - \$0.08/0:20 - (Location is US)* the thread starter was given numerous downvotes because the link did not work for other Turks. The user responded to this by posting: “Serious question: why do people downvote a dead HIT? Like, I understand that you're upset that you missed the HIT, but would you rather I not post anything?” (Reddit, 2018). In the mind of the thread starter they are confused as to why people would penalize them when they were only trying to contribute to the community. For those who downvoted the post, what they experienced was the promise of an easy \$0.08 cents that was not delivered. For TurkWorker_ the creation of this thread was a part of the precarious pre-labor that the poster engaged in to contribute to the community. In this case that is not how the gesture was perceived by others who believe that the creation of the thread was detrimental to their pre-labor routine. This seems to increase the anxieties for all parties involved.

A thread by user Rounder advertised “Google a term - PK - \$0.03/0:12.” In the post the user also commented “Barely worth it, but better than a stick in the eye.” The top comment in the thread is from user cryptoman who states “Depends on whose eye ;)” The response to this comment actually comes from the thread starter, Rounder, who replies “I would hope it's Jeff Bezos'. That guy makes more in one second than most workers make in their lifetime on Mturk” (Reddit, 2018). The comments in the thread then devolve into a discussion of Bezos’ wealth. This thread is of note because it makes clear that MTurk workers are very much aware of the economic inequality in the world around them, including the irony of working for pennies per task, while contracting their labor to the world’s richest man in Jeff Bezos. This awareness may certainly contribute to the feeling of precarity that many experience working for MTurk and engaging in this pre-labor on the subreddit. The fact that the thread starter points out that it is not much but it is better than nothing, is telling. One can surmise that this is the attitude that must be adopted in order to rationalize many of the tasks being done for relatively insignificant compensation.

Another problem that emerges with this subreddit as a means of maximizing time is that in order to experience any real success utilizing tips from HitsWorthTurkingFor, people must sit on their computer for the majority of the day and constantly refresh their computer browsers. This too constitutes precarious pre-labor. In order to have a very “good day” one might take on the tasks of numerous surveys that would only equate to a few dollars for what might take hours of sitting behind a screen and waiting for an opportunity that a user fits the criteria for. A thread by user BiffTannen9 advertises in the title “Social Ties Survey (~10 minutes) - NASL - \$2/6mins - (HIT approval rate (%) is greater than 97, Total approved HITs is greater than 5000).” This HIT is distinct in that as opposed to the typical pennies, the offer is \$2 dollars for 6 minutes of intellectual labor. In the comments there are many thanks dedicated to the poster. One comment is particularly

telling. User AlwaysMe comments “That was a day-saver. Thanks!” (Reddit, 2018). For this user the \$2 dollars collected seems to have helped them reach some sort of a daily goal.

This comment also suggests the extent to which users might engage in “playbor,” a term for the combination of play and labor that has become increasingly popular in studies of the digital economy since its inaugural use by Julian Kücklich in his 2005 article “Precarious Plabor: Modders and the Digital Games Industry.” In the article, Kücklich examines the evolving relationship between play and labor, which are sometimes conflated in digital labor. Kücklich also explains the value of productive leisure, wherein the fruits of one’s leisurely activities possess market value. This is the case with the modded games that Kücklich writes about and also the leisurely production of the redditors discussed in this chapter. First and foremost, through spending time on Reddit any and all actions users engage in make them prosumers in that their site traffic is a valuable commodity to Reddit. In addition to this, pre-labor activities like creating threads about advantageous HITs is also a leisurely act that produces a product (the thread itself) with value to Reddit, the other redditors, and also MTurk. This precarious playbor is essentially a type of precarious pre-labor on this subreddit.

Furthermore, the concept of precarious playbor is applicable to MTurk laborers in that it seems that some of these workers look at the competition with themselves and others in the community as a game of sorts. The game involves using the leads provided in order to top your earnings or to at least remain consistent with what you expect to earn daily. This seems to be what redditor AlwaysMe meant when they called the \$2 dollar HIT a “day-saver.” This is important because it seems that this is a way that both the precarious pre-labor and precarious playbor of engagement on this subreddit are rationalized by workers. While AlwaysMe just achieved their goal for the day with the \$2 dollar HIT found in the thread, the user has not voiced any concern

about how much money Reddit or MTurk has made commodifying their activities. They are only concerned with their goal for that day. Feeding further into this playbour mindset is the fact that HITs performed successfully and exceptionally well by users allow them to “level up” to reach advanced labor task qualifications. The highest status one can attain is Master, which comes from maintaining a high performance level. User robotic1 created a thread called “I just got the Master qual today” in the MTurk subreddit in which the user posts their promotion for the rest of the community to see. Some congratulate, while others post their stats and wonder why they have not yet been selected for this status upgrade. For example, user SealTeam55 posts “240k Hits, 11 Rejected. No masters. Eff you amazon Edit: Also genuine congrats to everyone who did. Super happy for y'all just salty” (Reddit, 2018). It is evident that all of this fosters a sense of competition amongst the other members of the community and plays into this conflation of play and labor on MTurk. This also creates an environment where precarious pre-labor becomes perceived as especially vital to achieving success on MTurk, in that one’s ability to find and complete HITs is seen as connected—however mysteriously—to the attainment of a Master level designation.

This culture of competition is mostly beneficial to Amazon as it makes their position as an intermediary for cheap intellectual labor at what are (in many cases) sweat shop rates much easier. In a sense, the laborers regulate themselves through this competitive culture. The fact that these laborers and contractor know this and continue to willingly provide their labor to this system speaks to how limited they may feel their financial options are and how much economic precarity weighs on them daily. Nonetheless as I have argued throughout this chapter, MTurk does nothing to quell these anxieties, and only adds new kinds of economic anxieties to the lives of its laborers. Some might argue that a service that does not make any explicit promises about what to expect financially cannot be held accountable for the expectations of the potential independent

contractors, and others might say that Amazon and the Requesters know exactly what they are doing and who they are targeting with this type of a labor structure. One thing that is for sure is that the opinions of those who provide their labor to this service are not unanimously positive, and MTurk is and will continue to be polarizing. The same goes for many other labor platforms within the gig economy.

2.4 Conclusion

The digital economy and digital labor are complex and evolving. As emerging technologies and platforms provide people with new ways to monetize their intellectual and creative labor we must be aware that many of the familiar issues related to labor exploitation will not be far behind. Whether one sees sharing economy mainstays like MTurk and other crowdsourcing sites as purveyors of hope, or merchants of malice the fact remains that a more thorough understanding of both sides of the issue is necessary. What I have tried to illuminate in this chapter through the contribution of, and exploration of precarious pre-labor, are some of the ways that the promise of crowdsourcing is not always the reality and the often paradoxical nature of digital labor as an answer to the precarity in the traditional workforce. MTurk is a unique platform that does have the potential to be a beacon of economic hope. As for Amazon though, it is clear who they are really in the business of serving with this platform. It will be interesting to see what the future of the sharing economy brings and the ways that those laborers, reliant on performing pre-labor adapt to these shifts. Moreover, how will the definition of pre-labor change in regard to how it is both conceptualized and executed?

3.0 Traversing the Dangers of Amazon's Last Mile

At the core of Amazon's empire is its e-commerce business and since its founding in 1994 the company has revolutionized and mastered a process of business to consumer marketing and product delivery. Amazon has become synonymous with its promises of same-day, one-day, and two-day shipping for Prime-subscribed customers. As the years have passed and online shopping has become an integral part of American culture, Amazon has continued to grow both in infrastructural breadth and operational scope. All of this is necessary in order for the company to consistently deliver on its seemingly unmatched speed and price in product delivery. Keeping up with its own required growth has not always been easy for the corporation and presents many challenges. One of those major challenges is trying to keep the cost of its delivery operation manageable, while continuing to exponentially grow the volume of packages that it is able to consistently and securely deliver to its customers.

In addition to this exponential growth in package volume over the years, in 2019 it was also widely reported that Amazon now delivers approximately half of its own packages in the United States (Nickelsburg, 2019). While it still utilizes UPS and FedEx in many instances to make its deliveries, Amazon is actively moving toward a day when it will be completely self-reliant. This has been the case for the past decade as Amazon has built up its own fleet of cargo ships, freighters, warehouses, and an army of couriers, with the ultimate goal being to own its entire logistics chain. This is imperative to Amazon's bottom line and the future of the company. As the company continuously grows, so does the amount it dedicates to shipping costs. According to *Forbes* contributor Ardria Ceng, "The company's roughly \$40 billion in annual shipping costs eat into about half of its retail gross profit, and efforts to manage that heavy cost are crucial to

Amazon's future profitability" (2019, p.1). So while the company dominates e-commerce its subsequent success is dependent on being able to manage both its promise of expedited shipping as the status quo, and the economic realities of that status quo.

In regard to the billions that Amazon pays in shipping expenses the reality is that a large percentage of that is dedicated to what is called the "last mile" or "last mile problem." The last mile can simply be explained as the challenges facing delivery services and supply chain management companies during the transport of goods and products from a freight station or fulfillment center to the final destination of the products, whether that be a retail store restaurant, or office (Faccio and Gamberi, 2015). In the case of Amazon, the final destination is often the home of the customer. This part of the goods transport is vital to Amazon in its quest to reduce delivery expenses for the fact that the "last leg of the supply chain is less efficient and comprises up to 28% of the total delivery cost" (Wang et. al, 2016, p. 279). In response to this challenge, and in order to reduce costs, Amazon has taken initiative by building its own delivery network over the past decade, including the acquisition of a 25% stake in the shipping company Yodel in 2014 and the complete purchase of the shipping company Colis Prive in 2016 (Team, 2016). These acquisitions were just a piece of the larger picture.

Amazon's delivery network consists of its own freight drivers and deliveries but in more recent years has become dependent on what the company calls its "delivery service partners" on its official website. For the sake of reducing costs these delivery service partners are mostly independent (but Amazon franchised) delivery companies who take on the burden of the last mile for Amazon. This is all through a program called Amazon Logistics, which encourages entrepreneurship under the guidance of Amazon. The internal delivery program was started in 2014 as a way to help Amazon decrease the aforementioned costs. In addition to this, Amazon

introduced Amazon Flex in 2015, another branch of its delivery network that relies on independent contractor labor to deliver packages, in the vein of Uber. This too is meant to lessen the financial burden of the last mile. Shrinking these costs is one of the foundational reasons for Amazon once again situating itself in the sharing economy and calling upon independent contractor labor, as it has done in the past with platforms including Mechanical Turk. In theory both sides benefit in that Amazon is able to increase the efficiency of the last mile, and the contractor is paid what appears to be competitive sharing industry wages for their labor. Amazon Flex in particular is of interest in this dissertation in that as a part of the sharing economy it builds on conversations established in previous chapters.

The aim of this chapter is to explore the historical, logistical, and labor dynamics of Amazon's current e-commerce supply chain. Broken down into three main sections this exploration begins with a further examination of the rise of Amazon's delivery operations including Amazon Logistics. Following this, I offer an analysis of Amazon Flex, exploring its origins and investigating Amazon's increasing dependence on and investment in independent contractor labor. In addition, I further examine the last mile problem as it pertains to Amazon, specifically. The second section, building on previous chapters, explores where Amazon Flex falls within the broader landscape of the sharing economy and what that means for independent contractors who are dedicating their labor to this particular platform. I examine the promises and rhetorics that Amazon utilizes in order to attract these laborers. These rhetorics are then juxtaposed against published accounts of Amazon Flex contractors. Some of these accounts will be through media outlets who have reported on Amazon Flex in the past 5 years. Based on my findings here, I argue that it is evident that in many ways Amazon deviates from its core promises of "great earnings, flexibility, and being your own boss" and in ways that exacerbate contractor precarity,

as opposed to minimizing worker uncertainty. All of this leads these workers to engage in various forms of precarious pre-labor necessary to prosper as a Flex deliverer, including utilizing online communities as resources. As in the MTurk chapter I ethnographically situate myself within an online community that focuses on discussions of Amazon labor and maximizing one's earnings potential. In the third section I embed myself in the subreddit r/AmazonFlexDrivers in order to monitor and document relations and dynamics between these Flex independent contractors. Through this online ethnographic research what becomes clear is that these Flex contractors are unique in that although they are treated as expendable – as is the case with many who engage in this line of labor – this brand of labor is uniquely essential to both Amazon and the public. This was obvious as the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic became a reality for these contractors during my research, and made clear that their services are imperative in ways that extend beyond being merely cost saving labor and in ways that may not have been completely evident to Amazon or the public prior.

The objective here is to explain what makes this brand of Amazon sponsored independent contractor labor unique from other platforms, including specifically the previously examined Mechanical Turk. Based on my findings I argue here that Amazon Flex is a uniquely precarious Amazon sharing economy platform in so much as it relies heavily on both intellectual and physical labor. This reliance and lack of resources provided by Amazon leads to increased risk and increased uncertainty for the laborers. Additionally, this labor is much more integral to Amazon's operations, which produces circumstances of far-increased stress and precarity causing laborers to have to rely on outside resources like online communities in order to succeed. The overall goal of this chapter is to offer a picture of the ever-evolving dynamics of Amazon's labor infrastructure as well as the sharing economy, and how the two are continually intersecting. I look to contribute

to ongoing conversations about conglomeration and how conglomerates are benefitting from independent contractor labor, which is becoming more prevalent and increasingly a part of the cultural zeitgeist, as the sharing economy continues to normalize this mode of labor.

3.1 Amazon and the Evolution of its Delivery Operations

In December of 2017 Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos released his annual letter to the shareholders, which acts as a year in review for the purpose of increasing investor confidence. In this particular letter Bezos was eager to share approximate numbers in regard to Amazon Prime. The company is often secretive with this kind of data, and does not disclose these figures to the public or media but this year Jeff Bezos made an exception. In the publicly-released letter Bezos explained about Prime:

13 years post-launch, we have exceeded 100 million paid Prime members globally. In 2017 Amazon shipped more than five billion items with Prime worldwide, and more new members joined Prime than in any previous year – both worldwide and in the U.S. Members in the U.S. now receive unlimited free two-day shipping on over 100 million different items...We keep making Prime shipping faster as well, with Prime Free Same-Day and Prime Free One-Day delivery now in more than 8,000 cities and towns (Griswold, 2018, p.1).

For Bezos this increase in Prime growth was a point of emphasis, sitting atop the “Recent Milestones” section of the letter. While he seemed to be proud of the progress that the program made in the years since its launch it was clear that further growth and expansion for Prime was a present objective for the CEO.

In the years since 2017 Amazon Prime has in-fact continued to expand under the direction of Bezos. For many Prime customers the customary free two-day shipping has become free one-day shipping. In 2019, Amazon announced plans to continually expand free one-day shipping across North America and then globally. That year, Amazon CFO Brian Olsavsky announced that the company planned to spend \$800 million dollars in the first quarter of the year alone to further expand one-day shipping (Kim, 2019). Additionally, in December of 2019 Amazon announced that its internal shipping divisions (led by Amazon Logistics) were on pace to deliver 3.5 billion Prime packages, which accounted for approximately half of the company's world wide orders for that year (Del Rey, 2019). It must be noted that there is a difference between the 5 billion "items" that Bezos announced in 2017 and 3.5 billion "packages" announced in 2019 as the amount of items shipped does not take into account how many packages those items were shipped in. Nonetheless, this was a major milestone for the company, and representative of its continued determination to expand.

A study regarding this operational growth was done in 2019 by Morgan Stanley's AlphaWise research group, which estimated that Amazon's internal shipping divisions will reach a volume of 6.5 billion packages per year in the US by 2022 (Sheetz, 2019). If accurate, this would be representative of a major shift in the private shipping and delivery industry in that logistics juggernaut UPS delivers approximately 4.7 billion packages per year, and FedEx delivers approximately 3 billion packages per year (Statt, 2019). Importantly, the AlphaWise report also estimates that in 2022 both UPS and FedEx will remain relatively stagnant with UPS growing to 5 billion packages, and FedEx growing to 3.4 billion packages. At this rate Amazon is set to pass both FedEx and UPS in US package volume. This raises the question of whether or not Amazon

will be able to scale quickly enough to keep up with that type of exponential growth and what sorts of infrastructures and labor practices such growth will require.

3.1.1 Logistics Networking

Maintenance of Amazon's expanding supply chain infrastructure is arguably the most important part of its e-commerce business. The corporation's focus on self-sufficient delivery has taught Amazon that it is not merely enough to amass a fleet; the real challenge comes when a package must be delivered from one of its fulfillment centers to the door of the customer in that promised period of time. Amazon currently has 150 North American fulfillment centers that employ over 250,000 people (Sisson, 2019). While that labor is vital to the delivery supply chain, and full of its own challenges, for Amazon the most financially risky segments of the delivery process occur after that. This is the process of transferring the customer's goods from fulfillment centers to the doors of the customers.

During the aforementioned last mile, companies are tasked with finding the most obstacle-free and cost-efficient means to get the product to the customer. The term "last mile" was initially used in the context of telecommunications, specifically referring to the last leg of the telecommunication networks that deliver services to customers, dating back to landline wiring in both metropolitan and rural areas. The key has always been to find methods that are "robust, flexible, scalable, affordable, and user friendly" (Nandi et al, 2013, p. 1). As it applies to package delivery servicing the last mile problem is challenging to solve because it encompasses a plethora of problems that delivery companies must deal with in getting a package from a fulfillment center to the customer's doorstep. In addition, this process only becomes more complicated as the dynamics of retailer to customer delivery evolve (for example, Amazon introducing same-day

Prime shipping in some areas). As scholar Liying Song points out “increases in home delivery activity have heightened concerns over freight traffic in often unsuitable residential areas” (2009, p. 9). This is a problem that has only compounded over the years as online shopping has become a more popular option for consumers. Another problem is that costs are increased by failed first-time deliveries. Failure to deliver is often caused by factors such as the growth in single-person households, flexible working patterns, and evolving household work dynamics (Guan, 2009, p. 9). Additionally, packages that aren’t secured at the door can “result in theft of the product, denial of receipt, and even burglary” (p. 9). These problems at the point of delivery result in great financial loss for delivery companies and retailers annually. There are also issues that occur before the point of delivery and that are arguably of equal concern to companies and courier services.

A major challenge that the last mile presents is navigating urban areas in order to get a package to the intended address. As pointed out by scholar Luigi Ranieri in 2018, challenges emerge from the fact that urban landscapes and populations continue to dynamically evolve. For example, “about 54% of the population live in the cities today, and about 66% is expected in 2050. Urban areas require a massive quantity of goods, services and resources” (p.2). This leads to increased freight concentration to urban areas, which is costly for companies. This also leads to a rise in pollution in those urban environments. The drivers of freight vehicles must take into account the challenges that come with traveling through urban landscapes, including tolls, dilapidated roads, and traffic (both human and vehicle), which can make it difficult to make it to the customer in a timely manner. These are just some of the reasons why the last mile is the costliest and least efficient part of delivering any goods, and why this is such a major burden for Amazon. This is why Amazon has felt the need to develop its own supply chain delivery network specifically tasked with handling the diverse challenges that come with navigating this process.

3.1.2 Amazon Logistics: Own Your Success

Amazon launched Amazon Logistics in 2014, as a mechanism through which the company could begin building its own work force for last mile deliveries. Known for their signature blue, Amazon branded vans, Logistics couriers have become an integral part of Amazon's delivery operations. Since its launch, Logistics has been tremendously successful for Amazon and has grown impressively. Explained simply, for a franchise buy-in fee, a person can form a "third-party courier company" as guided and equipped by Amazon for the purposes of delivering Amazon packages. As of 2019 Amazon reports currently employing 800 of these third-party courier companies, which manage approximately 75,000 drivers (Peterson, 2019). In August of 2019 it was reported that "Amazon had delivered 46% of U.S. packages bought on its e-commerce platform through Amazon Logistics... more than double the 20% figure just a year earlier" (Cheng, p.1). The rapid expansion of this operation may be explained by Amazon's ability to sell it to potential entrepreneurs through entrepreneurial rhetoric—chief among the company's recruiting tactics.

Using familiar entrepreneurial rhetorics that focus on community betterment (Spinuzzi, 2017) the Amazon Logistics website urges: "Own your success. If you love building and leading teams, start your own business as an Amazon Delivery Service Partner, delivering smiles to customers across your community" (Logistics, p.1). The website for Logistics also advertises "Low startup costs" of as little as \$10,000 dollars. Importantly, it also promises the entrepreneur the support of the already available Amazon infrastructure and resources as it assures "Logistics experience not required: Use our technology, processes, and more than 20 years of logistics experience to set up and run your delivery business" (Logistics, p.1). Amazon provides access to its fleet of vehicles for the entrepreneur and their employees (typically between 40 and 100 on

average). The company also promises “training, a comprehensive toolkit, and ongoing support.” The website even includes a testimonial from one of these entrepreneurs whose statement reads:

I had prior experience running my own business but not in logistics. I was driving for Amazon Flex when I learned about the opportunity to start my own delivery company. Backed by Amazon's resources and logistics experience to learn while I earn and grow my business made this opportunity a no brainer. In just 5 months, I have hired more than 40 employees (Logistics p.1)

This testimonial is accompanied by a picture of a black man, in a West African garment whose name is stated to be Olaoluwa. Additionally, it states that he lives in Aurora, Colorado. Clearly Amazon is telegraphing that this man is living his “American dream,” through its entrepreneurial franchising opportunity. Amazon has stated that the maximum earnings potential annually reaches as high as \$300,000 in profits while managing 40 routes (if you live in a large enough area) (Bishop, 2018). That means that a person may be able to change their life as an Amazon entrepreneur if they are willing to do the requisite labor.

There is something else that is of note from this testimonial. “Olaoluwa” states that before he was an Amazon franchisee, he drove for Amazon as an Amazon Flex deliverer, or an independent contractor delivering packages for the company, also in the hopes of reducing last mile costs for the company while earning money. This testimonial posits that a person can elevate themselves from independent contractor to Amazon franchisee, “owning their success” and obtaining financial freedom in a relatively short period of time. Essentially, what Amazon is doing here is outsourcing the last mile problem, and also outsourcing the problem of management. Through logistics, part of being a boss comes with managing your own team of independent contractors who you will rely on in order to keep operations running smoothly. The Logistics

entrepreneur becomes an independent contractor recruiting and leading other contractors. This organizational structure here is similar to that of companies who engage in multi-level-marketing programs. Companies including Avon, Herbalife, and Amway have come under scrutiny in recent decades for what has been described as ethically dubious labor practices. As explained by scholars Claudia Grob and Dirk Vrines in the *Journal of Business Ethics*:

These problems include that (1) some MLM companies operate as de facto pyramid schemes, (2) income opportunities are misrepresented, (3) customers are harmed by exaggerated and/or illegal product claims, (4) distributors misuse their friends and family members to earn money, and (5) that some MLMs have cult-like organizational cultures that restrict their members' ability to reflect on the (ethical) quality of the company's business practices (2019, p. 334)

A lot of this can be applied directly to the entrepreneur-based business model being propagated by Amazon. Much like the promises of the sharing economy, what has historically made multi-level-marketing programs attractive to potential laborers are “factors like freedom to work at your own time and pace, additional residual income, the opportunity to be your own boss and the promise of steady and gradual success for ordinary people” (Chaudry, 2013, p. 8). Amazon is relying on cheap laborers selling an advancement opportunity to lower level laborers and so on for that buy-in fee of \$10,000.

The reality is that many people do not have the “as little as \$10,000” that it takes in order to buy into an Amazon delivery franchise so they remain low-level independent contractors who are the foundation needed for higher level contractors and Amazon to thrive. For these drivers their choices when it comes to driving for Amazon then become contracting for a Logistics entrepreneur or driving for themselves through Amazon Flex, wherein the driver is dealing with the same stresses

and obstacles of the last mile, but with less infrastructural support and less investment from Amazon. In many ways it seems that the messaging from Amazon sets up an agonistic relationship between the Logistics laborers and those who choose to labor for Flex, wherein Flex drivers are made to feel as if they should be working their way up to the status of Logistics workers. All of this raises questions about what can be discovered about Amazon and its commitment to mastering the last mile, through further exploring Amazon Flex, its messaging, and the labor behind it.

3.1.3 An Introduction to Amazon Flex

Initially described as “Uber for packages,” Amazon launched its Flex delivery service in 2015. Earlier in 2015 it was rumored that Amazon was in talks to buy the established delivery service Postmates (Perez & Lunden, 2015). The reported plan was for Amazon to rebrand the company and utilize its established infrastructure, while expanding to become the official delivery service of Amazon and its packages. Instead, later in the year Amazon unveiled another new delivery service called Amazon Flex. Initially Flex was rolled out only in Seattle, Washington with plans to expand to eight other US cities (including Portland, Atlanta, and New York) soon after. As was reported by *The Guardian*’s Alex Hern upon launch: “Amazon has made its first serious foray into the so-called “gig economy” advertising for part-time delivery drivers in Seattle as part of a programme called “Amazon Flex” (p.1). Of course, it must be noted that if taking Mechanical Turk into account Amazon has been deeply embedded in the sharing economy since 2005. Hern went on to explain:

Amazon advertises the role to potential workers “be your own boss: deliver when you want, as much as you want”...“You can choose any available 2, 4, and 8-hour blocks of time to

work the same day, or set availability for up to 12 hours per day for the future. You can work as much or as little as you want,” the company explained in an FAQ (p.1)

While Amazon Logistics promises that you can “own your success” while being an entrepreneur, Amazon Flex similarly promises that you can “be your own boss” as an independent contractor. Flex is essentially Amazon’s answer to expanding its delivery force through people who want the opportunity to work, but cannot afford the \$10,000 dollar buy-in or do not want the burden of owning an Amazon delivery franchise. While the rhetorics for both platforms are similar, the pay structures are not. As explained by *Washington Post* reporter Sarah Halzack in a 2015 article about the then-new service:

With Amazon Flex, the company says, drivers can make from \$18 to \$25 an hour ferrying packages to customers that were ordered as part of its one-hour Prime Now delivery service. As with on-demand car services such as Uber and Lyft, drivers will be independent contractors who select their own work hours. The new approach is part of the retailer’s ongoing obsession with getting items to customers faster, and could help reduce Amazon’s dependency on major shipping carriers such as UPS and FedEx (p. 1)

While it seems like this is a mutually advantageous relationship for Amazon – always looking to expedite the delivery of their products to eager customers, while limiting costs – and for independent contractors looking to make competitive wages, the remainder of this chapter examines the problems that have emerged as Amazon Flex has grown in the time since its introduction. Some of these issues resemble those faced by the independent contractors who power the infrastructure of the previously discussed MTurk. These include wage fluctuation, a lack of employment stability, and the issues that emerge from the absence of protections provided by employee benefits.

Additionally, the remainder of this chapter examines how this labor is also comparable to the labor of other independent contractors in the sharing economy who labor for juggernauts like Uber and Lyft, and are required to perform pressurized physical labor tasks including driving, and delivering precious cargo, and are also responsible for utilizing their own vehicles, smartphones, and all other resources necessary to ensure delivery. For the contractors these challenges include the precarious pre-labor that is necessary to ensure success generally within the sharing economy. For Flex drivers this entails vehicle upkeep, pre-prepping as not to have to rely on an often unreliable Amazon Flex app, calculating possible wage losses for certain routes due to tolls and fines that must be paid out of pocket, and mitigating the risk associated with this type of delivery labor as an independent contractor.

3.2 The Promise of Amazon Flex

What is made evident through examining Amazon's marketing of its sharing economy platforms is that similarly to how the company advertised MTurk and Amazon Logistics, the corporation is acting directly in concert with other sharing economy giants like Uber with engaging messaging that pushes a narrative of laborer empowerment that predicates laborer success or failure on their own self-determination. This strategy has been effective in that Amazon Flex has spread operationally from its initial launch in Seattle to over 50 US cities, including Boston, Los Angeles, Manhattan, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Nashville, with new Flex operations being established every day (Kohler, 2020). It was even announced in January 2020 that Flex was rolling out in Sydney and Melbourne, Australia (Jones, 2020). As this growth continues, more and more people have been swayed by the promises made by Amazon regarding Flex.

As with the large number of companies who rely on independent contractor labor and these rhetorics of the sharing economy, Amazon is trying its best to control the narrative about what it means to be a laborer for this company. On the Amazon Flex home page in a large font and bold letters at the top of the page the words “Great money. Great flexibility” (Flex, 2020) are laid out as if a promise to any inquiring laborers. Right below this are the words “Be your own boss, set your own schedule and have more time to pursue your goals and dreams” (Flex, 2020). These are all standard rhetorical strategies utilized within the sharing economy. These promises of autonomy and freedom are the foundational rhetorics of the sharing economy and imperative to selling the dream. As eluded to previously, this promise is very much similar to that made on the Mechanical Turk home page, which promises the laborer that you can “Make money in your spare time. Get paid completing simple tasks” (MTurk, 2020). Both of these promises elude to the idea that the laborers will be so well compensated, and in such a short period of time, that this work will be supplementary to more important goals which Flex or MTurk will afford the worker the opportunity to pursue. Another commonality is that the reality may not match the promise in both cases.

Of further note on the Flex home page is the additional promise that “Most drivers earn \$18 - \$25 per hour*” (Flex, 2020). The asterisk next to that statement tells an interesting story that may differ from what workers are offered at face value. At the very bottom, the page reads, in much smaller text, “*Actual earning will depend on your location, any tips you receive, and how long it takes you to complete your deliveries, and other factors.” There is a certain ambiguity that is tied to that statement that is somewhat unsettling. What exactly are these “other factors” and why is Amazon not listing at least some of them? The idea of compensation being tied to “how long it takes you to complete your deliveries,” raises questions about how this metric is evaluated,

and how that specifically factors into the compensation of drivers. It appears as if the company is eluding to the challenges of the last mile, while trying its best to maintain potential laborer confidence.

As stated in the previous chapter, ambiguity about wages and inconsistencies in regard to compensation are often tied directly to laborer feelings of economic instability and precarity. This type of work can be tied to anxieties that manifest in a plethora of ways, including mental instability and issues with physical health (Jacobs, 2015). In exploring Amazon Flex, I return to the concept of precarious pre-labor, which is essentially the labor necessary before a particular job in order to be successful and economically prosperous in that job. The sharing economy is notorious for employing laborers who feel that they must subject themselves to this type of pre-labor in order to earn more. For example, with Uber, car upkeep is essential year round. With Airbnb house upkeep is key to your success before ever having a person to tend to in your living space. With the example of Amazon Mechanical Turk, I pointed to the fact that many contractors frequent internet message boards where they give each other tips for the most advantageous postings at the moment. This raises the questions of what might trigger driver anxiety, and what type of precarious pre-labor Amazon Flex workers feel that they are subject to in order to succeed within that working environment. This also raises questions about how the workers feel about the quality of this labor compared to how Amazon presents it through these rhetorics of the sharing economy.

In examining the dynamics between Amazon Flex and the contractors who labor for it I found that indeed the rhetorics of Amazon do not match the realities faced by these laborers. In thoroughly researching laborer reports, accounts, and documenting interactions between these workers in online communities my research uncovered that the issues go far beyond broken

promises. This chapter argues that in regard to Amazon Flex labor, these contractors are performing labor that positions them in a unique situation, wherein their labor is of the utmost value to both Amazon, and the public, but at the same time they are seen as expendable. In addition to this, this brand of labor creates a situation where these laborers are uniquely vulnerable to dangers that are not often (if ever) taken into account, or acknowledged by Amazon. Engaging the last mile in particular puts these drivers in positions where the dangers are dynamic, and more difficult to predict, prepare for, or navigate than the run-of-the-mill sharing economy contracted labor (like Uber, or Airbnb). A revealing example of this is the Covid-19 pandemic, which occurred during the writing of this chapter, and is foundational to the argument that I am making about these workers being uniquely vulnerable, and also uniquely essential, yet still under-compensated, and under-recognized by Amazon. It is this unique combination of factors that create idiosyncratically precarious working conditions for these laborers. In response, to this many of these workers are led to perform the arduous pre-labor task of seeking out community on the internet, in order to ease the burden of this physically, and mentally taxing, precarious labor.

Documenting these online interactions is an important contribution to the studies of labor because as labor norms continue to evolve in the 21st century it is evident that the presence and impact of sharing economy platforms will only continue to grow as a force in the larger economy and in the lives of both those who work as contractors to provide services, as well as a public that is ever-more dependent on the services. A deeper understanding of the challenges faced by these contractors could shift the way that the public thinks of these laborers, and the ways that companies like Amazon who rely on their cheap labor compensate them. Additionally, this type of human analysis contributes to the study of the sharing economy in particular by expanding the discourse beyond discussions of the more broad paradigmatic economic shifts, to much needed discussions

regarding the human experiences and costs of these shifts. The remainder of this chapter sets out to expand on the aforementioned findings and arguments. The following section evaluates some of these aforementioned contractor accounts of both labor, and pre-labor challenges including everything from mundane challenges, including preparing for a lack of parking, to trying to navigate other unknowns of the last mile. This section serves as an introduction to the more basic struggles faced by these contractors, as the remainder of the chapter focuses on the more dynamic struggles faced by these workers as provide their time and labor to Amazon.

3.3 The Reality of Amazon Flex Labor

The three foundational promises that are made to potential contractors on the Amazon Flex webpage are great earnings, flexible hours, and the ability to be your own boss. These are commonplace promises that are made in the hopes of enticing people to contract their labor to companies or corporations participating in the sharing economy. As Guy Standing points out about the ever-growing class of people who lack an anchor of stability – or the precariat – this lack of permanence has been historically tied to policy shifts and institutional changes in a given period (Standing, 2011). Building on this, Mary L. Gray points out in her 2019 book *Ghost Work* that the present institutional labor paradigm has been disrupted by “a world in which steady work and salaries are being replaced by a chaotic string of small projects and micropayments, and human bosses are being replaced by automated processes that are programmed to oversee a far-flung workforce of anonymous independent contractors” (p. 45). This is the current reality for those who are employed and for those seeking employment. In both cases this may result in a persistent state of precarity, tied to ever-precarious labor circumstances.

For contractors who are relying on labor opportunities that are increasingly dynamic when providing labor to Amazon Flex, how can any of the aforementioned promises made on the Amazon Flex homepage be kept by the company? This section explores those promises made by Amazon, by first utilizing journalist accounts and investigative reports as case studies that reflect on the reality of what it is actually like to work as a Flex package deliverer. In order to explore these labor dynamics, I examined multiple articles written by people who had worked for Amazon Flex temporarily, and with the intention of relaying their experiences to the public after their individual experiences. These accounts are meaningful as they are representative accounts of the struggles of the last mile that were published for the consumption of the mass public including potential Amazon Flex drivers. Following this, I once again engage in online ethnography as I embed myself in an online Reddit community, dedicated solely to Amazon Flex contractors. Building on my analysis of independent contractor discourses regarding labor precarity from the Mechanical Turk chapter, I set out to examine the ways in which this more traditional mode of labor may also create precarious conditions for this set of contractors. Engaging in this methodological approach also creates continuity between the Amazon laborers profiled in the previous chapter and those who chose Flex as their mode of contracted labor. Online ethnography also produces responses from these laborers that are unfiltered, as they engage each other in a community where they can speak freely about their experiences.

This section builds on the foundational argument of this chapter, which is that the exploitative and precarious labor conditions created through how Amazon utilizes sharing economy conventions for MTurk contractors in their completion of intellectual labor, are only exacerbated when applied to the more traditional physical labor of Amazon Flex contractors. Furthermore, I argue that although some of the conditions that create labor precarity are similar,

there are significant differences that are made evident by Amazon Flex laborer accounts. These include increased physical dangers, more consequential responsibilities without the appropriate support, even less job security, and coming to terms with the fact that although their labor is essential, they are seen as expendable. All of this creates uncertain conditions that contradict the promises of Amazon Flex and produce a plethora of labor-related anxieties for these workers who must now engage in precarious pre-labor through message boards in order to combat the inherent instability of this brand of labor.

3.3.1 “Great Earnings” and the Last Mile

According to Stanford University sociologists Paolo Parigi and Karen Cook the financial dynamics of the sharing economy are more straight forward than they might appear. As they explain in their 2015 article “Trust and Relationships in the Sharing Economy,” the platforms that will continue to be the most successful are “those where providers earn cash and consumers get a good deal” (p. 14). They continue by explaining that these are typically large, well-funded, for-profits who have the means to garner the most attention for their platform. This, in many ways describes the dynamics of Amazon Flex, wherein the ultimate goals of the service are to reduce shipping costs by eliminating last mile expenses for Amazon, increase customer satisfaction through increasingly expedited product delivery, and to pay competitive wages to their providers or laborers. It is a scenario in which Amazon and the customers are typically mutually satisfied with the results. This is not always the case when it comes to those contracting their labor, however, and this is not exclusive to Amazon.

There is nothing new or novel about the use of deceptive practices in the marketing of sharing economy opportunities. As referenced in the article “The Taking Economy,” published in

2017, in the *Columbia Law Review*, sharing economy companies have been historically deceptive in their marketing. Cited as an example of this deception is the 2016 case in which the FTC alleged that Uber “misrepresented, in advertisements, how much drivers (whom the Commission called ‘entrepreneurial consumers,’ consistent with Uber’s own designation of drivers as ‘entrepreneurs’) could earn” (Calo & Rosenblat, p. 1632). This raises questions about how in 2020 Amazon Flex’s homepage can boast “Most drivers make \$18-\$25 an hour*,” especially when many have reported that this may not be necessarily true when all is taken into account.

In June of 2018 *The Atlantic* published an article entitled “I Delivered Packages for Amazon and it was a Nightmare.” In the article, journalist Alana Semuels chronicled the process of enrolling as an Amazon Flex contractor and her experience as a package deliverer for a day. As reflected in the title of the article, the process was not what she expected and moreover not exactly what had been promised by Amazon in the Flex homepage or in their advertisements. Many of the challenges of last mile package delivery are made evident in her accounts of her experiences. She begins by sharing what it was like to even get enrolled and approved as a Flex driver. She recalls:

I became an Amazon Flex independent contractor by downloading an app, going through a background check, and watching 19 videos that explained in great detail the process of delivering packages. (I did not get paid for the time it took to watch these videos, nor was there any guarantee that I would be approved as a driver once I watched the videos.) (p.1)

It appears that the inequities begin at the point of application for the contractor, as other more conventional employment opportunities might provide paid training or orientation. The applicant here is left in a state of uncertainty as they wait for confirmation or denial from Amazon. Semuels goes on to explain that following the unpaid training it was “weeks” before she was approved and able to pick up a shift in her delivery area of downtown San Francisco. A situation like this may

be conducive to increased feelings of precarity amongst potential contractors in need of this source of income.

Semuels recounts that the expectation was set that “my three-and-a-half-hour block was going to net me \$70, according to the app, though of course I had to pay for my own fuel and tolls” (p.1). As a first-time deliverer she already is aware of the fact that there is no reimbursement for any expenses that may arise during the delivery shift, which will certainly cut into the “great earnings” promised on the Flex homepage. For the duration of the article Semuels recounts the self-described “nightmare” that was this shift. This included scenarios that were not covered in trainings, including lack of free parking in metropolitan areas, threats of parking tickets, navigating the delivery of 43 packages to multiple addresses in the allotted timeframe, and an overall lack of support from Amazon.

In addition, Semuels gives a breakdown of her finances at the end of her shift. What she reveals is that after all of those aforementioned “other factors” are taken into account driving for Flex may not be nearly as lucrative as Amazon promises. As Semuels recalls about her experience as a driver “Flex was not a good deal for me. My shift lasted slightly longer than the three-and-a-half hours Amazon had told me it would, because I had to return two undeliverable packages to the South San Francisco warehouse” (p.1). She continues:

My tech-economy experience was far less lucrative. In total, I drove about 40 miles (not counting the 26 miles I had to drive between the warehouse and my apartment). I was paid \$70, but had \$20 in expenses, based on the IRS mileage standards. I had narrowly avoided a \$110 parking ticket, which felt like a win, but my earnings, added up, were \$13.33 an hour. That’s less than San Francisco’s \$14 minimum wage (p.1).

The attractive and competitive \$18-25 dollars an hour advertised by Amazon was inaccurate in this case when taking into account the costs of delivering these packages in one of America's most expensive cities (Betz, 2020). This does not take into account the mental and physical toll that the deliverer endures during their shifts.

This sort of precarity was not exclusive to Semuels and could also be found in other similar published accounts of the burdens that are a reality of Amazon Flex laboring. The following year, in June of 2019 CNBC released an article titled "What it's Really Like to be an Amazon Flex Driver as Prime One-Day Shipping Expands." The article is written by reporter Katie Schoolov who shadowed a Flex Driver named Oscar Montes who was responsible for the delivery of approximately 46 packages in 3½ hours, for \$105. Montes experienced similar concerns and hardships as Alana Semuels. Montez shared his frustrations about responsibilities beyond merely delivering packages on time, including vehicle upkeep costs, and additional expenses including tolls, gas and any other expenses that might occurs, like tickets or citations.

At the end of the shift Montes confided in the reporter that some days are better than others depending on factors like locations that he is assigned. Delivery locations are based on factors including need and availability. These may be more of the "other factors" that Amazon was referring to in the small print at the bottom of the Amazon Flex home page. Montes discusses his anxieties about the reality of the wages earned in comparison to the costs of the labor stating, "If I spent three-hours-plus of my time, that's just doing the block. Then who knows how long it will take me to get back. And all I made was 70 bucks, and half of that might go to expenses like gas and like the bridge" (p.1). The fact of the matter is, Amazon Flex as contracted labor costs a lot to perform. Much of the "great earnings" go right back into the cost of delivering and traversing the last mile including unforeseen auxiliary expenses like tolls, fuel, or tickets for traffic violations

while delivering packages. These are the obstacles that could not have been anticipated by these contractors initially, but that become a part of their reality as Amazon Flex laborers. Furthermore, there are intensive and often monetarily detrimental physical labor tasks that must be performed before the driver is able to serve Amazon and the customers they are delivering to. These tasks include vehicle upkeep procedures like oil changes, car alignments, and the general maintenance necessary to keep a vehicle in running condition. I argue that in addition to trying to prepare for the obstacles of package delivery, there are many other tasks that drivers must perform in preparation for the road. This is essentially precarious pre-labor that drivers must engage in as part of a series of ‘first mile’ tasks before tackling the last mile for Amazon. As with many sharing economy jobs this unpaid and uncompensated pre-labor contributes to feelings of precarity that weigh on the drivers and add to the uncertainty of this type of labor.

3.3.2 Agency, Flexibility and Being Your Own Boss

After promising potential contractors that they can achieve great earnings. The next two points of emphasis are “flexible hours” and the chance to “be your own boss.” Essentially what is being advertised here is a sense of control over one’s circumstances that someone may not have had before. This is a type of human agency that is being recognized by the company and bestowed upon the independent contractor. Individual agency is described as the capacity for people to “bring their influence to bear through their own actions” (Otto et al., 2020, p. 3). As Welzel & Inglehart note “feelings of agency are linked to human well-being through a sequence of adaptive mechanisms that promote human development, once existential conditions become permissive” (2010, p. 43). They continue by explaining that existential conditions “are all types of environmental conditions, including not only natural conditions but also economic, social, and

cultural conditions” (p. 48). Amazon is promoting the idea that Flex as a platform is the mechanism that will create permissive existential conditions to facilitate change in a person’s economic status by affording them control over that status. This is a standard rhetorical strategy often utilized in sharing economy marketing materials. It is an enticing offer but the reality is that in taking on this opportunity, contractors may find themselves under the control of a stifling corporate regime with the power to control the financial outcomes at the end of the day.

Amazon’s “flexible hours” and the ability to “be your own boss” are tied together because the flexible hours seem to be the main selling point of the be your own boss narrative here. In actuality what they are really promising is that you will be able to pick your preference from what delivery shifts are available, as dictated by Amazon based on need. This is unlike Uber or Lyft where drivers are able to choose driving times based on their needs, in conjunction with passenger demands. Amazon provides no such autonomy. Rather, drivers pick an available shift and are then at the mercy of Amazon and the delivery demands of the day. The documented reality of these promises is that they may not reflect the reality of the laborer experience. In a final article about driving for Amazon Flex for *GeekWire* entitled “I was an Amazon Delivery Driver: What It’s Like to Work in the Tech Giant’s Citizen Package Brigade” reporter Taylor Soper recounts his time as an Amazon Flex driver. Soper recalls two different Flex delivery blocks that he worked on two separate days in Seattle, Washington. This is of importance to him because of the differences in experiences during the two shifts. He elaborates:

I’ve done two shifts for Amazon.com orders and made \$118.50 total, not counting gas expenses and overall wear and tear on my car. They were quite different — one evening I only had to deliver three packages and made \$60, while a week later I spent nearly three

hours on a Saturday afternoon stopping at more than 35 different houses within a half-mile of each other (2017, p.1).

This account reiterates the aforementioned inconsistency that comes with many jobs of the sharing economy as the labor is disseminated on the basis of need, which is variable day-to-day. In this way you are always working at the will of Amazon. More importantly, this is emblematic of one of the aspects of this type of labor that is precarious, which is the lack of stability and predictability. On a shift to shift basis your economic reality changes in a way that the worker has no agency over outside of choosing to accept the work or not. Furthermore, the laborer goes where Amazon instructs them, and performs the tasks that Amazon has available for you on a given day.

Throughout the article, Soper speaks on having difficulties similar to those mentioned in the previous reporter accounts. These include undeliverable packages, efficiently fitting packages in his modest vehicle, app problems, racing against the clock, and a lack of Amazon support. Of particular note, Soper describes his dependence on his smartphone and the navigation app in order to efficiently deliver the packages. He recalls “When I was ready to leave, the app automatically directed me to the first stop, as decided by Amazon’s algorithms... The maps software is based on HERE, originally developed by Nokia. Amazon may be avoiding Google Maps or Apple Maps because it wants to keep its delivery data close to the vest” (p.1). At every step of the process Amazon is not only tracking your movement, but also telling you how you should move and when based on the time provisions of the shift. Additionally, you are not provided with the autonomy of choosing another navigational app in the name of protecting proprietary Amazon delivery data.

This is seemingly the reality of driving for Flex. The worker is promised freedom, but because the cargo is so valuable to Amazon, the contractor is micromanaged in the same way that they may be at a typical job. There is always fear that the powers above have the ability to cancel

your contract as they see fit, with little or no warning. Additionally, as *New York Times* columnist Natasha Singer points out, workers exist in a dynamic reality that can change on a day to day basis without explanation. This is in terms of the actual labor and the policies that govern the labor. Singer writes that “one issue for contractors is that companies can alter their terms with impunity. Workers are often reluctant to challenge these changes because the companies can drop them – or deactivate them... at any time” (Singer, 2014, p. 2). The Flex driver is always aware of who the actual boss is in this employment situation and it is not them. All of this surely increases the precarity of this labor despite the promises made by Amazon. While Soper only got a fleeting glimpse of this day-to-day inconsistency, this is what many Flex drivers expect on a day to day basis. This is also evidenced in the ways that drivers communicate amongst themselves, as demonstrated on the aforementioned message boards that are at center of the upcoming section.

In some ways Amazon Flex drivers are encouraged to think of themselves as their own boss. As I note above, before you get on the road, you are able to select the available shift that best works for your schedule. Amazon does not tell contractors when they have to or do not have to work. The contractor can also pick up as many shifts as they like, given there are shifts available. That said, once the contractor agrees to those shifts, they are agreeing for that time to have Amazon be their boss and influence their decisions and movements. For Amazon, being your own boss equates to picking your own schedule based on what is available at the time. Beyond that they are your employer, and an employer that can be demanding and stress inducing for the employees. Ironically, all of this is despite the fact that you are not legally Amazon’s employee and the company therefore does not provide the same protections and security that is provided to traditional employees. This is one of the common threads that is evident in all of these articles that reflect on time spent as Amazon Flex independent contractors.

In sum, examining these media accounts of Amazon Flex drivers and their anxieties are valuable because they shed light on these issues and provide insight to a public who may not be aware of what goes into the labor-end of their package appearing on their door step. Moreover, I found that despite Amazon's promises not coming to fruition in any meaningful way, and a multitude of hardships that come with the labor, these drivers are still dedicated to this and are able to soldier through. In many cases they are able to compartmentalize and rationalize the stresses that come with this work and make it all the more precarious. These nationally published accounts of the precarious nature of Amazon Flex labor only tell part of the story. For every published account, there are thousands of testimonials that go unheard. The next section of this work is concerned with those laborers. I dive deep into an online community that is comprised mostly of Amazon Flex package deliverers who come onto the Internet to share stories about shifts, vent about hardships, and provide tips for other deliverers about how to make their deliveries more efficient while increasing earning potential. This section is specifically concerned with the precarious pre-labor involved in navigating the last mile and finding a balance between maximizing reward, while minimizing risks.

3.4 r/AmazonFlexDrivers and the Precarious Pre-Labor of Avoiding Risk

In addition to the physical labor that drivers engage in, including vehicle upkeep and shift planning, drivers often rely on Internet message boards to provide both a source of information and community. One message board in particular brings together thousands of Amazon Flex contractors and provides an open atmosphere for them to air concerns and receive support from their fellow contractors. This is Reddit, where Amazon Flex contractors can communicate by way

of the subreddit r/AmazonFlexDrivers. Much like the MTurk subreddit, many of the posts here are about how drivers can be more efficient and maximize their earning potential. Unlike the MTurk subreddit, these posters are discussing more traditional physical labor as opposed to the politics of the intellectual labor of Mechanical Turk. Furthermore, these Amazon Flex posters are seeking information on ways to mitigate the stress of the auxiliary labor that is a part of delivering packages for Amazon. Whereas the MTurk subreddit posters are concerned with finding the most opportune HITS to perform on the MTurk website, r/AmazonFlexDrivers has posters who are more concerned with navigating the physical labor of their delivery blocks. This includes the extremes of navigating the last mile, such as minimizing the dangers of delivering packages to the homes of strangers. A lack of control over unknown dangers is one important aspect that differentiates Amazon Flex drivers from other counterparts who labor for ridesharing platforms including Uber and Lyft. While those drivers are able to decline service in situations where they feel they are at risk, in most cases Flex drivers are not afforded the same flexibility to decline servicing potentially risk-filled areas, for the packages must be delivered on time. This is often a topic of discussion amongst drivers. Posts are also about the more mundane aspects of this labor, such as planning for parking and dealing with the Amazon Flex app.

In this section I once again engage in online ethnography in order to examine the ways in which Amazon Flex independent contractors utilize the r/AmazonFlexDrivers subreddit in order to organize and share tips on ways to maximize profiting ability while minimizing the labor that is necessary in order to succeed as a Flex driver. In order to collect these data, I have embedded myself in the Reddit community, while observing the ways in which these posters engage with each other. This includes keeping record of the topics that recur and the temperament of the interactions. Through embedding myself in this forum and studying driver interactions I found that

the issues that drivers face are dynamic and are closely tied to factors including geography, socio-economic status, and the realities of traversing decaying urban areas. While performing this research, I found that uncontrollable world events play a major role in the lives of these drivers in ways that are unique to them, and that make their brand of sharing economy labor that much more precarious when compared to their contemporaries.

3.4.1 The Danger

As mentioned, one of the most important aspects of delivering packages for Flex drivers is doing so safely. Much of the pre-planning and pre-labor that goes into driving for Flex is in regard to making sure that drivers are prepared for the possible dangers that could come with delivering packages to unfamiliar neighborhoods. This is especially true for new drivers and is made evident by the abundance of daily threads on this topic that are made on r/AmazonFlexDrivers. An example of this is a thread made by a poster named JohnB_77. The thread is titled *DON'T deliver to the back of a house*, and the poster warns new drivers in the Los Angeles area “Amazon has recently been hiring a bunch of new people and I wanted to warn people to not go to the back of a house, even if instructed to. This happened to me not long ago, the delivery instructions said to go to the back and drop off the package. When I went to the back, I opened the gate and I see a pissed off fucking pitbull running straight at me (p.1). He goes on to recount narrowly escaping from the dangers posed by the dog. In a similar thread posted by user rocktopus, the user warned in their thread title *Delivery instructions: ‘deliver to side door,’ but the small gate was closed. Went to open it and a USPS worker behind me said don’t, there’s a dog in there*. He elaborates in the short body of the thread, “What the fuck, be safe out there. If that USPS worker wasn't there I'd have

gotten bit by a fucking dog. Don't open gates and watch out for dogs. That lady almost set me up wtf" (p.1).

Additionally, Flex drivers lack the certainty that comes with having a regular route, like postal workers or UPS and FedEx drivers. This means that every time they are tasked with delivering to a neighborhood the potential dangers – regardless of how mundane they may be – cannot be accounted for or prepared for specifically. This puts these drivers at a disadvantage and is one of the factors that contributes to the precarity of this kind of labor. As is pointed out by Valerio De Stefano in her article “The Rise of the ‘Just-in-Time Workforce’: On Demand Work, Crowd Work, and Labour Protection in the ‘Gig Economy,’” the things that seem trivial for many traditional employees of a company become:

all the more serious in countries where basic social instruments such as health insurance and pension plans are mainly provided by employers to regular employees, leaving the rest of the workforce uncovered. The problem is even more widespread if we take into account other social entitlements such as unemployment benefits: in jurisdictions where they are reserved to formerly “employed” persons, most workers that are allegedly self-employed in the gig-economy risk to find themselves excluded from coverage (2016 p. 480)

This is what makes this physical labor increasingly stress-inducing for the contractors. The fact of the matter is that one uncontrollable event could have dire consequences. This inherent precarity that is tied to Amazon flex and similar contracted labor makes preparedness a priority, and thus the message boards become major assets to these laborers. Because for many of these drivers Amazon Flex is the contractor’s primary source of income, being able to avoid risk wherever and whenever possible is a key to success. This is a factor that goes into planning and scheduling work blocks. The dangers go beyond the commonplace threat of overzealous dogs. In many cases drivers

log on to the subreddit to report on other unforeseen dangers including human threats and those looking to commit robberies of vulnerable and inexperienced drivers.

In a thread titled *First route ever in Detroit, basically got robbed of a package*, user RedditProfile01 recounts a frightening experience that occurred on their inaugural delivery block. It was not something that Amazon had warned about in training or that was ever mentioned in the lead up to their first shift. The user writes:

I pull down this dark street and scan my package, start walking towards the door and I hear from across the street “hey! What u doin?!” Then this old black dude runs down the steps toward me and once he gets to me he starts questioning why I’m delivering so late and following me to the correct doorstep asking me “what the fucks in the package” ... I basically just hand it to him because this is Detroit and I don’t feel like getting shot today.

Pretty sure he stole it. What was I even suppose to do on this (2018, p.1)

The poster was met with an abundance of support from his fellow posters and Flex drivers, who have come to worry about similar scenarios when delivering packages to unfamiliar areas. User ModImmortal responded “You did the right thing. Don't worry about the lost package dude. You need to have like 11 stolen out of 500 to be deactivated” (p.1). The user continued on by describing their own interaction with a suspicious stranger while delivering a package. A user named precious1 has a brief but apt response, stating “You'll definitely get deactivated if this happens often, but Amazon won't pay your medical bills so always comply with demands” (p.1). It is commonplace for drivers to acknowledge that Amazon will not pay for medical expenses, and therefore the risk that comes with delivering packages is often not worth the reward. Additionally, users provided tips for specifically navigating Detroit, in terms of selecting shifts in neighborhoods with better safety records. The socio-economic and socio-political history of Detroit cannot be told

without acknowledging the ways in which redlining as a practice has impacted the residents of Detroit to this day. In many ways what these drivers are discussing serves as a sort of impromptu red lining of Detroit, wherein certain areas are privileged over others. Many of the neglected areas are areas also historically affected by redlining. With that said, what these drivers are engaging in is not unique to Detroit on this forum. This type of planning and strategizing occurs for most major cities that are represented on the message board. The practice is aided by the fact that many threads are labeled state-specific, and are thus made to communicate information to specific posters from those areas. This information is often similar to that shared by the posters trying to mitigate risk in Detroit by avoiding certain areas.

This raises questions about the ways that Amazon handles these types of situations, and also about the ways in which the company navigates under-served neighborhoods and relies on these contractors to traverse these areas. In a sense, Amazon is not only out-sourcing delivery duties, they are also outsourcing risk to these contractors—as are the governments that presumably serve these poorer neighborhoods. Communities in which various kinds of stores have been closed or relocated because of gentrification may be especially in need of the sorts of delivery services that Amazon has to offer. That Amazon Flex drivers want to avoid these neighborhoods highlights the problems that come when local governments privatize portions of their infrastructure—something that also happens when they depend on companies such as Uber or Lyft to cover for the transportation deficiencies that result from cancelled bus routes. Rather than finding ways to serve those communities hit hardest by gentrification, the digital-era solutions of the sharing economy suggest new ways of moving around or redlining them—or they ask other precarious laborers to navigate them on behalf of businesses and the government alike.

As scholars Dag Yemenu and Richard Cerenzio point out about this type of outsourcing of risk to contractors “without addressing all of the potential risks surrounding contractorisation, the potential for implementation of a sub-standard contractor management program is greatly increased” (p. 1, 2012). They continue by noting that companies who rely on contractor labor should have some type of risk mitigating system in place, stating that “it starts with identifying a company's top areas of vulnerability to risk, analyzing data from measurements of key performance indicators, outlining a safety plan and implementing and enforcing consistent standards (p. 2). This seems not to be the case with Amazon. While it may be difficult to create a standardized system to reduce risk due to dynamic geographical, and regional factors, many drivers write about feeling that there is a lack of effort in even addressing basic driver safety concerns by Amazon.

Threads about the dangers of certain areas are common. What is also common is drivers feeling as if they are helpless when it comes to navigating these situations in which they feel unsafe, due to what some believe to be a lack of support and empathy on the part of Amazon. User `orion_hill` posted a thread about this dichotomy, lamenting that “I've been running into an issue where I have to deliver to areas that I would never go in normally. As someone who has been held up at gunpoint in one of these areas, I tried explaining to the staff to only get the response ‘nope either take it or get deactivated’” (p.1). This is representative of a feeling of a lack of control and agency that some drivers feel when it comes to managing their own safety. As user, and forum moderator `AdmiralAZ` responds:

Unfortunately, you don't have much choice. Amazon expects drivers to accept and deliver whatever packages they give us, no matter where the delivery is. That's part of the agreement. They don't care how dangerous it might be... You may just end up having to

choose between delivering in sketchy areas sometimes or finding another gig/job.

Hopefully not (p.1).

This choice of either putting your life in danger or breaking the rules is one that drivers must confront, especially when knowing that as contracted labor they are expendable and easily replicable by Amazon, whose main objective is pleasing customers. To harken back to a point from the previous section, these do not sound like the accounts of people who feel as if they are their “own boss.” Rather these are the accounts of people who are tied to this labor and recognize the importance of maintaining this employment opportunity despite the possible dangers. These dangers are ever evolving and shifting. While writing this chapter a new danger emerged that quickly superseded the aforementioned dogs and bandits, and became a definitive event in demonstrating just how dangerous and precarious this brand of labor can be for these Flex contractors.

3.4.2 Covid-19: The New Danger

The unique dangers of delivering for Flex are frequently discussed in the subreddit. For the most part these are accounts of the aforementioned animals and thieves. In the spring of 2020, a new threat began emerging as the topic of much discussion on r/AmazonFlexDrivers. This was the Covid-19,; the global viral pandemic that had put much of the world on lockdown. The virus, which began to spread in late 2019, had soon caused chaos in a plethora of countries including China, Italy and Australia. By February of 2020, the contagious and quickly spreading virus had entered the United States. This became a primary concern of many of the Amazon Flex drivers who frequent the subreddit regularly and a reason for many drivers to join the forum. Preparing

for and managing the risk of delivering packages in this climate became another type of precarious pre-labor for these drivers.

As the virus spread throughout the United States and the American people began to panic all but essential businesses were forced to close down. These essential business included restaurants, public transport, health care facilities, grocery stores, and big box stores. In this time, the services of Amazon became critical to many Americans who would rely on the company to deliver essential goods to their residences. Many of these deliveries would be carried out by Amazon Flex employees. Flex contractors were on the front lines of the pandemic, as were Amazon employees at multiple levels of the supply chain. For a period of time, Amazon would put a halt to shipping and delivering all products that were considered non-essential.

Amazon's delineation of a good as "essential" is an important one because it essentially labeled these goods as the ones that were valuable enough for the company to put their labor force, especially warehouse workers and package deliverers, in harm's way to get to the homes of its customers. There was no transparent methodology laid out by the company for how it determined what is essential and what is not. Additionally, what may be considered essential for one person may not be the same for others, especially under unprecedented circumstances. Media reports stated that "Amazon customers can expect greater availability of things like soap and dog food, and potential shipping delays when it comes to less pressing items like clothing and electronics" (Matsakis, p. 1, 2020). All Amazon would publicly state was that "We are seeing increased online shopping, and as a result some products such as household staples and medical supplies are out of stock...we are temporarily prioritizing household staples, medical supplies, and other high-demand products coming into our fulfillment centers so that we can more quickly receive, restock, and deliver these products to customers" (p. 1). In actuality some remarked that essential

and non-essential status seemed to be inconsistently and arbitrarily delineated. As Journalist Maddy Varner pointed out in their article *Amazon's Shifting Definition of Essential*:

As of April 6, in the United States, you could still order a bowling ball, a 10-pack of rubber chickens, and a prom dress and have them show up at your door within a week. All of the items are described on the website as either “Fulfilled by Amazon” or “Ships from and sold by Amazon.com,” and none of the items are in the categories previously deemed essential (p. 1)

This led to questions about whether or not this constituted an expansion of the definition of essential or was mere negligence on the part of Amazon. Nonetheless, this was only putting Amazon laborers at increased risk. Published media critiques mainly focused on the warehouse employees fulfilling these orders, and not on the independent contractors also performing precarious labor in delivering these packages. As for Amazon itself, the only explanation for this inconsistency was delivered by Amazon spokesperson Andrea Rudge who (in April 2020) emphasized that while Amazon was still prioritizing essential items “we have begun selectively bringing more products from our selling partners into our fulfillment centers” (Mims, p. 1, 2020). Once again this selection process was clouded by a lack of transparency.

Amazon was aware of the optics of putting its workforce on the front lines of a global pandemic. The company made an effort to assure the public, employees, and contractors that it would act should these workers fall ill as a result of the virus. Amazon stated its intention to “hire an additional 100,000 workers in the US,” and said they “would give employees in the US, UK, and Canada a temporary raise of at least \$2 through the end of April” (Matsakis, 2020). For contractors, though, the support plan was more vague. One thing that was clear was that Flex drivers who did not elect to deliver packages would not be paid. For those who elected to drive,

Amazon stated that it would start a \$25 million dollar relief fund and after that the company would only say that it was “actively supporting employees and contractors on an individual, case-by-case basis” (Peters, 2020, p. 1). This type of ambiguity in their employment status, combined with the threat of viral infection only added to the precarious nature of this labor, and increased the amount of pre-labor and preparation needed to be successful as an Amazon Flex deliverer. This was made evident in the posts that began to become more prominent on the r/AmazonFlexDeliverers subreddit.

The proliferation of Covid-19 seemed to create two persistent narratives amongst the posters on r/AmazonFlexDrivers. On one end of the spectrum there were posters who viewed the increased need for home delivery as a positive, in that they believed this would equate to increased shifts and tips as people across the country were required to stay in their homes and practice social distancing. On the opposite end of the spectrum there were posters who viewed working during a pandemic as yet another danger that added to the already precarious dynamic of this contracted labor. They also seemed to be aware of the fact that as people lost their traditional employment, opportunities like Amazon Flex would become more attractive to people out of work. These two camps would become very vocal, making daily threads about their experiences, navigating the new reality of being a package deliverer in a country where people needed them most, even as that need was putting the drivers at risk. Topics that would often arise included ways to decrease the dangers of a virus that people did not understand, and also how to maximize the possible financial opportunities that arose from the increased importance of Amazon and its package deliverers.

At first the virus and following national quarantine resulted in more available blocks for drivers. In addition to this, there were also an abundance of posts about general acts of kindness from grateful customers who were relegated to their homes. Many of the drivers felt a sense of

appreciation. In a thread titled *The love is real for us Flexers* user The_copy simply posted a picture on themselves in their car holding a twenty dollar tip and a note left by a customer reading “Thank you!!!! Appreciate the food delivery.” User Adam9954 replied “Nice !!! It is nice to be appreciated” to which the thread starter replied “Dawg! I actually teared up a lil. Esp. when this sweet old man came out to tell me it was for me and to thank me personally. Wow. It’s a great feeling” (p.1). There seemed to be a certain dignified feeling that many posters experienced, and a new-found sense of purpose to what may have felt before like menial labor where there were threats instead of thanks. Knowing that they were being supported by the customers seemed to alleviate some of the precarity and anxieties that come with driving at a certainly uncertain time. This feeling of purpose and self-importance is a common sentiment among sharing economy workers. As noted by Malin & Chandler in their 2016 exploration of Uber and Lyft contractors, “these drivers seem to see themselves as playboring for good, gaining a sense of personal fulfillment from the service they believe they are providing to their passengers and to the larger public (p. 390). This sentiment is understood by sharing economy companies, like Uber, Lyft, and Airbnb, who often promote the promise of societally-beneficial labor in their marketing. In the case of Amazon Flex this is accomplished by emphasizing the importance of these packages being delivered on time and safely to eagerly waiting customers. This was especially true during the Covid-19 crisis, wherein the perceived importance of Amazon increased greatly to both customers and laborers.

Many additional posts about this type of support were also prominent on the message board. It became the norm for posters to make threads featuring pictures of “thank you” notes and gestures of kindness from customers. User VirtueSignal posted a thread featuring a note that read “Thank You for your delivery we appreciate you taking the time away from your family to help

make our house run a little more smoothly” (p. 1). User Cali_Official posted a picture of a bin that had been left outside for delivery workers, which was filled with items like La Croix waters and snack foods. The note on the bin read “Dear Delivery Person: Thank you! Please enjoy a treat from the bin as a [token] of our appreciation” (p. 1). The comments in this thread were a little more practical and centered on how to handle this type of customer gesture. One user responded “Very nice and cute gesture. However, unless you have a disinfectant wipe readily available, I would not touch any of it” (p. 1). In response to that comment a user commented “Lol/not lol....sad we have to think about that now!” User TaxiDriver99 offered a more cynical theory to his fellow deliverers about these treat boxes that had suddenly emerged on the porches of customers. They wrote:

My take on why people do this: To alleviate any guilt they may have for not tipping. I'm sure there are some people that still tip on top of offering a can of Lacroix, but not many. I've ran across a few of these "goodie" boxes delivering and I just roll my eyes. Even before all this virus crap I wouldn't take food or drink from a random box outside someones house.
(p.1)

This is representative of the fact that not all posters were feeling positive about their new reality on the front lines. In fact, for some of these drivers a similar sense of cynicism had developed not just toward the customers, but more importantly toward Amazon. This point of view is also represented in comments like that of user Huggy780 who posted “Amazon – Where customers care more for the contract drivers than Amazon” (p. 1). The company itself seemed to be where much of the animosity was directed on the forum. This was especially true of workers who felt they deserved more compensation and security for their labor from Amazon, without having to rely on customers.

Along with the sense of gratitude that many posters were feeling as they posted on the message board, an increasing number of posts started to be authored by contractors who were now posting daily about their health concerns, financial concerns, and overall distrust with and disappointment in, Amazon. These workers were also inspired by the actions being taken by traditional Amazon warehouse employees, who had made their frustrations with Amazon known through media outlets after multiple Amazon employees had tested positive for Covid-19. By March 25, 2020, workers at 19 Amazon warehouses had tested positive for the virus (Dzieza, 2020). This fact was not lost on the independent contractors who were aware of the fact that due to not being classified as employees, if they were to contract the virus they would be put in an even more precarious situation due to a lack of insurance and ever unclear policies and promises made by Amazon in regard to how they would assist contracted laborers were they to become ill and need to rely on the company.

Due to the increased ambiguity of their labor status and a general lack of support from Amazon, contractors would come on to the board to share their frustrations along with vague correspondences received by them from Amazon after reaching out for support. User Truckerboy2000 posted a scan of one of these generic letters in a thread titled *Thanks Amazon. Nice way of saying we don't care about you and you really don't matter* which read:

Hello, Thank you for contacting us. We know that you have been waiting for a response. Given the evolving nature of the current situation, we have been experiencing a high number of contacts. We are currently operating with reduced Driver Support capacity and will not be responding to your email in any further detail (p.1)

The letter goes on to instruct the contractor to visit the frequently asked questions portion of the Amazon Flex website for further support. As expected, the redditors were not happy about this

cold response from Amazon. User Fantasy50's reply was representative of the majority of the replies in in this thread as he wrote "You thought they gave a fuck about you? I give more of a fuck about which side of my toast gets buttered than Amazon gives about anyone on a zero hour contract" (p. 1). There is a general feeling among many drivers that they may not be of the most concern to Amazon when compared to the company's employed labor force—which itself often feels underserved by Amazon. This means looking out for themselves and utilizing this community as a resource in order to be the most productive that they can be even as Amazon treats them like second class laborers.

Other workers were using this as a forum to vent about financial frustrations as the precarity of this labor seemed to increase. Due to Flex deliveries being the primary source of income for many drivers these contractors voiced dismay over the increase in potential bodily harm, coupled with a decrease in base pay in many areas. User Shamrock93 from Detroit shared their disappointment in a thread titled *It's not worth it anymore*, writing:

I had a few blocks last week. One with no deliveries (1st time) but this week every block is at minimum rates. The entire state is shut down, so I know more drivers are available. But \$17 an hour isn't worth taking the risk of catching the virus. How I miss the good old days of \$25-30 (p. 1)

With many people losing work due to state and government mandated distancing, the supply of drivers had risen, in some places at a rate that was not matched by the amount of deliveries that were being requested, as the frenzy for essential goods (like toilet paper and hand sanitizer) began to die down. This led to anger over new drivers and Amazon lowering pay for established drivers in a time of need. User UFCpatron replied "Its gone to shit. Now costing us to deliver" (p. 1). This

user voices a common frustration in regard to how slim the margins are when taking into account last mile costs that add up quickly.

As the feelings of precarity amongst contractors continued to increase, many started to explore more unconventional avenues for balancing driving for Amazon Flex with the realities of an uncertain world. One of the topics that would continually emerge on the forum was unemployment insurance. Drivers who had been laid off from their primary income source were wondering aloud if they were eligible for unemployment benefits. Others wanted to know if they could both apply for unemployment insurance, and also drive for Amazon Flex. As the amount of drivers was increasing and shift rates were decreasing some viewed this as the only possible way to make their ends meet while their employment options were increasingly limited and their hope began to dwindle.

The question of unemployment benefits was one that was new to the forum. In previous years it was generally understood that unemployment was not an option for gig economy laborers. In fact, the remedy to unemployment was the gig economy. All of this changed as a result of the 2020 federal government stimulus package, which now afforded contractors the ability to file for these benefits. Nonetheless, there was still much confusion in regard to this on the subreddit. User Luxury2001 made a thread titled *Unemployment Insurance*, where they simply asked “Do flex drivers qualify for unemployment under the new stimulus package?” (2020, p. 1). The top voted response was from user kylesparrow who responded “Yes. If you’re getting reduced hours and pay, you can file for unemployment;” they continued “The application process will vary by state, but generally you’d be listing what you make in a typical week, and then what you’ve been reduced to.” At the end of this statement the user left a link to an article written for the NPR website.

The NPR article, written by journalist Shannon Bond, was titled “Gig Workers Would Get Unemployment Safety Net in Rescue Package.” In the article Bond explains the government protections that would be available for sharing economy contractors. But more importantly the article examined how sharing economy workers in general had been financially impacted by a health crisis that required distance between people. Bond explains that “the relief package passed by the Senate on Wednesday allows self-employed people to apply for unemployment benefits that they normally would not qualify for. The package also lets some of the self-employed access disaster loans for small businesses” (2020, p. 1). In the article she references Uber employees who have stopped driving in fear of virus transmission, and also Airbnb contractors who have gone from 90% occupancy to 0% occupancy. Citing University of California, Hastings law and labor expert Veena Dubal, Bond points out that historically “platform companies have maintained that these individual drivers, grocery delivery people are small businesses rather than employees, so the companies have refused to pay into the unemployment insurance fund” (2017, p. 102). If these contractors are considered small businesses that contract labor, then according to the parameters of the stimulus package, these contractors were entitled to the same protections offered more traditional small businesses. This type of support for Amazon Flex contractors was new and the site would become a beacon for questions regarding this government safety net, with people from similar areas of the country providing support for others reaching out for help.

User KimmyOMEGA was representative of this shifting dynamic in the r/AmazonFlexDrivers subreddit. In a thread titled *Unemployment/Care Act* the user lamented:

Before shit hit the fan (not sure if it has actually even hit the fan yet) I did 2 blocks a day for 2 weeks straight and ever since have only landed approximately 3 blocks in the last 2 weeks... I'm confused as to how we (independent contractors) receive any form of

government assistance? Can't apply for UI unless you have a W-2 or were an employee and I'm not sure how else to get the benefits (2020, p. 1)

The fact that the unemployment process differed by state meant that some drivers found themselves entangled in a more complex application than others. This led to threads with titles including *Flex driver in Pennsylvania unemployment problem! Anyone successfully navigate this?* and *Anyone having trouble or success filing for UI in AZ?* In the case of the Pennsylvania driver, user TheFirstOne99 wrote: “I've tried many times, but it keeps telling my I'm not eligible for PUA [Pandemic Unemployment Assistance] but I am most likely eligible for regular UC, which obviously I'm not as flex was my only income... Am I missing something? Guidance, a head scratch, anything appreciated thanks for your time” (p. 1). This type of post is representative of a newer brand of pre-labor that these laborers were engaging in to provide themselves with options and alternatives to Flex, if possible. The driver received suggestions as to what the issue may be from other posters from their state in order to help troubleshoot the issue. This is an example of one way in which a global community like r/AmazonFlexDrivers was beneficial to drivers who felt overwhelmed by the complexities of their individual state's processes and who may have had few real-life information sources outside of the forum.

In the case of the Arizona applicant, their concerns about unemployment insurance eligibility were laid out in a way that made it clear that the pandemic was affecting them personally. User BunCake wrote:

Currently getting a monetarily ineligible status even though i should qualify based on the guidelines per the DES [Department of Economic Security] website. My understanding is that becuz we dont have w2s our wages arent reported normally, causing this status.

Anyone have any insight? Ive had to stay home due to my live in girlfriend being a presumptive positive covid case. Any help would be appreciated! (p. 1)

This post demonstrates the ways in which the virus was not only affecting these drivers in terms of their daily processes, but had also affected their personal lives, adding a new layer of uncertainty to their already precarious situations. User Cyclops responded by sharing their experience, and lamenting: “Applied for unemployment too, as I was laid off in my primary job. The claim was accepted/approved, but I didn’t get anything, as my weekly Flex earnings exceed state max benefit of \$240(AZ)... as soon as your side job earnings exceed \$240, then state benefit does not apply” (p.1). Another one of the top responses was telling, as frustrated user ReneTee explained:

No self-employed people in AZ have received any UI yet. The state has been funded by the federal gov under the CARES Act, but that money has not been given to help anyone who traditionally doesn’t qualify for AZ’s pathetic standard UI (AZ is one of the lowest paying in the country). At this point, it is quite shameful. Yes, the system is overwhelmed with applicants, but that system should have been updated from its archaic state long ago. (p. 1)

At the end of the exchange user BunCake could only respond “Alright well I’m fucked. Thanks for the info!” (p. 1). There was a sense of hopelessness that was evident from the thread starter and the respondents. In some states laws in place before the pandemic created a situation where these contractors would be forced to deal with a long and drawn out application process in addition to dealing with the stresses of driving, and the impact of the virus on their pandemic on their personal lives, due to a system designed to be of little help to those who are independently employed.

Some drivers who were able to attain approval in their state had a simple message for their fellow Flex contractors. User munchy421 (who did not list what state they were posting from)

made a thread simply titled *Stop delivering* where they exclaimed to those reading “My claim was just passed. I’m collecting unemployment. Didn’t think it was possible but it is. My hope is that every one of you applies and is accepted and Amazon Flex comes to a halt. Fuck you Amazon” (p. 1). For this approved driver the message was direct; if you receive unemployment insurance, do not continue to put yourself at risk for Amazon. The responses were mixed. A user named PHXson (presumably from the aforementioned state of Arizona) dismissively responded “Pack of losers” (p. 1). To which a user named Jesse_blue21 responded “You’re the one working during a Pandemic” (p. 1) in a mutually antagonistic response. User CheeseMatzah of Massachusetts wrote:

I got approved as well, in MA. For the pandemic months I'll be making decent money from unemployment, however, with just the rate they assigned to me, which is ridiculously low, I won't make hardly anything. Looks like I get about 2-3 months with the combined additional \$600, but without that additional 600, it's not enough (p. 1)

Even though many guidelines for collecting unemployment for independent contractors only require that the driver had experienced decreased pay due to the pandemic, many drivers had elected to drop out of Flex all together for the time being despite still being able to legally drive and collect. User cyclops, from the thread about Arizona unemployment re-emerged in this thread pasting his nearly-identical response about his complicated experience with the AZ unemployment process. User Jesse_blue21 chimed back in with a response that matched the tone and sentiment of the thread starter, proclaiming “I got unemployment too. Fuck this trash gig for a while. \$1200 a week. I’m going to milk it Until all my money is dry. Only the most desperate of the desperate are working for flex right now” (p. 1).

More workers than not agreed with the idea that the pandemic was not a time to be driving if one did not have to. As user kumite wrote in response to the munchy421 unemployment

insurance thread: “Awesome. I'm reading more and more cases of amazon/WF [Whole Foods] employees getting sick or dying from corona virus. I'm happy to hear a few of us are starting to get unemployment benefits. The risk isn't worth the shit they're offering us” (p. 1). Whereas at the beginning of the pandemic many drivers took on the challenge of delivering to a quarantined public, as alternatives emerged some of these drivers began to put their own health and safety first. If they did not have to perform this precarious labor they chose not to. Beyond the aforementioned munchy421 thread this type of posting was beginning to become commonplace. A thread by user Quavo highlighted both the public risk aspect of the labor and what was perceived to be organizational incompetence on the part of Amazon. In their thread titled *Unemployment Line* the user asked other posters: “Now that they’ve butchered WF (Whole Foods) blocks and there’s only scant base rate logistics blocks, who else is hopping in the unemployment line? I literally can’t wait and the second this shit goes back to normal I’ll be more than happy to work again” (p. 1). Once again this was a thread where other posters overwhelmingly agreed with the thread starter. This thread also touched on a growing resentment festering amongst laborers over this perceived organizational incompetence on the part of Amazon in terms of providing these laborers those great earnings that were promised when they signed up.

The general sentiments of the responses in the thread mirrored those of thread responder the_agora who wrote:

I made the decision recently to stop trying to work Amazon. The scant blocks, lack of supplies to protect ourselves (can't buy sanitizer anywhere in Seattle), and the fact the blocks that do show up pay less than usual is a reminder that Amazon doesn't give a shit about us. That's their right, but I'd rather run Postmates or borrow from friends before I put

myself on the line for the machine. If I actually felt I was performing a service, I might feel differently. But I just feel like cannon fodder (p. 1).

The poster focuses on a lack of safety support leading to increased risk, and steadily decreasing wages and labor opportunities which increase the precarity of this labor. This issue of decreased labor opportunities was another prevalent topic on the forum, which frustrated these contractors. These workers seemed confused as to why wages and opportunities were in short supply. One theory that emerged and became common was that due to higher demand for this type of labor, there were more drivers, and Amazon was prioritizing these drivers. It could also be argued that in anticipation of losing many contractors to sickness, or unemployment Amazon over-hired many new contractors willing to take up the mantle. For those who did not apply for unemployment, were rejected for some reason, or who simply could not rely on unemployment to cover their expenses, driving Flex became a more competitive experience than they were used to, leading to a survival of the fittest mentality for many.

This contractor survivalist mentality was evident in many threads and became more common as shift demand increased. Drivers began using the board as a way to sound off about this decrease, and also in order to figure out ways to combat it. In a thread titled *Am I just checking the app at the wrong time or are there just hundreds more drivers gobbling up PrimeNow and WFM deliveries?* User curry1 concisely wrote “It’s been over a week since I got one of those blocks” (p. 1). This post demonstrated the ways in which certain blocks had become coveted including those for Whole Foods Marketplace grocery deliveries, due to the fact that people were more apt to show their appreciation by leaving tips, both in the app and in person, for those food deliveries. The top response to this was by user dnyce who responded, “It’s survival of the fittest now, in these times. I been constantly refreshing at different times & even wake up in the middle of the night to

hopefully snag something. I spend almost an hour 1/2 trying to get a block. Sometimes I get lucky but not consistent” (p.1). User vinniepaz followed up by sharing their experience stating, “The only time I can snag a prime now block is past 10pm and normally it’s for an early morning the next day. On a random occasion I will see about 10 different options for prime now/Whole Foods and as soon as I click one they’re all gone. It’s luck and also checking the app constantly” (p. 1). In the most telling response in this thread user ChefMom2020 shares a theory about why curry1 may be struggling. They wrote, “Let me guess: you’re fairly new? Amazon puts new drivers in a different block system. They give the[m] lots of blocks that are easy to get so you both get experience and get a sense that this is a good system. Then you get put into the normal block system. It’s carnage in there” (p. 1). Essentially ChefMom2020 was letting curry1 know that his honeymoon phase was likely over, resulting in the lack of available work. While never explicitly verified, this theory of new driver privilege was common throughout the forum and led to newer drivers being scapegoated and became the topic of much discussion and driver frustration.

In a thread titled *Significantly less routes popping up* the thread starter asked in their post “Anyone else experiencing this? Holy cow it's low. I'm in the Chicago land area” (p. 1). Once again, a respondent mentioned this new driver theory, but also added to this with more context for why shifts were not as prevalent. User Zombie_Pasta explained:

A few things happened, new drivers were hired and also with the virus the warehouses are only allowed a certain number of associates per sq ft. I know the one I used to work at went from 75 associates to 35 a shift because of this rule. Less workers means less ability to push out units... which equals less routes (p. 1)

This explanation takes into account the ways in which the pandemic triggered shortage of traditional warehouse workers was factoring into the lack of laboring opportunities for those

looking to work for Flex. Essentially, the precarity of more traditional Amazon employees was triggering more precarious labor conditions for the independent contractors by way of a precarity domino effect.

In the same thread, another user made a noteworthy point that played into another commonly held theory. Redditor VillageAna33 commented, “I have to refresh all day and when they pop up it’s one at a time and those are gone in 1/2 a second!” (p. 1). On the surface this appeared to be a simple comment about how quickly these labor opportunities were being claimed, but what is also being telegraphed here is a growing suspicion about methods being utilized by some Flex drivers to procure these blocks through the website. The original poster responded to VillageAna33’s post adding “I had a shift I wanted pop up 4 times and I missed it every time. I was waiting for it too, it’s crazy. Either other people are cheating or wicked fast” (p. 1). VillageAna33 agrees, “I think cheating. There’s no way 8 to 12 blocks back to back are gone in less than a second.... Something’s up!” (p. 1). This exchange was not novel, nor were these accusations.

Many drivers speculated that due to the more competitive nature of the work some had resorted to looking for an advantage by using “botting” programs in order to sign up for these scarce shifts. A bot is a software application that is programmed to run scripts or automated tasks on the Internet (Dunham & Melnick, 2008). These software applications, and more importantly the people behind them, are often the target of vitriol, as the programs have often been used to carry out tasks that some may consider morally questionable. An example of this is the way in which these botting programs rose to popularity in the hyper competitive sneaker subculture where products are often limited and in high demand. Effectively, the bot is used here to “speed up the checkout process when buying products online” (Duhig, 2020, p. 1). In the case of sneakers, the

bots “fight for a better place in line, online. These bots automate the checkout process, saving the user's shoe preference, size, and credit card payment information. This way, users can speed through the checkout process the instant a sneaker is released” (Yamamoto & Fiorino, 2019, p. 1). These programs had become more and more popular during the pandemic for the procurement of a plethora of products, including electronics such as webcams, and video game consoles, which increased in demand as people were under quarantine, but whose production had slowed due to global production interruptions. In the case of the Flex drivers the scarce goods being bottled were delivery blocks to be signed up for through the Amazon Flex website and App.

In a thread titled *Bots – 1 | Honest Driver – 0* Redditor alwaysbeaware shared their frustration writing:

I am now actually giving up on amazon flex because of the amount of blatant cheating that's going on with the same driver using 2 or 3 phones... Each time I swipe. (This block has been taken) with no understanding of how the block is captured instantly when it lands on my screen. Unless they are cheating and using a bot. So, yeah, this crisis does bring the best and worst out of people. Well done Bots, you win. Stay safe everyone.

Some users agreed with this sentiment and offered what they believed would be fair solutions to stop people using botting programs from gaining an advantage. For example, user uLookLikeaDeer suggested “Having to take a selfie every time after accepting an IO would be a start. Just my 2 cents” (p. 1). Surprisingly some users were not as empathetic to the accusations of people botting to get ahead. This was evident in a scathing post by user miamiflexcar who chastised the people venting about bots by lamenting:

It is kinda getting ridiculous that every driver who can't get blocks is posting about "bots" of which they have no clue about... The current situation is not caused by bots, but by the

current crisis and amazon itself. As usual. There are many bottlenecks in the system from employee shortages to delivery window outages etc... Worse than it's ever been and i've been doing it since 2016 (p. 1)

Despite the workers disagreeing on the exact causes of the work shortages, one thing they could rally behind was their similar senses of hopelessness and increasing precarity that was plaguing this work. Nonetheless, those who were fortunate enough to procure blocks were even more vocal about their concerns about their health and Amazon's continued lack of pandemic health protocol, even weeks into the pandemic. At the end of the day those commenting about risk management still had the largest presence on the forum.

As time went on and the pandemic continued to shift the reality of this work there was a prevalent belief amongst workers that their health and wellbeing was continually being compromised by the nature of this labor, and by their responsibilities as drivers. In the beginning many were concerned about interactions with others, but as time went on these drivers began looking at other Amazon employees and contractors as an equally viable threat to their health. Many of these concerns were specifically connected to interaction and engagement with their fellow workers at locations, including fulfillment centers. There was a prevalent sentiment that the most dangerous part of the work had become engaging with their fellow contractors during points of overlap and unavoidable contact. This was evident in a thread titled *Any Covid 19 Stats Available?* where user irvingD wrote:

I was wondering if Amazon is sharing any Covid19 stats or information anywhere to help with contact tracing and to inform if self isolation might be needed just in case of possible exposure. I've been mostly staying home and mostly not interacting with people. The only outside people I'm forced to interact with for minutes at a time are the Amazon employees

when I encounter an issue at the distribution center so it would be good to know [if] they found out their employees may have gotten sick and went to work (p. 1)

What he is discussing here is the portion of delivery labor prior to actually delivering the packages. This is a pick up stage where many drivers are simultaneously picking up their lots for delivery at the fulfillment centers. This is where the traditional warehouse workers meet the contractors, and additionally contractors are in contact with each other. As user Spontaneous-Medic put it in this thread, “It's just a matter of time before I come home with the Rona. As far as I know none of the facilities in Austin or San Marcos have it but we all labor share” (p. 1). User VintageRon44 followed up with a telling critique of Amazon and the thread starter’s question, commenting: “You expect a company that won't be transparent about your pay or why you get deactivated to share stats with you about the health status of their actual employees? Might as well stay at home for the foreseeable future if you fear the virus” (p. 1). Other threads displayed similar concerns and were home to similar discourses about the further increasing lack of safety protocol for contractors.

A thread titled *Packed together like flies. BYOP (BRING YO OWN PROTECTION)* simply featured a picture of Amazon Flex deliverers in a crowded Whole Foods fulfillment facility picking up their delivery packets, some wearing protective masks and gloves, and others not. In this thread drivers shared tips with each other about how they are handling the lack of available resources, and protective material to keep themselves safe. User ColdTom5 shared, “I reuse my gloves and masks because there is a shortage. I leave them in the sun for a day or two. It is better than nothing, which is what I would have if I only used them once (p. 1). Many agreed and shared the fact that they, too, must reuse the same protective materials over again to at least feel safer while delivering. It seemed that other drivers were relieved to know that they were not alone in feeling literally unprotected. Finding creative and effective ways to re-use these materials, and seeking council in

other drivers regarding the ways that they re-used their protective gear served as yet another example of how novel forms of pre-labor became necessary in order to survive this crisis. Another poster shared insight about his other job as a laborer, stating, “Well I also work at UPS and sadly it’s literally the same situation. I can’t escape it” (p. 1). The post contained a hyperlink to a video of UPS employees similarly unprotected as they sort through their packages. This type of thread, with deliverers just sharing safety tips or words of encouragement with each other, became common. In a final r/AmazonFlexDrivers thread titled *Be Safe Out there Fellow Flexers* user RogueOne3 shared this advice to his fellow Redditors:

The peak of this pandemic is approaching within the next couple weeks. Lots of people that are asymptomatic will start showing the symptoms. Lots of people are gonna get sick real fast & many will succumb to this virus. My mother who is a retired nurse, pretty much pleaded that I not work for the next couple weeks with the approaching virus peak...the concern on her face as she pleaded was all the convincing that was needed. Be Safe Out There...Wish Y’all Good Health! Godspeed! (p. 1)

This is a driver who elected to drop out of the contractor pool but still elected to share some words that he believed could help his fellow Flex drivers mitigate the risk of driving under the most precarious conditions they had seen to date, with worse potentially on the horizon. Overall, this post is representative of what this subreddit is about—drivers helping drivers to succeed, and to lessen their precarity.

3.5 Hybrid Precarities: Fear of Bodily Harm, Competition, and Expendable Labor

While embedded in the r/AmazonFlexDrivers subreddit it became clear that there are many aspects of Amazon Flex independent contractor labor that shares similarities with that of the previously analyzed MTurk labor platform. More importantly, I was able to observe the ways that Flex labor is unique from MTurk and other sharing economy. Specifically, and for the purposes of this chapter, I was able to learn the ways in which the labor is differently precarious. All of this was made evident through the themes that emerged continuously throughout the Reddit community, prior to and during the Covid-19 pandemic. These included fear of bodily harm resulting from a lack of contractor protections in place. Additionally, laborers were constantly battling a lack of both resources and available work opportunities. Furthermore, this labor compounded with the stresses of their everyday lives to create new and unique precarity for the laborers. Finally, there was an overarching feeling that despite all that these workers encounter, they were still seen as expendable and undervalued, specifically by Amazon. All of this is what makes the labor especially precarious, and leads these workers to feel the need to utilize this message board as both a space for laboring advice, and also one to vent their frustrations to those who they know will understand the challenges that they face on a daily basis.

Concerns over bodily harm make this work specifically unique when compared to the MTurk platform of the previous chapter. Whereas MTurk served as a haven for those who may have already experienced some sort of event that may leave them unable to work more traditionally physical labor, Amazon Flex is exactly that. While turks are engaged in intellectual labor from the comfort of their homes, Flex workers are out in the world, navigating the often unpredictable last mile for Amazon. This leads to different types of concerns for these workers, in a dynamic world. In my time embedded in the forum community I was able to observe these contractors expressing

concerns about everything from unchained dogs, to what they perceive to be dangerous neighborhoods, to fear of becoming deathly ill while performing essential labor for others. This is all representative of the fact that this work is very dynamic in terms of the obstacles that these drivers find themselves encountering on a daily basis. When reading these accounts, it is clear why so many rely on r/AmazonFlexDrivers as a guide.

While in other sectors of the sharing economy the lack of employment benefits increases the risk involved with this labor, this is especially evident when it comes to these Flex drivers, who in many ways lack the autonomy that others, in other sharing economy sectors have. An Airbnb renter can generally make decisions they feel are in the interest of their physical well-being. So can an Uber driver. For a Flex driver this is less the case as packages have to be delivered and on routes that are often unfamiliar and confusing for these drivers. This leaves these drivers with a constant feeling of uncertainty. As the fears shifted from the more traditional to the more unprecedented with the proliferation of Covid-19, this uncertainty became even more evident and became even more of a frequently recurring topic on the forum. There was much of the standard “Amazon does not care about us” discussion, but during this time many drivers expressed how the lack of care and protection weighed more now that this work became literally a matter of life and death. In that moment, more than ever drivers were faced with just how vulnerable they were as contractors. What made this situation even more unique was the fact that in contrast to the more traditional dangers of the past, which felt manageable, Covid-19 was unlike anything any of them had experienced before and made it more difficult to guide each other. This created a situation where drivers really did not know how to navigate this specific danger and therefore the advice given in some cases was reflective of a shared confusion and uncertainty amongst these

contractors. Ultimately this led to quite disparate opinions on how workers should be handling themselves and their surroundings during these unprecedented times.

Another theme that emerged in both the MTurk and Amazon Flex subreddits was that of competition. Both of these forums acted as a space where contractors could navigate the competitive design of these labor platforms. In the case of MTurk, laborers were searching for the most advantageous intellectual labor tasks and competing with others at a national or global level. With Amazon Flex these drivers were using the forum in order to gain an advantage when it came to local delivery blocks. This extended beyond just trying to find blocks that were the most financially advantageous or attractive. Additionally, drivers used this forum as a space to vent about a lack of working opportunities, period. This is a problem that escalated as Covid-19 led to mass layoffs and people looking for alternative labor options. Wherein Flex was once seen by many as a way to subsidize established income, it had now become the only available option for many. This led to increased demand, and decreased supply. Adding to this was Amazon purportedly increasing the amount of drivers in anticipation of many drivers dropping out of the work pool either due to illness or finding other resources, including unemployment benefits.

All of this created a unique dynamic between these forum posters as they began to need the assistance and advice of some of their fellow contractors while resenting others. A resentment built for anyone whom they perceived to be a threat to their ability to earn. This included new drivers, who were thought to be receiving preferential treatment, and also drivers who some believed were using unfair methods in order to acquire a competitive advantage for the procurement of scarce available work. For some, this competition certainly added to their economic uncertainty and made this work even more precarious than it had been prior to the health crisis. Drivers found themselves at odds with other drivers for the opportunity to do labor that was

becoming increasingly dangerous. More than anything else this was representative of how desperate times were for many of these drivers. As the weeks passed this desperation only seemed to increase among the drivers on the forum, who needed answers as to when some sense of normalcy might return. Despite this underlying agonism the forum remained a predominantly helpful environment for these drivers who were able to utilize this resource to find answers to their queries, even when those answers may not have been the ones that they were looking for. Nonetheless having this resource was invaluable at a time when Amazon itself was not able to assure these drivers or guide them.

For many reasons, including those mentioned above, more than ever these were laborers who felt that they were expendable. They were loyal to a company who did not care whether it was them or the next person delivering the packages, so long as the packages got delivered on time. All that mattered to Amazon was that it was able to decrease the delivery costs. Equal or fair distribution of labor was not a priority for the company. Time and time again these contractors relayed these feelings of expendability in their posts on this forum. Similar to MTurk where the intellectual laborers made it known that they were dissatisfied by the constant addition of new Turks to an already sparse labor pool, the Flex drivers shared similar feelings. They too believed that they were being put in a position where they were constantly being made to feel as if they could easily be replaced by the next driver up. This led to many drivers electing not to drive for Flex if they did not have to. It also manifest in drivers posting about finding alternative financial opportunities or in some cases collecting unemployment benefits. To these workers unemployment was an option where they no longer had to feel as if they were just another cog in the Amazon machine. Furthermore, these workers no longer had to assume the risk that came along with

working during a pandemic. This labor, which is advertised as freeing, had at some point become one of the more constraining parts of their lives.

Nonetheless, this forum was a place where it was evident that these laborers were perseverant and able to carry on despite feeling hopeless at times. Even with their lives at risk the number of posters still navigating the forum remained steady, and even increased after the Covid-19 pandemic began. One might characterize this as proof that many of these drivers are desperate for the potential earnings that this labor platform provides. This may be true, but during my time embedded in this subreddit I also encountered many drivers who saw this work as fulfilling and worth the risk so that they would be able to help others avoid the dangers of going outside or to stores amidst the uncertainty of the health crisis. This was what was the most surprising. While many drivers were often pessimistic and morose about what driving entailed (before and during the crisis) many were on this forum looking for ways to do the work most effectively as to have a positive impact. This is not to say that they still did not view the work as precarious, but to point out that despite this many were on this forum because they saw themselves continuing for a long time and wanted to make the best of their situation, or at least see the positive in their situation.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter began as an investigation into Amazon and its increasing reliance on more traditional physical labor through the labor of independent contractors. In my research what became evident was the fact that there were striking similarities to Mechanical Turk, but there were also stark differences between the two labor platforms. In regard to the similarities, Amazon once again utilized the rhetorics of the sharing economy, which promise potential laborers that

they will be able to achieve autonomy and success by dedicating themselves to working for the company. They promise that the key to self-fulfillment can be found in Amazon Flex labor, but the fact of the matter is that – also like MTurk – the reality is much more complicated than the simplistic nature of those promises. In this particular case, this is because the realities of navigating the last mile problem present many more obstacles than these drivers, or even Amazon, are able to anticipate. This was made evident in both my recovery of published reports describing Amazon Flex labor, and in my own ethnographic research evaluating r/AmazonFlexDrivers Redditors.

Evaluating the published reports provided a somewhat superficial glance into the ways that this labor is precarious for those who chose to deliver these packages for Amazon. Problems such as scarce parking, app maintenance issues, and auxiliary costs were prominent in these reports. These accounts made clear that for both people who had elected to drive for Amazon long-term and for those who chose to for short periods of time, the promises made by the company were not representative of the reality of the labor. Article after article painted a picture of a labor operation that only exacerbated anxieties of these laborers, and furthermore increased the financial precarity they may have already have been experiencing before taking on this work for Amazon.

Once again a Reddit community provided an in-depth look into the problems faced by these drivers on a daily basis. It became clear the ways in which this community was a haven for these contractors who could utilize it in order to engage in the pre-labor necessary in order to survive the unpredictable and often dangerous Amazon Flex tasks that they were responsible for carrying out on a daily basis. This was especially evident as the Covid-19 pandemic made this labor even more difficult, and even traumatic for these laborers who were already feeling that this labor was becoming increasingly precarious. At the time that this work is being written the Covid-19 pandemic is ongoing. Based on the observations made during my time embedded in the

r/AmazonFlexDrivers subreddit I posit that this labor will only continue to become more trying for these laborers. Covid-19 was a unique event that occurred for these drivers but what it demonstrates is that events that occur in the world have much more of an impact on contracted laborers than many people may assume. This is part of what makes contracted, yet essential, labor unique. This is also one of the main factors that differentiate it specifically from other Amazon contracted labor, and what makes this service particularly valuable to Amazon. Deliveries will never stop, and will only increase as people continue to become more accustomed to rapid delivery for both essential and non-essential goods. This means that for the foreseeable future, and as Amazon continues to manage its delivery costs, this type of cheap contracted labor will be essential for the company.

Based on Amazon's complicated history with labor and laborers it is not clear whether or not the company will do much in order to make this work less precarious for these essential, yet contracted laborers. Amazon's thinking and decision making in this regard will have long-term effects for those whom they entrust with both its packages and its reputation as the world's premier online shopping destination. Amazon can either choose to set an example by increasing the stability of this labor, or set a precedent by devaluing this labor that the Covid-19 crisis proved to be invaluable for both Amazon and the people of the world.

In the next chapter of this work I continue my exploration of Amazon and labor. I shift my focus from Amazon's reliance on contracted labor to its impact on labor dynamics as the company continues its transition into brick and mortar locations. Specifically, I examine Amazon's foray into the grocery space through its acquisition of Whole Foods. In what acts as an extension of this current chapter I look beyond the contractors who deliver Whole Foods groceries to Amazon Prime customers, and focus on those who are actually legally employed by Amazon through Whole

Foods. In doing this I look to examine what similarities and differences may exist between the contracted labor that Amazon relies on, and the actual employees that the company is responsible for.

4.0 The Human Costs of Conglomeration

By definition the goal of a successful conglomerate is unimpeded growth powered by expanding industrial sectorial conquest. The most lucrative and successful conglomerates in modern history have all been able to achieve this type of asset accumulation and maturation and design the infrastructure necessary to support it. In successful cases a “conglomerate can save a corporation money by operating more than one company under the parent company. The primary purpose of having controlling interests in different companies is to diversify risks in order to lessen the impact of major financial setbacks” (Keefer, 2016, p. 1). For example, General Electric – once merely a purveyor of energy – now maintains subsidiaries devoted to healthcare, and aviation, in addition to renewable energy. 3M – once known as the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing company – is now a leader in US healthcare, and most notably consumer goods, producing over 60,000 products (Chamaria, 2018). This type of growth and expansion has been the ideal of traditional conglomerates and represents a blueprint for the kind of sector expansion that has been historically synonymous with successful conglomeration. It appears that this has been the trajectory that Amazon has embarked on in the 26 years since the company’s inception. Amazon has grown from a small, Seattle-based, internet company that originally focused on the sale of books, to a company that owns over 40 subsidiaries, which make up the ever-expanding infrastructure of the company. These include such varied services as Amazon Maritime, Beijing Century Joyo Courier Service, the live-streaming platform Twitch, and Audible audiobooks. In 2018 Amazon also announced that it had struck a deal to buy the online pharmacy PillPack, adding the online pharmacy to its growing list of subsidiaries. These seemingly ancillary branches of the

corporation paint only part of the picture of the diverse industrial tapestry that makes up Amazon's current infrastructure.

While on the surface Amazon's expand and conquer strategies may look like traditional fare for a conglomerate, as I mention in the introduction to this dissertation, there are key differences between a company like Amazon, and the aforementioned traditional conglomerates General Electric and 3M. The defining characteristics of Amazon and other new-age conglomerates include a commitment to innovation, attentiveness to synergistic strategizing in order to continually strengthen their core business, and the promise of certain growth that often times defies traditional economic norms. Essentially, Amazon and the other new-age FAANG companies that dominate the digital economy are at the forefront of shifting economic paradigms, and in many ways play by their own new rules.

This chapter focuses on important twin characteristics of the new-age conglomerate: innovation – or the perception of innovation – and the commitment to synergistic strategizing that emphasizes a core business. Both of these are particularly notable when examining the Amazon infrastructure. It is evident in the way the company is able to balance these principles and the sheer breath and scope of its subsidiary acquisitions. I argue that all these acquisitions are made with one key goal in mind, which is to expand Amazon's reach as the world's most dominant e-commerce platform. This chapter focuses on a very specific example of this inward-facing conglomerate expansion which is the 2017 Amazon acquisition of Whole Foods Market. This serves as a germinal example of how an acquisition that once baffled many was part of a meticulously crafted plan by Amazon to lure more consumers to its already massive e-commerce consumer base. More importantly, this chapter focuses on how this type of acquisition strategizing affects the labor realities of those who are employed by Amazon. While much of the focus in the

previous two chapters has been on independent contractor labor, here I focus on the actual employees who power Amazon's infrastructure in order to examine some similarities and differences in the plights and struggles of the two working groups. In doing so, I seek to provide further insight on the often-times precarious labor realities of both groups. Building on the methodology used in the previous two chapters, this chapter also relies on internet message board threads in order to examine how those engaged in this labor discuss their work with each other. In this case it is the r/wholefoods subreddit. Once again, this analysis is predicated on the idea that engagement within these online communities is a kind of pre-labor necessary to survive the precarity that comes along with laboring for Amazon. This is because many of the same stresses that plague the previously studied independent contractors also burden the Whole Foods employees. These include feelings of precarity due to a lack of control, job instability, and an overall culture that puts profits over the people who produce those profits for the company.

This chapter also argues that all Amazon labor, whether contracted or traditionally employed, is in the service of strengthening the reach and scope of Amazon's e-commerce core business. This focus on the core business shapes the labor dynamic across Amazon platforms and subsidiaries. Regardless of where an employee falls within the Amazon infrastructural hierarchy, at the end of the day the purpose of their labor is to maintain Amazon's overall dominance in the online retail market. What makes Whole Foods a notable example is that it demonstrates that even an acquisition which on the surface signals a shift in focus for Amazon into the realm of brick and mortar retail, is closely tied to Amazon and its e-commerce growth goals. Examples of this that I explore further in this chapter include Amazon's strategic proliferation of its Prime subscription service through Whole Foods home grocery delivery and the utilization of Whole Foods stores as essentially food storage warehouses for Amazon. Additionally, I examine how Amazon's overall

plan includes the deepening of the synergistic relationship between Whole Foods and other Amazon labor platforms, including Amazon Prime Now Shopper and Amazon Flex. I further argue that this acquisition shifted the labor culture and overall expectations for Whole Foods employees. Employees who were once primarily in the business of selling health foods find themselves selling and promoting the growth strategies of a multi-national conglomerate. This shift then creates an environment that is more like other Amazon labor platforms than a grocery store.

The overall scholarly aim of this chapter is to further contribute to political economy studies of conglomeration. More importantly, this scholarship seeks to build on burgeoning discourses about what it means to be a new-age conglomerate. In better understanding the paradigmatic shifts that have occurred in the ways that society conceptualizes the conglomerate we can be better equipped to understand their processes, motives, and cultural effects. Moreover, in building on scholarship from the previous two chapters this analysis of the labor/laborer relationship will contribute to ongoing discussions about and studies of labor, as global labor norms also continue to shift.

4.1 Innovation and the New-Age Conglomerate

As mentioned, one of the defining characteristics of a new-age conglomerate is an ability to innovate, or at least establish a public perception as innovative. This raises a fundamental question about how innovation is defined, particularly in the 21st century. In 2017 Amazon was named “The World’s Most Innovative Company” by *Fast Company*, a monthly American business magazine that focuses on technology and design. As Amazon sat atop their list, the other aforementioned FAANG companies were also in the top 10 with Google at number 2, Apple at

number 4, Facebook at number 6, and Netflix at number 7. In its summation the magazine states: “A rapid expansion of Prime plus bold bets in the physical world are allowing the retailer to offer even more, even faster and smarter” (Robischon, 2017, p. 1). Here we see a focus on the aforementioned debt leveraging bets that Amazon has taken on in order to continually grow and expand its reach and influence. The article goes on to argue that this world is now shaped in the image of Amazon and this will only continue as Amazon’s influence continues to grow. As the author puts it: “Our mobile-first, on-demand world finds its roots in Amazon’s founding idea: that digital commerce will radically reshape our marketplace. The company’s impact has already been staggering” (p. 1). That impact included effects on how people conceptualize shopping and what constitutes efficient delivery. In an age of one-click shopping and one-day delivery the ways people think of those concepts are surely different than they were 20 years ago, and Amazon has been at the forefront of that shift with the innovations manifest in its Prime subscription service.

Despite the other FAANG companies also exerting influence and perpetuating world-shifting innovations, Amazon has come to be seen as the leader of the new-age conglomerates. *Forbes* columnist Robert Tucker describes how Amazon has taken on this mantle, explaining “Amazon has emerged as the new model of innovation effectiveness. They are something new in the innovation realm. They’ve moved so fast for so long, implemented so many new product, process and business model innovations, that their playbook is suddenly the standard by which every company must measure itself against, or get left behind” (2018, p. 1). All of this is representative of a culture at Amazon that focuses on continual and fearless evolution. As tech columnist Nate Vickery puts it in his article “The Reasons Why Amazon is One of the World’s Most Innovative Companies”: “The company has changed the way people live and shop, but when

it comes to innovation, Amazon stands apart from others because of some pretty unique cultural elements that make it a perfect place for cultivating innovation” (2017, p. 1). The article goes on to argue that some of the factors that make Amazon exceptionally innovative include its ability to adapt and its embracing of continuous technological evolution, championed by its leadership. Furthermore, Vickery points to three specific initiatives that make Amazon the company of the 21st century. These are “an incursion into the physical world with brick-and-mortar stores; Prime, their \$99 per year membership program; and their fulfillment center that has human workers and high-tech robots working together, restlessly rethinking logistics” (p. 1). Noticeably, in all of these articles there is a focus on Amazon’s ability to thrive in both the physical and digital worlds, and consolidate the two. I argue that this is one of the key tenets of modern innovation for the new-age conglomerate and an important way that these companies differentiate themselves from the conglomerates of the past.

Another key component to innovation is the willingness to take risks. As with any corporation making large acquisitions, there are going to be successes and failures. New-age conglomerates are not immune to failures. Notable examples of this include Google Video, the company’s initial failed foray into video sharing before purchasing YouTube for \$1.65 billion dollars in 2006 (Fortt, 2006). Another example of this might be the Apple Homepod, the company’s recent failed venture into the smart-speaker market. In the case of Amazon the company’s “willingness to move first, to test, and yes to fail (witness Amazon Fire the firm’s disastrous foray into smartphones) has transformed it into not just an online retailer, but a movie studio, a hardware company, a grocer, or a web services provider – but an idea factory” (Tucker, 2017, p. 1). While the Amazon “idea factory” is successful in many of its endeavors, there are just as many failed ventures and Amazon revolutions that were grounded before they could change the

world. What all of these new-age conglomerates have in common is the fact that they consistently fail. It has been observed that new-age conglomerates “are spending, and often losing, tens of billions of dollars annually on all sorts of projects and acquisitions that may or may not turn out to be successful. But investors are seemingly willing to give these new behemoths a free pass in the name of growth and innovation” (Sorkin, 2017). It also cannot be ignored that many of these failures are funded with debt and borrowed money, as I discuss in the introductory chapter to this dissertation, which these companies are able to acquire so easily on the promise of future innovation.

In a sense the largest benefits of being considered innovative are these endless streams of debt that these companies are allowed to amass because of a history of successfully winning more bets than are lost. This is a risk investors are willing to take. This raises questions about whether or not these borrowers should be bankrolling these large-scale risky endeavors and also whether these companies should be able to take on a seemingly endless amount of debt. Even Jeff Bezos has acknowledged that all empires fall eventually and Amazon will be no different. He stated in 2018, “I predict one day Amazon will fail. Amazon will go bankrupt. If you look at large companies, their lifespans tend to be 30-plus years, not a hundred-plus years... We have to try and delay that day for as long as possible” (Kim, p. 1). It seems that the banks and investors who fund the innovations of Amazon and other new-age conglomerates are willing to bet that the inevitable failures of all of these companies will come far further down the line, and that there are still plenty of winning bets to be made by these conglomerates. For this reason, I argue that innovation essentially is measured by how much the successful bets outweigh the lost ones. With that said, when these bets are no longer successful, and the failures start to outweigh the successes, who will

suffer? This question seems to be a can that is being kicked up the road while these new-age conglomerates are given passes to continue operating with impunity.

Nonetheless, this ability to be perceived as innovative and influential in both the digital space and the “real world” is what I argue separates the innovations of the classic conglomerates of old from the new-age conglomerates of today. The ability to win more bets than are lost in the volatile, increasingly dynamic and unpredictable digital arena while also re-shaping human attitudes, habits, and behaviors is what makes these new-age conglomerates seem novel as innovators. This duality and ability to adapt to the rules of the digital realm, while also creating new rules, is what makes the innovative capacities of the new-age conglomerate revolutionary. I argue that for these reasons these companies, while similar to conglomerates of yesteryear, are also representative of a paradigmatic shift in the way that we think of the conglomerate. Their success starting in the digital-realm, navigating that space, and expanding outwardly while strengthening that digital core is another property that makes these companies noteworthy and of the new-age.

4.2 Outward Expansion and Core Strengthening

The second major point of differentiation between the conglomerates of old and those of the new age is a focus on and dedication to strengthening a core business and reinforcing the foundations that made the company what it is. For this to be realized, synergy has been the key. As previously mentioned, many conglomerates of the past found themselves entangled in business sectors that had nothing to do with the company’s origins, or that added no value to their original business. It seems that with digital conglomerates there is a commitment to

synergistic expansion strategies and acquisitions that further the operational strength of the core business. A grand example of this is the Apple ecosystem that drives its conglomeration. As Babson college professor Sam Hariharan explains about Apple in his essay “The Revival of the Conglomerate”:

Starting out as a personal computer company (Apple Computer as it was known then), Apple has evolved into an enterprise that now encompasses many spaces: music entertainment (iPod and iTunes), tablet computing (iPad), smartphones (iPhone), and set-tops for video entertainment (Apple TV). More recently Apple has ventured into other spaces, such as payment systems (Apple Pay), Luxury watches (Apple Watch), telematics/automotive systems (Car Play), and applications in the health and fitness area... While Apple may participate in several competitive spaces, there are some common core elements that hold it together. Apple’s current businesses and their ecosystems are interlinked loosely or tightly through Apple’s concept of the “digital hub” strategy of linked “platforms.” The successful realization of this strategy has led to Apple creating and dominating linked eco-systems in digital music, tablet computing, and smartphones (2016, p. 1)

Apple has evolved from a computer company to a corporation that sells the convenience that its synergistic ecosystem of products creates for the consumer. Every expansive move that Apple makes, and every sector that it enters is, in the name of strengthening customer engagement with the ecosystem. This includes Apple’s 2019 foray into credit cards that people can use to finance its products at a discount and even its rumored future expansion into vehicle production. All of this is in service of the core business goal of expanding the reach of the ecosystem, no matter how

much each new expansion may seem like a departure from what the company “normally does.” This is how the new-age conglomerate operates.

Amazon’s expansion history demonstrates why the company is considered to be the leader of this new pack of conglomerates. The company has been able to expand into many different categories including everything from home video streaming (Prime Video), to cloud computing (AWS), to freighting. What all of these have in common is the fact that they all have served to strengthen Amazon’s core e-commerce business. In the same way that Apple has evolved from a computer company to selling the ecosystem experience, Amazon has evolved from an online retailer of books to a company that sells retail convenience. Year after year Amazon continues to dominate the e-commerce sector for its ability to continually revolutionize the retail experience. It is evident that when Amazon ventures into a new sector, the question it first answers is “How does this strengthen the company’s position of dominance in e-commerce?” The motivations behind any Amazon subsidiary or acquisition can be explained by examining them through the lens of that foundational and philosophical question.

In recent years, Jeff Bezos has laid out a business philosophy that can effectively be summed up as doing what works now, and will also work in and for the future. Bezos explains:

[I]n our retail business, we know that customers want low prices, and I know that’s going to be true 10 years from now. They want fast delivery; they want vast selection. It’s impossible to imagine a future 10 years from now where a customer comes up and says, ‘Jeff I love Amazon; I just wish the prices were a little higher,’ [or] ‘I love Amazon; I just wish you’d deliver a little more slowly.’ Impossible. And so the effort we put into those things, spinning those things up, we know the energy we put into it today will still be paying off dividends for our customers 10 years from now. When you have something that you

know is true, even over the long term, you can afford to put a lot of energy into it (D’Onfro, 2015, p. 1).

This focus on expedited delivery, undercutting prices, and diversity in selection has manifest in all ancillary aspects of the company that tie back to the e-commerce core in one way or another. For example, as mentioned in the previous chapter, Amazon’s acquisition of freighting companies and introduction of Amazon Flex and Amazon Logistics are not meandering strategies to arbitrarily take on FedEx and UPS. Rather these are part of a larger plan to lower the cost of shipping in order to sustain expedited shipping that customers have come to expect. The strategy can be described as growth while also limiting organizational inefficiencies. That is the prime directive of these synergistic ecosystems that corporations are looking to build.

This focus on synergy is evident when examining the business practices of all of these new-age conglomerates. Even the most apparently radical of ventures can be tied back to a strategy to proliferate a core business or core business ideology. These ecosystems, while prevalent today, are not brand-new ideas. Known as the “father of strategic management,” Igor Ansoff explained in his 1965 book *Corporate Strategy* that “strategy is a rule for making decisions determined by product/market scope, growth vector, competitive advantage, and synergy” (p. 118). Synergy has always been an ingredient for successful diversification. Nonetheless, this was lost on many corporations of the past that fell victim to a desire to over-diversify, with the focus on synergy being lost in the process, ultimately leading to the decline of the conglomerate firm as we once knew it. What we are witnessing with these new-age conglomerates is the ability to take the old tenets of synergistic growth and apply them to a new world with new rules. More specifically, these digital conglomerates are able to create synergistic infrastructures wherein they can exercise influence in both the physical world and the ever-evolving digital landscape.

This disciplined balancing act that these new-age conglomerates are able to execute allows these companies to reshape consumer expectations and behaviors in ways that shift market expectations and norms. Take Netflix for example, whose portfolio has expanded to include ownership of its own film studio, and investment in film and television distribution. The company has been able to shift film industry norms in regard to how film distribution works in both the physical and digital realms, how films are to be consumed by the public, and what constitutes prestige filmmaking. Notable examples of this include its financing and distribution of the 2019 Martin Scorsese film *The Irishman*, which saw a limited theatrical run with a focus on a streaming release. This went against the conventions of the film industry, as other Netflix distributed projects including *A Marriage Story* and *Roma* have done. What all three of these unconventionally Netflix distributed prestige films have in common is the fact that between 2018 and 2019 they were all nominated for the Best Picture Academy Award. In achieving these feats Netflix has changed not only the way that digital distribution is thought of, but also conventions of real-world film consumption and evaluation. This is an example of Netflix as a new-age conglomerate being able to blend virtual and real-world strategies in order to affect change within an industry.

In addition, the company is able to continue building out its synergistic ecosystem in further service of its core digital content-streaming business. As *Forbes* contributor David Bloom noted in his 2019 article “Netflix Won The Oscars Even Though ‘Roma’ Lost Best Picture”:

for subscribers, the imprimatur of quality from Oscar wins helps validate their choice to keep spending \$13 a month to watch. As Netflix tries to figure out ways to keep driving growth, especially as competition stiffens from its former content partners, this halo of quality will become ever more attractive. This Oscar Sunday was a Netflix win (p. 1)

This is a textbook example of a new-age conglomerate being able to walk that line of both the physical and the digital, and what makes this type of disciplined synergy different from that of the past. In a similar vein, Amazon, which also boasts its own streaming service with Amazon Prime Video and the production company Amazon Studios, is able to justify its foray into these spaces as synergistic expansion as well. This is because while Netflix can account for its expansion into film and television production and distribution as an avenue to strengthen its core-streaming business, Amazon can say the same. However, Amazon's leap into film and television strengthens its ability to grow its Prime platform and therefore expand its e-commerce business. Same type of expansion. Different synergistic motives.

Amazon's focus on its expansion of its e-commerce business, mostly through the expansion of Prime, can be argued to be the motivating factor behind much of its synergistic strategizing. This is made evident in its recent endeavors into brick and mortar businesses, with Amazon book stores and Amazon Go locations having emerged in selected cities across the country. These are physical Amazon store locations where Amazon customers can receive discounts on products if they are Prime subscribers. This focus on both the physical and digital is representative of its positions as a new-age conglomerate. All of this is most evident, however, when examining Amazon's 2017 acquisition of Whole Foods Market. The remainder of this chapter will focus on how the tenets of the new-age conglomerate, as illustrated by its Whole Foods acquisition, affect labor realities for those who are employed by Amazon. In particular, the remainder of this chapter focuses on the ways in which laboring for Amazon as an employee in the evolving ecosystem can be precarious.

More specifically, I examine the ways in which Amazon employees within Whole Foods Markets balance the responsibilities that come with working in that physical space and also

responsibilities that come with ensuring the digital proliferation of Amazon's e-commerce business. Additionally, I examine how shifting from Whole Foods employees to Amazon employees has affected labor conditions and laborer attitudes. In order to accomplish this, I once again turn to internet message board forum threads for the purposes of obtaining laborer accounts of their experiences working for Amazon and the ways in which this labor can be precarious. What separates this chapter from the previous two is the focus on actual Amazon employees who are protected by employment laws. This is of value for the purposes of answering the specific question of whether or not the protections and assurances afforded to these employees create conditions that are less conducive to the precarious experiences that this work has documented in previous chapters. Through embedding myself in the r/wholefoods subreddit I found that once again laborers are utilizing this online platform to engage in a type of pre-labor meant to alleviate work anxieties and precarity. Among the issues discussed are feelings of anxiety based around rapidly changing physical working conditions that often feel unsafe and Amazon leadership that seems apathetic to this anxiety. Additionally, workers discuss stress that stems from now having to engage with other Amazon employees, including Prime Now Shoppers and Flex contractors who now inhabit their stores. Finally, these employees express feelings of uncertainty as new policies and Amazon technologies are implemented that cause some Whole Foods employees to feel as if they are becoming obsolete. Overall, these discussions illustrate that in many ways legal employment within the Amazon ecosystem can be just as precarious as independent contracting, though in different ways. The remainder of this chapter serves as an examination of Amazon's more traditional labor infrastructure and how this structure and reactions to it shed light on the often painful realities of being an employee of a new-age conglomerate.

4.3 Amazon + Whole Foods Market: Brick and Mortar Expansion, E-Commerce Intentions

In June of 2017 it was announced that Amazon would be further expanding its retail empire by making what some considered an unconventional acquisition for the e-commerce giant. News outlets from *The New York Times* to *CNBC* reported that Amazon had purchased the upscale grocery chain Whole Foods for \$13.7 billion dollars. This was a move that perplexed some in these business reporting circles, with some questioning whether two companies with such differing business philosophies could realistically become one, and continue to satisfy both customer bases. As *INC.* contributor Geoffrey James hypothesized in his article “Why Amazon Will Probably Fail with Whole Foods”:

While Whole Foods is all about an upscale experience, Amazon is about trolling for bargains at your own risk. This market positioning is reflected in the corporate cultures of both organizations, and they are not compatible. And that bodes ill for the merger... Amazon would be converting upscale, quality-minded consumers into downscale, price-minded consumers. That's incredibly stupid, because the most valuable brands are those that can command high prices and not get caught up in price wars (2017, p. 1)

This was a valid observation, and just one of the questions that emerged about the possible sustainability of this acquisition. There were also questions about Amazon’s ability to manage a large-scale brick and mortar chain as it had seen underwhelming results with its limited Amazon Go stores and Amazon physical book stores. These endeavors were far less of a commitment, though, than taking on the operations of the over 500 established Whole Foods grocery stores throughout North America. Others in business circles figured that this must be an Amazon strategy for gaining an advantage over its biggest retail rival, Wal-Mart, America’s largest grocery retailer (Bhattarai, 2019). It was evident that “with the acquisition of Whole Foods, Amazon is possibly

embarking on a radical disruption of brick & mortar retailing in the US, leaving Walmart to play defense” (Clarence-Smith, 2017, p. 1). Above all, one thing everyone could agree on was that this move was going to mean that Amazon was looking to diversify its approach to retail. Overlooked in the many early articles about this acquisition, which focused on a brick and mortar versus e-commerce dichotomy, was the idea that the acquisition of the brick and mortar grocery chain was also an attempt to strengthen Amazon’s e-commerce core.

While some business publications were initially perplexed by Amazon’s desire to enter the brick and mortar space, despite its dominance in e-commerce, others were more understanding of the potential impact this move could have on growing the company’s e-commerce preeminence. In a 2017 article announcing that Amazon had acquired Whole Foods, *New York Times* contributors Nick Wingfield and Michael J. de la Merced posit that the motivating factor behind the acquisition was Amazon’s impotency in trying to sell groceries through their e-commerce model in the past. The authors explain:

The acquisition, announced Friday, is a reflection of both the sheer magnitude of the grocery business — about \$800 billion in annual spending in the United States — and a desire to turn Amazon into a more frequent shopping habit by becoming a bigger player in food and beverages. After almost a decade selling groceries online, Amazon has failed to make a major dent on its own as consumers have shown a stubborn urge to buy items like fruits, vegetables and meat in person (p. 1)

As time went on this became a common point of understanding amongst publications who were reporting on this deal, with others pointing out how the deal would be beneficial to both brands. As Derek Thompson of *The Atlantic* commented, “Amazon needs food and urban real estate, and Whole Foods needs help.” He continued, “Whole Foods offers the biggest name in yuppie

groceries and a fleet of urban locations, which can double as Amazon warehouses. Meanwhile, the grocer is in a tailspin, its stock price cascading as revenue growth has fallen every year since 2012” (p. 1). The potential for infrastructural growth was evident here for Amazon. In recent years Amazon has experimented with food sales but with limited success. This was a sector of the Amazon ecosystem where the company had fallen short of its goal of creating a fully convenient and integrated digital experience for its customers.

The most prominent example of Amazon’s struggles in the grocery sector was its Amazon Fresh service, established in 2007, which allowed Amazon Prime subscribers to select groceries online and have them delivered directly to their homes. Customers resisted and Amazon realized that excelling in this space was going to be more of a challenge than initially expected. This created an interesting paradox for the company who has made a name for themselves by undercutting prices and crippling brick and mortar stores. In an attempt to remedy its food problem, and ease customers into the idea of Amazon as food retailer, in 2016 the company opened 17 Amazon Go convenience store locations, where customers could walk in and buy a limited selection of groceries through a technology-assisted experience using the Amazon app and excluding any teller or cashier interactions. This serves as an example of Amazon trying to extend its influence in the digital realm into its brick and mortar expansion. This, though, was still a work in progress.

When questioned about the motivations behind this suddenly more aggressive approach to food sales and brick and mortar ambitions Amazon would downplay the apparent attempt to rescue its struggling online food service. This was evident in a 2016 *CNet* article where columnist Ben Fox Rubin reported on rumors of Amazon having larger ambitions for its presence in the grocery sector. Fox reported:

Two days after *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Amazon plans to open "more than 2,000 brick-and-mortar grocery stores under its name," the company knocked down the idea as false. "It's absolutely not correct," Amazon spokeswoman Pia Arthur said in an emailed statement Wednesday. "We have no plans to open 2,000 of anything. Not even close. We are still learning. "The online retailer also batted down the claim by the publication that Amazon envisions opening a 30,000- to 40,000-square-foot store that would resemble a discount grocery chain like Aldi. "No plans to build such a store," she added (p. 1).

It is hard to surmise whether the company initially had no plans for expansion of that scale, or whether it was playing its cards close to its vest. Perhaps it did not want to admit how much of a struggle integration into groceries had become for the company, which had cultivated a reputation for innovating and disrupting many of the sectors that it had previously extended itself into.

On June 16th 2017, after months of denials about a large scale plan to enter the grocery sector, Jeff Bezos put out a joint statement with Whole Foods co-founder and CEO John Mackey. In the statement, Bezos officially announced Amazon's acquisition of Whole Foods Market, proclaiming, "Millions of people love Whole Foods Market because they offer the best natural and organic foods, and they make it fun to eat healthy...Whole Foods Market has been satisfying, delighting and nourishing customers for nearly four decades – they're doing an amazing job and we want that to continue." Mackey built on this by stating "This partnership presents an opportunity to maximize value for Whole Foods Market's shareholders, while at the same time extending our mission and bringing the highest quality, experience, convenience and innovation to our customers" (Wise, 2017, p. 1). This move signaled a tremendous shift for both Amazon and Whole Foods in terms of operations and their core business models. This also created a sea of

questions and expectations. Soon the conversation shifted away from “will they, won’t they?” speculation to questions about what this acquisition would mean for both e-commerce and the design of the grocery sector as a whole. Could the existing grocery chains survive competing with a juggernaut like Amazon?

As pointed out in 2017 by *Vox* columnist Matthew Yglesias in the days following the acquisition:

That’s an enormous problem for every grocery chain in America, which already operate on razor-thin margins. Nobody thinks Amazon bought Whole Foods in order to siphon off Whole Foods’ operating profits in order to subsidize something else. A Whole Foods under Amazon’s stewardship will almost certainly accept lower profit margins than it does as an independent chain — and that spells trouble for everyone else in the grocery business (p.

1)

Amazon’s ability to disrupt the grocery market was seen as immediately and obviously problematic to those who could see the inevitable writing on the wall for all in the grocery sector. Whole Foods would no longer have the problem of operating at thin margins under Amazon, a conglomerate that can afford to cut prices, operate at a loss, and subsidize Whole Foods with profits from other areas of its infrastructure. Whole Foods was now a part of an entity in Amazon with seemingly unchallenged permission to operate under extreme debt as is the case with it and other new-age conglomerates. In this specific instance it is evident how Amazon’s ability to play by a different set of rules is potentially damaging to others, including smaller grocery stores and other businesses and those who depend on them for employment. As a part of the Amazon ecosystem, Whole Foods had essentially become fail-proof or “too big to fail.”

In this way and other ways, this was an advantageous acquisition for both companies. Whole Foods had been running into a unique problem in the upscale grocery retail space. In the years leading up to the purchase by Amazon, Whole Foods profit margin had dropped an average of from \$6.56 back in 2015 to \$2.44 by 2017 (Mourdoukoutas, 2017). What was the cause of this? Panos Mourdoukoutas of *Forbes* explains that in recent years a surge in competition from other natural and organic food suppliers had considerably decreased Whole Foods' dominance in this sector. Another issue that the company found itself dealing with had to do with market saturation and the stagnating socio-economic status of many Americans. As Mourdoukoutas further explains: "The company was running out of affluent neighborhoods in which to sell its produce. That slows down sales growth, intensifies pricing pressures, and compresses profit margins" (p. 1). Whole Foods was running out of time and space and it was only a matter of time before it hit a wall. Additionally, as finance columnist Ethan Bohbot explained "Amazon is validating the brick-and-mortar channel for grocery and acquiring a quality brand with a large footprint, which is accelerating their push into grocery by allowing them to overlay their insights and supply chain/eCommerce dominance on top of an existing strong foundation" (2017, p. 1). Amazon provided an out for Whole Foods and Whole Foods provided Amazon with the established infrastructure needed to expand its e-commerce empire further into the food and beverage market.

Of course, another benefit of this deal was that the Whole Foods infrastructure now provided Amazon the ability to take on Wal-Mart. The two companies have been embroiled in a decades long retail competition, both vying for the attention and wallets of global consumers. Wal-Mart had long had the advantage in the grocery retail sector for the aforementioned reason that many customers want to physically encounter their food before buying and consuming it. Super Wal-Mart grocery centers have been able to provide that, first and foremost. As Rachel Abrams

and Julie Creswell of *The New York Times* speculated: “Jeff Bezos, Amazon’s chief executive, is known for making unconventional decisions. But he is also known for having big ambitions, and that could mean a more frontal assault on Walmart — a face-off between the old and the new dominant forces in the retail world” (2017, p. 1). This ongoing war continued to rage and as Amazon was trying to solidify itself in the brick and mortar grocery retail space, Wal-Mart was further venturing into online grocery purchases and grocery pick-up for its customers. Ironically, it seemed that Amazon’s strategy was to become a bit more like Wal-Mart as Wal-Mart was striving to become a bit more like Amazon. Three years removed from the Whole Foods acquisition it is clear to see what the true intention of the company was. Yes, it was to compete with Wal-Mart, and also to improve the company’s efficacy in the grocery retail space. As I have argued, however, the overall goal was an increase in infrastructural synergy, and to expand the parameters of the Amazon ecosystem for its consumers. Furthermore, the Amazon plan was to utilize the physical space within Whole Foods to transform the natural food retailer into a physical Amazon hub where the conglomerate could further their growth both in the grocery sector, and also as an e-commerce giant. While advantageous for Amazon, this would become a major source of frustration for the Whole Foods employees who were not used to working in stores that would essentially become Amazon food fulfillment centers.

One of the immediately evident changes in Whole Foods stores around the country was the prompt integration of Amazon’s signature products into its newly acquired Whole Foods locations. The acquisition happened in June of 2017 but the deal was not officially completed until August 28th of that year. By September people were starting to notice that in addition to health food products Whole Foods was now also carrying a plethora of Amazon products. In a *Business Insider* article published on September 5, 2017 contributor Kate Taylor noted the changes that you might

notice upon entering Whole Foods: “Prices on staples from ground beef to avocados quickly plummeted. Whole Foods items started being sold on Amazon.com, and, perhaps most surprisingly, Whole Foods stores began selling the Amazon Echo” (p. 1). It was reported that some locations began selling the Amazon Echo as early as August 28th to make the presence of Amazon immediately known. The article goes on to show a picture taken within a Whole Foods of a display of Amazon Echo devices adjacent to the produce section of the store. A sign next to the display reads “Farm Fresh! Pick of the Season” and below that advertises that the Amazon Echo is “Now \$99.99” and the Amazon Echo Dot is “Now \$44.99” (p.1). This was certainly a new addition to the Whole Foods experience. The Amazon Echo, which is often advertised as nothing more than a home device that you can use to vocally purchase products from Amazon, was now the center stage at your local Whole Foods Market. This is representative of the ways that Amazon was eager to quickly create infrastructural synergy and situate Whole Foods in the minds of the public as part of the Amazon customer experience.

Amazon made it abundantly clear in a press release the week of the merger that they planned to fully take advantage of the benefits that came from having control of these Whole Foods locations. The release stated, "This is just the beginning - Amazon and Whole Foods Market plan to offer more in-store benefits and lower prices for customers over time as the two companies integrate logistics and point-of-sale and merchandising systems" (Taylor, 2017, p. 1). This again is representative of not only synergy, but of Amazon’s proclivity for always thinking of its core e-commerce business first. In this case, specifically, the in-store benefits would be going to people who patronize the online Amazon platform first and foremost, and would incentivize more people to sign up for Amazon services like Amazon Prime, while also using this space to push its signature products to people in person. By November of 2017, *CNet* reporter Megan Wollerton pointed out

that the number of Whole Foods where this practice was happening was rapidly growing (100 locations or 1 in 5 stores at the time). A press release from November, published on the Whole Foods website, announced:

As the gift-giving season approaches, Whole Foods Market and Amazon today announced that customers can now shop for Amazon devices such as the all-new Amazon Echo, Echo Dot, Fire TV, Kindle e-readers, Fire tablets and more at over 100 Whole Foods Market stores... Just in time for holiday shopping and entertaining, Whole Foods Market customers will be able to try out Amazon devices and learn about services like Prime and unique content on Prime Video at the staffed Amazon Pop-Up stores (Amazon, p. 1)

The shameless marketing of Amazon products in Whole Foods grocery stores demonstrated a shift in the ethos of Whole Foods from a naturalistic “hippie” oriented grocery chain to part of the corporate establishment, as represented by Amazon. These products would serve as visual indicators of a changing of the guard for customers and employees. Additionally, employees of Whole Foods would now be just as much Amazon warehouse employees as they were Whole Foods employees. This would change the labor dynamics and the responsibilities of every person who had been a Whole Foods employee before the acquisition. In the years since there has been increased emphasis on the proliferation of Amazon Prime through the resources afforded by way of the Whole Foods infrastructure.

When a customer logs onto the Amazon website as an Amazon Prime member what you see is what the company hopes is the seamless integration of Whole Foods into its infrastructure. Right next to the “recommendations for you” tab, the “recently viewed” tab, and an ad for new programming on Amazon Prime Video you see the “Whole Foods Market” tab. This tab advertises the “Exclusive weekly deals. Just for Prime members.” When you click on this tab you are brought

to a page where you are shown the deals for that week, including an additional 10% off in-store items with a yellow tag on them. You are also offered the opportunity to utilize the Amazon Fresh service for delivery of your Whole Foods groceries (likely by an Amazon Flex driver). More interestingly, but also regarding this integration of the two brands, there is a tab dedicated solely to the Amazon Alexa device. The tab shows a picture of the Amazon Alexa with a Whole Foods logo and the words “organic milk” sprawled across its interface. You also see next to that device the words “Alexa, add organic milk to my Whole Foods cart.” This is representative of that synergy that Amazon is trying to establish with its Whole Foods arm. It seems the corporation wants people to think of Amazon immediately when they think of Whole Foods. It also explains why Amazon decided to sell Amazon Echo’s and Alexa’s from day one.

Amazon is walking a tight rope here as Whole Foods becomes more Amazon while still trying to retain the value and perception that comes with the Whole Foods brand. It is evident when shopping at any Whole Foods location today how the experience has changed. Since acquiring Whole Foods, Amazon has kept two of its initial promises. The first is the cutting of Whole Foods prices on a variety of items. The second was making shopping at Whole Foods a more value-laden proposition for Amazon Prime members. In April of 2019 Amazon announced that it would be slashing Whole Foods prices for the third time since 2017. As reported by *Tech Crunch*:

Amazon-owned Whole Foods announced a third round of price cuts that will see the grocer discounting hundreds of items, offering an average savings of 20 percent. Produce is an area of specific focus in this wave of price cuts, with lowered prices on seasonal items including greens, tomatoes, tropical fruits and more. In addition, Amazon will expand its Prime benefits offered to Whole Foods shoppers with a larger selection of weekly deals, the company says (Perez, p. 1)

While some might argue that the Amazon acquisition of Whole Foods has allowed consumers the opportunity to maximize their shopping experience, this work argues that neglected in these analyses of the acquisition are any meaningful examinations of how these new in-store norms have affected the working conditions and experience of the Amazon/Whole Foods employees. In what follows I examine the online discourses of these employees in order to more deeply explore the ways in which the transition from Whole Foods employee to Amazon employee has affected the laboring conditions. I argue that in essentially becoming Amazon Warehouse employees these Whole Foods laborers now experience increased precarity as the scope and breadth of their work responsibilities increase under Amazon leadership. Once again, I have examined the discourse on online message boards and forums, particularly r/wholefoods, in order to access interactions between employees using these platforms as a form of precarious pre-labor in the hopes of mitigating the uncertainty of their working conditions. In doing this I look to contribute to conversations about the human costs of new-age conglomeration, and the dynamics of evolving modern labor paradigms.

4.4 r/wholefoods: The Human Costs of Conglomeration

When navigating the Whole Foods Market career opportunities website, the company makes clear what one should expect if hired to work for this supermarket chain. The site is plastered with pictures of smiling employees from all levels of the Whole Foods employee hierarchy. This includes everyone from those who work in corporate offices to the cashiers and managers who work in the store locations. There are sections dedicated to the core values of the company as well as to the charitable foundations funded by Whole Foods globally. On the “Our Core Values” page you find the company’s six core values: “We sell the highest quality natural and organic foods,” “We satisfy

and delight our customers,” “We create profits and prosperity,” “We care about our communities and the environment,” “We practice win-win partnership with our suppliers,” and “We promote team member growth and happiness” (Whole Foods, 2020, p. 1). Appropriately, that last core value is what Whole Foods tries to emphasize most on this career opportunities page. The company even includes testimonials from current employees in order to paint a clear picture of what you can expect if you are given the opportunity to work for the company. For example, cashier Joseph B testifies “You feel the value of the work you do every day. That’s something you don’t feel everywhere.” Julie H insists “It matters to me to do things that matter. That’s why I work at Whole Foods – Our work makes a difference” (p. 1). Each of these employees is pictured smiling in a way that expresses satisfaction with their working environment and situation at the grocery chain.

When further investigating the website you will find a page labeled “Whole Benefits” where the company lays out the three core benefits that an employee can expect to receive as part of the Whole Foods Market team. These are “physical health, mental health, and financial health.” In regard to physical health the company boasts “It’s a fact – you’re a happier, more productive person when your body feels 100%. We give you access to everything you need to stay in tip-top shape” (p. 1). This includes comprehensive health insurance and also dental and vision coverage. Regarding mental health, the website assures potential employees that: “How you feel doesn’t always apply to your body. We offer mental healthcare coverage, too” (p.1). This includes access to a Team Member Assistance Plan, which is comprised of “several free in-person counseling sessions.” Finally, the financial health section informs the potential employee that “We have a history of rewarding great work. There’s a reason we were one of the first grocers to set minimum pay far higher than our competitors” (p. 1). Financial benefits are listed as “competitive pay, saving for the future, discounts that matter, PTO cash-outs.” These are the protections that separate Whole

Foods/Amazon employees, from the Amazon independent contractors whose labor the company is also reliant on, and who have been examined in previous chapters. It is of note that unlike on the Amazon website where Whole Foods is closely tied to the Amazon brand and advertised proudly, nowhere on the Whole Foods careers opportunities website is it mentioned that Whole Foods is owned by Amazon nor is there any Amazon branding. It is likely that here, the company is clearly trying to create distance between perceptions of Whole Foods and perceptions of Amazon labor practices, which are often called into question.

The remainder of the chapter examines this Whole Foods/Amazon dynamic and whether or not the promises laid out on the Whole Foods website match the reality of the labor carried out by its employees. As in previous chapters where I have embedded myself in the r/HitsWorthTurkingFor and r/AmazonFlexDrivers subreddits, I once again utilize Reddit and engage in online ethnography as a methodology. This time I embed myself in the r/wholefoods subreddit, which is populated largely by Whole Foods employees and potential employees. In addition to examining the ways in which the online accounts of these Whole Foods employees are, or are not representative of what has been advertised by the company, I have also engaged in comparisons between these employees and the previously studied independent contractors of Mechanical Turk and Amazon Flex. What I found is that although Whole Foods employment comes with protections not afforded to contractors, there is still tremendous precarity that is tied to this labor. Moreover, I argue that despite Amazon hiding its branding during the hiring process, once the person is employed it becomes abundantly evident that they are now a part of the Amazon ecosystem, and this employment comes with many of the problematic intangibles that Amazon employment brings with it. These include feelings of vulnerability due to a lack of systematized safety protocols, financial uncertainty tied to the understanding that you could one day become

obsolete, and environmental stresses that weigh on the mental health of these employees. Simply put, Whole Foods labor is differently precarious than other forms of Amazon labor, but nonetheless the online employee accounts make clear that this labor is also rife with precarity. The r/wholefoods subreddit provides these employees with a place to vent, but also to share experiences with other employees. This is also a place where employees can engage in the pre-labor necessary to mitigate the uncertainty of their Whole Foods work. This pre-labor consists of employees helping each other navigate the dynamic landscape of these Amazon owned Whole Foods stores and providing tips for managing the precarity that is unique to this type of labor. Overall, the testimonies of these employees provide insight into the human costs and ramifications of new-age conglomeration that are often ignored in discussions of this business practice.

4.4.1 Whole Foods, Amazon and Employee Health

As with the previous chapter, portions of this chapter were also written in a post-Covid-19 world where the norms of labor and basic health protocols had changed dramatically. This was evident in many of the threads that circulated on the r/wholefoods subreddit. Many employees have posted threads about the precarity that has come with the new reality of being an essential worker in uncertain times. This served as a perfect litmus test for the promises made by Whole Foods for its employees and is immediately evident in a thread titled *List of Whole Foods Locations with COVID-19 Cases* started by user SeanChen. The original post was a link to a shared Google Document. When opened, this shared document, cultivated by r/wholefoods redditors, provided a list of confirmed employee Covid-19 cases at US Whole Foods stores. As of July 2020 the document provided up to date reported statistics including “Total of Confirmed Cases: 751, Total Deaths: 4, Total Stores Affected: 255.” The data was then broken down by region and sourcing is

given for the information. This sourcing included anonymous employee reports and archived media reports. The document is still updated regularly, as needed. In the actual thread users shared information and tried to create more certainty for others while holding each other accountable, which was evident when user PANDAm0nium inquired about the document: “This may be a dumb question, but how are you guys finding out about confirmed cases in your store? Is it word of mouth? Is the store notifying you?” The thread starter responded “we all get voicemails notifying us” (p. 1). Another poster followed up: “At my store the STL [Store Team Leader] is telling everyone personally. If you are not present when he tells your dept, then you find out via word of mouth. No email, no text, no voicemail, no notes posted around the store” (p.1). The remainder of the thread was essentially employees reporting in-store cases and incidents. This painted a clear picture of the physical danger that essential employees at Whole Foods found themselves in and the ways in which they were relying on each other to help mitigate the bodily risk that came with essential employee labor. The inconsistency and the lack of a company-wide system or mandate for notifying employees was why some Whole Foods employees felt that the reading and engaging of this thread was necessary pre-labor to ensure their safety at work. Still in existence and utilized daily, this thread is a premier example of the ways in which Whole Foods employees utilize the r/wholefoods subreddit in order deal with the material precarity of this type of labor. This thread and how employees navigate it is representative of how labor that might typically be seen as mundane can easily escalate into the area of life and death. This is very similar to how the Amazon Flex independent contractors of the previous chapter utilized the r/AmazonFlexDrivers subreddit in order to ensure their own safety and health.

Unlike the Amazon Flex independent contractors of the previous chapter, these Whole Foods workers’ status as employees (moreover essential employees) provided them with stable

employment and insurance throughout the health crisis. This status also locked them into oftentimes dangerous labor and an understanding that if they walked away, or elected not to work they would not be eligible for unemployment insurance, or Pandemic Unemployment Assistance like the Flex contractors. In the midst of the confusion and chaos of Covid-19 some employees found themselves joking in order to diffuse some of the tension on the forum. In a thread sarcastically titled, *Dear wholefoods/amazon employees, good news:* user LowerCase_ wrote the facetious announcement:

Another employee in your store has contracted Covid-19, bringing the total cases in your store to two total cases. Eighteen more cases storewide and we'll finally be able to replace you all with robots, saving us millions in labor costs! We wish you luck in protecting yourself, have a good day!

While partially made in jest this post brings serious issues plaguing these employees to the surface. The first is concerns about their health. Additionally, the post illuminates concerns about the feeling of increasing obsolescence (which will be covered in depth in this analysis in upcoming sections). It is evident that these employees harbor resentments toward Amazon as the owners of Whole Foods and the entity responsible for their working conditions. Also evident is the fact that many of these employees do not trust Amazon or its motives. Throughout the thread the vitriol of these employees also shifted to customers as frustrated employees shared accounts of problematic and apathetic shoppers. Some were spiteful toward these customers who they viewed as the vessels of the virus and therefore threats to their health. User 8675309 responded: "I mean all the customers are bringing it in everyday so this isn't news to me. Today an entire fucking sports team came in, in groups. As if we aren't in a pandemic and a grocery store is a fucking field trip. Fucking idiots... Thanks, customers" (p. 1). User HilSwank followed up, "To be fair.. two cases is rookie

numbers.. my store has had about 10 and I'm sure other stores have had more than mine. That's certainly nothing to brag about. I guess I just mean, be thankful two is it. But also, I am sympathetic to your post.” (p. 1). Switching their tone from joking to more serious the thread starter replied:

haha yeah, this whole post was meant to be a little lighthearted. my buddy is really worried bc he has asthma and I've been trying to make everyone feel better since we had our second outbreak. we're all just really worried, most of us are around or are high risk in the kitchen. I just want us to be happy, even though we're in the dumbest most non mask wearing area of our state (p.1)

The thread seemed to be a way for the thread starter to cope with the precarity of their situation. It also brings to light the cultural debates surrounding mask wearing, which were repeatedly discussed on the message board.

During Covid one of the more surprising points of contention were discussions of the efficacy of protective masks. The World Health Organization and other medical experts reported that these masks were necessary to suppress the spread of the virus and many states mandated their use in public places. Many Americans (often referred to as anti-maskers), though, viewed these mandatory orders as infringing upon their rights. In this moment, the debate shifted from one about the efficacy of these masks to a political and ideological struggle. As *Washington Post* columnist Lori Rozsa explains:

Mask-wearing for some people is an identifier of broader beliefs and political leanings. Like so many issues rooted in science and medicine, the pandemic is now fully entangled with ideological tribalism. This has played out before: helmets for motorcyclists, seat belts in cars, smoking bans in restaurants. All of those measures provoked battles over personal liberty. Now it's masks and the coronavirus, with face coverings emerging as an emblem

for what cleaves the nation... To many people, masks represent adherence to civic duty and a willingness to make individual sacrifices for the greater good of public health. To others, masks symbolize government overreach and a violation of personal liberty (2020, p. 1)

This ideological clash would have real world consequences as this mask rebellion created unsafe environments for the general public and also for essential workers who had to encounter and deal with people who did not see the value in adhering to mask policies, or who just flat out refused to abide by such policies.

Whole Foods employees found themselves becoming potential casualties, caught in the middle of this battle as their stores tried to implement mask policies for their safety. In a thread titled *How do you do it everyday?* User itsam123 vented:

I was hired as a seasonal worker for the front end in May and after 3 months I am just so tired. Every day there is a new customer who refuses to wear a mask and causes a scene when asked. I was called a bitch for asking a man to wait for an employee who was comfortable checking him out without a mask... How do you let these things go? How do you feel ok at the end of the day? (p. 1)

This post demonstrates not only that workers found themselves vulnerable to the virus itself, but also susceptible to verbal, and potentially physical abuse at the hands of irate customers. Covid-19 serves as a cautionary example of the ways in which the realities of the outside world frequently travel with customers into these stores and create often times volatile environments for essential employees. In response to the initial post, the most upvoted response was from user spacecase who somewhat jokingly replied “I like to pretend that as soon as they drive out of view they get into a terrible accident and die and then I go on with my life thinking they no longer exist... because of

how insignificant they are too my day to day life” (p. 1). User ENC followed up with a simple yet resonant reply, writing “i remember that I have bills to pay” (p. 1). This response is the second most upvoted and simply states what is the obvious feeling that many of these Whole Foods employees carry with them as they encounter customer challenges that may compromise their health. Their paycheck is how they are able to justify engaging in this type of precarity-laden labor. As stated above, if these workers elected not to work they were not covered by unemployment insurance, or eligible for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance. During this particular crisis, this fact and a lack of options for these essential workers made their labor arguably more precarious than that of the aforementioned Amazon Flex contractors.

Another mask-related thread demonstrated that the danger did not only follow the customers in, but that some of it was actually manufactured by other employees. In a thread titled *Employees at my store are wearing fake masks* user thisandthatkid reported, “Just to be defiant, they are mesh masks and do nothing but look the part, kinda warped huh?” (p. 1). It is not clear whether or not this user was upset by this or rather just thought it was amusing but it was clear how the responding r/wholefoods posters felt. In response user AnnA74 strongly suggested “Tip line, asap, those POS need to be terminated yesterday” (p. 1). User MoneyGirl34958 responded “I’m hoping your management isn’t full of complete dumbasses and that they realize the danger of this to everybody” to which the thread starter replied “My management is the type that won’t do anything about it lol” and continued more seriously:

It’s infuriating I spent the last week off because my mom who is immune compromised and has a prior condition (multiple sclerosis) became infected and was hospitalized for severe complications due to the virus, I didn’t sleep for three days thinking the brief

moments on FaceTime I would get to spend with her we're the last times I would ever see her, the tone of FaceTime ending will forever haunt me (p. 1)

MoneyGirl34958 replied and assured the poster that “you done good by posting this here. I bet you by the end of the month this nonsense will be put to a stop, and other stores will update their policy too about these inconsiderate, uneducated, fake mask wearing pieces of s***” (p. 1). This is another example of the ways in which the community oriented dynamic of the subreddit helps these users create a support system for each other wherein posters can solicit advice on ways to try to lessen the precarity of this work. There is an implicit understanding that through this platform users need to look out for themselves and each other in ways that their particular Whole Foods store and Amazon on a larger scale, may be neglecting to.

All of this raises questions about Whole Foods/Amazon and how it has gone about protecting the health of its employees. While the company is not directly or legally responsible for the health of the independent contractor laborers that are also important to its infrastructure, it certainly is responsible for the physical health of its legal employees. Having said that, many Whole Foods employees post on this message board about frustrations that they face in regard to their health plans—the same health plans that are boasted about on the Whole Foods career opportunities website. User maybeitsnot posted a thread titled *What are your experiences relying on WFM health benefits?* They inquired in the post “I'm looking into the insurance plan for the first time and honestly it's a lot different than what I was lead to believe when I first applied. I... have chronic health issues and was going to rely on the WFM health insurance once I age out of my current plan.” After explaining the particulars of the plan that they are looking at the user ended the post with the “I don't know how I'm supposed to survive off of this” (p. 1). The other posters shared their experiences utilizing the Whole Foods insurance and while supportive the responses

were not encouraging. One response in particular was telling. At the end of a rant about the particulars of the Whole Foods insurance packages user rockyW_ vents “This new insurance coverage (since 2018 - post Amazon) is much worse than what we had before where 100% of services were covered after the deductible was met” (p. 1). This poster makes it clear that they look at their Whole Foods experience in terms of before Amazon and “post Amazon” acquisition with the latter being representative of a negative shift. User Screech100 concurs with their simple response “I agree. The new insurance sucks. Especially for those just coming up” (p. 1). Once again there is an allusion to a past that was less precarious than the present under Amazon leadership. All of this became of germinal importance to these employees, especially during a pandemic when their health was increasingly at risk.

It is common on this message board to see more employees venting about how the Amazon acquisition has affected the culture and reality of work at the market. In a thread titled *I just quit after 1 year and it was one of the best feelings I've ever had. This company is slowly becoming an evil that is amazon* users discuss their feelings about Amazon and its influence on the Whole Foods employee reality. The top response was from user JAYcat who replied “Agree that Amazon’s systematic lack of attention to detail is not a good influence on Whole Foods. But without Amazon, Whole Foods would be in a bad place.” This commentary reflects the fact that in many ways the marriage between Amazon and Whole Foods was one of convenience (discussed above), based on the fact that each entity had what the other needed at the time. In this marriage of convenience though, lost in the shuffle were the employees. This is not lost on them, although some employees are able to find a silver lining in all of the changes that have occurred since the Amazon acquisition. As user puck responds:

without Amazon delivery, our business would probably be hanging by a thread right now. Whole Foods was technologically and logistically in the dark ages before Amazon bought us, and I laugh to think about Whole Foods trying to come up with its own delivery system in response to the pandemic. Amazon just got us to the same overly corporate destination that Whole Foods was taking us, but faster. Did we want to deal with decaying profits and more layoffs (like we had in 2015, before Amazon bought us) or decaying morale and the erosion of our culture? Ultimately, this is what happens to any company that expands quickly and goes public. The American dream prioritizes aggressive growth at the expense of its employees. It's the same old corporate schtick that every retail establishment has (p. 1)

This is the response of an employee who seems to understand that things are not perfect under Amazon, but that Amazon's 2017 intervention may be the only reason that they currently were employed, regardless of how the culture of the work had shifted. Other posters in this thread were not as optimistic in their assessments of what Amazon rule had meant for Whole Foods. User FoodsWharf responded to the previous posts with these nihilistic sentiments: "But it's arguably in a worse place now. Not financially, but morally and functionally. Clearly the whole structure wasn't working -- how is Amazon reanimating its rotting corpse and turning it into an ugly corporate zombie an improvement?" (p. 1). It is evident that this employee does not see the glass as half full and sees all of this as simply a bad situation that has gotten worse under Amazon leadership. In a final word redditor HoneyComb-484 saw all of this as indicative of a set of larger societal and structural deficiencies as opposed to just differences in corporate cultures. They argue that the government "need[s] to improve employment laws, health care, and raise the minimum wage though. No corporation gives a shit about their employees beyond keeping them just happy

enough to not cause problems” (p. 1). This user understands that it could very well be possible that no matter what corporation purchased Whole Foods the reality of their working situation may not have improved much. The leadership just happens to be Amazon at the current moment. Furthermore, this user understands that this is just how business works because of the fact that the government allows companies like Amazon to operate with impunity, while leveraging massive debts that seem to never trickle down to its often-exploited labor force. Amazon seems to invest the minimum necessary into its labor force in order to keep these workers complacent. All of this is despite that Whole Foods and Amazon promise of promoting “team member growth and happiness” on its career opportunities page. Rather these employees seem to be anxious and often times stressed.

4.4.2 Infrastructural Changes and Increased Precarity

Many of the Whole Foods environmental shortcomings documented in the r/wholefoods subreddit are exemplary of a company that often is lax about enforcing regulations to protect the physical health of its employees. Additionally, these shortcomings and the stresses brought on by them also weigh heavily on the mental health of these employees. The day-to-day anxieties that come with working at Whole Foods and under Amazon are often discussed in the subreddit. While the Whole Foods career opportunities page advertises a culture that promotes mental hygiene in its employees these same employees recount job conditions that weigh on them heavily and that at times negatively affect their mental dispositions. While this type of employment stress and precarity is not unique to Amazon, it is indicative of yet another promise that is made by the company that falls short of reality for those who labor for the company. Many of the stress-inducing factors that are discussed

on the message board are in fact triggered by Amazon's cultural and structural changes made to Whole Foods as Amazon has integrated Whole Foods into its brand.

One of the things that often comes to the forefront of the message board is the new assembly line model that is a product of Amazon's integration. As a part of this model there are three main types of Whole Foods laborers who cross paths on a day-to-day basis. First there are store employees. In addition to these employees there is a second group of employees known as Prime shoppers who are responsible for processing and collecting the goods and products for the online orders made through Amazon Prime for home delivery. Third, there are the Amazon Flex drivers who are then tasked with delivering these grocery orders to the homes of the customers who put in the orders. These three sets of laborers are at the core of the evolving Whole Foods business model under Amazon. Between these three groups there is often expressed frustration and resentment in regard to daily interactions and the dynamics created by them having to work together to further proliferate the cultural changes being made by Amazon.

Prime Shoppers are relatively new to the Whole Foods ecosystem, and are the direct result of Amazon integrating its Prime subscription service into the shopping experience at Whole Foods. When a customer shops at Whole Foods or traverses its website it is made clear that having a Prime subscription will make the customers experience more valuable, from discounts in-store, to the ability to order groceries to their doorsteps on the same day. The Prime Now shoppers are the invisible labor that make this possible. In a thread titled *What does a Whole Foods shopper do?* Redditor, and Amazon Prime Shopper BeyoudYou explains:

People with Amazon Prime go to a page on Amazon where they place an order for groceries that are available from their nearest Whole Foods. You are a shopper in the Whole Foods store. You carry a phone that work provides you with. It has an app on it

that assigns you an order from a customer. The app tells you all the items that the person ordered. You walk around the store and grab the exact items ordered, or very similar items if the exact items are not available. You put them into bags. You stash the bags into either open racks or refrigerators, depending on whether the items in the bag need to be refrigerated or not... The job starts at \$15 an hour in my location but I have heard that it starts a bit higher in other states such as California (p. 1)

The thread further consists of inquisitive redditors and potential employees asking questions about the working dynamics of Prime Now shopping.

Of note is the fact that this thread is not located in the r/wholefoods subreddit; rather it is in a separate subreddit specifically for Prime Now shoppers called r/AmazonWFS shoppers. This is by design and indicative of the often tumultuous dynamics between Whole Foods store employees and Prime shoppers. Simply explained, Whole Foods store employees do not consider Prime Now shoppers (who all work part-time and inconsistent hours) to be traditional Whole Foods employees. Likewise, Prime shoppers consider themselves to be more Amazon employees than Whole Foods employees, since their position is a byproduct of Amazon integrating into Whole Foods. This antagonistic dynamic is explained by redditor StaySilent in the same thread:

When Amazon acquired WFM they came in like [a] 9,000 pound elephant occupying space the store was using. That pissed off Whole Foods folks. Next they began hiring hordes of “Amazon Shoppers” which seemed like an even bigger invasion bc Amazon wouldn’t hire full timers so it was constant fresh faces every 5 hours. Then Amazon trained the new hires very poorly. This resulted in constant workplace interruptions for the Whole Foods staff as hapless Amazon Shoppers ask them where to find obscure products. Amazon runs the Shopper and Flex Driver operations like Robert McNamara ran the Vietnam War:

Remotely from a distant basement writhing in data, analytics and devoid of the real world experience (p. 1)

This post encapsulates one of the main ways in which the Amazon acquisition of Whole Foods created a new reality for those workers who had been with the company from the period before. The space that these Whole Foods workers had known was now literally being invaded by Amazon, creating unpredictability and instability in their working experience. This would be one in a series of cultural shifts that would occur, creating new layers of precarity for these employees.

This divide between the more traditional Whole Foods employees and the Prime shoppers created a dynamic in which the Whole Foods employees were constantly reminded of the ways in which their employment norms were now being impacted by the influence of Amazon. In the r/wholefoods subreddit this ongoing disdain is often on display as these employees make clear that they are not satisfied with the ways in which the part-time Prime Now shoppers operate in the domain of the Whole Foods employees. In a thread titled *I'd rather be guaranteed full time hours and a raise each year than be an Amazon shopper...* Whole Foods employees speak on some of the issues that frustrate them about the Prime Now shoppers, including user ArtHouseSixty who explained “I think part of the issue is with the stores that have Amazon employees doing the shopping...- they have little to no supervision/accountability so when they act like asshats there’s not much WFM employees can do. Some take advantage of it (when the cat’s away ...)” (p .1). Building on this sentiment user JaredIsTerrible complained “It bugs me that a lot of them show up in sweats and slippers. You’re here to work. Have some pride in your appearance” (p. 1). This is indicative of the “us versus them” mentality that many Whole Foods employees demonstrate when speaking about these Prime Now shoppers. They are not viewed as a part of the Whole Foods team and some are frustrated by the fact that these part-time workers will not assimilate to the norms of

their stores. Others piled on, while some of the few Prime Now shoppers who elected to post on this particular subreddit defended themselves. Poster RKT1974 responded “I am an Amazon shopper and I don't get this. The whole foods workers in my store are nothing but nice. I mean a few seem to be stuck up but so what. I have had nothing but pleasant experiences with whole foods people” (p. 1). In agreement user Intellectual_Vigor responds “This! This sub is pretty toxic and makes me realize other Whole Foods must suck with this many toxic people” (p. 1). It seems that for some Whole Foods employees this specific change to the workplace structure is the cause of much angst and others try to look on the bright side despite this. Nonetheless this message board serves as a place where all employees can vent and voice perspectives about these Whole Foods cultural shifts.

While these new shoppers are a mild annoyance for some they are the source of more abject disdain for other employees. In another Prime Now shopper focused thread simply and directly titled *I HATE AMAZON SHOPPERS!!!!* user EnTransit88 outlined their objections to these Amazon employees that they must work with on a daily basis. The poster lamented:

These people are so annoying, this includes the deliver people with the hand truck. It's like they hire people who are not hireable in any other job. It's an unskilled entry-level job. You CANNOT get anymore unskilled than this! They don't know where anything is. They run into your leg with their hand truck/shopping cart and do not apologize. They'll knock your product off your table/u-boat and not pick it up. They'll run into you when you're on a ladder. They'll leave u-boats that don't belong to your department in your back-stock(for those of you who know about OTS [Order to Shelf Inventory Management] this hurts your scorecard). They also block exit paths which is an OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] violation... I'm tired (p. 1)

The poster goes on to recount situations in which Whole Foods employees at their store have been disciplined up to and including firing for getting into verbal altercations with these Prime Now shoppers. This led to a thorough and in depth conversation amongst those in the thread who mostly agree with EnTransit88 and also shared their concerns about and experiences with Prime Now shoppers. User Valhalla1 agreed and commented “I feel you dude. They're always in the way and show zero sign of self awareness. They walk in front of receiving bring out pallets, leave their carts ALL over the place. They hang out in choke points and just chat. They make my job so much more annoying” (p. 1). Once again a Whole Foods employee outlines the ways in which the addition of these workers contributes to the stress of the working environment.

Some posters comment on this as symptomatic of issues that exist on a larger, more systematic scale, and that may be out of the hands of the Amazon Prime shoppers. Poster PANDAm0nium comments “I actually have a lot of sympathy for the Amazon shoppers. Some of them are rude and annoying, but most of them are just confused. They really don’t seem to have much training or guidance and rely on us to educate them about our products” (p. 1). Once again this is a post that alludes to a deeper series of issues including Amazon not having the experience in the grocery sector or proper leadership to train these workers before sending them into Whole Foods stores to interact with these more tenured and experienced employees. Poster and Amazon Prime shopper vpn-throwaway apologetically weighs in and comments, “I’m an Amazon shopper and I apologize for my fellow idiots. I’ve worked at several different stores alongside hundreds of different shoppers and there is a huge variation in quality of shoppers, but sounds like your store has the crème de la crap.” They continue “Amazon hires anyone who can pass a drug test and legally work in the US, so of course there are going to be incompetent people. Also the training is awful and the work culture is toxic. They do not train us on any Whole Foods policies or

procedures” (p. 1). Amazon shoppers understand fully that they are not Whole Foods employees and they too are in positions of precarity, while trying to navigate the Whole Foods environment. This is a case of one group of people working under increasingly precarious conditions, meeting another.

Another post in this thread brings one more problematic issue to the surface in regard to how Amazon’s influence has shifted the Whole Foods working dynamics. Poster ChopShopOwner insightfully comments “The Ying-Yang of the Amazon / WF partnership is putting a warehouse metric inside of a live shopping environment. Each shopper has 60 seconds or less to find an item. This can cause much of what you previously described” (p. 1). This comment is of note because it is indicative of an overall structural change that Amazon has imbued onto Whole Foods stores as the company continues to integrate grocery products into its Amazon Prime subscription service. For all intents and purposes Whole Foods Markets now double as both grocery stores and Amazon warehouses for food products. This means that these Prime Now shoppers are essentially warehouse workers, who are also working under tight restraints similar to those thrust upon traditional Amazon warehouse employees but with less training. In addition to having less training these workers have to deal with environments where they are in competition with “native Whole Foods employees” for this warehouse space. Likewise, native Whole Foods workers are also warehouse workers in this model--in the sense that they are essentially restocking the warehouse for Prime Now shoppers as a result of these newly-implemented infrastructural changes in stores. They, though, balance these responsibilities in with the dynamics of also having to engage and assist their in-store customer base.

One result of this warehouse mentality that Amazon has adopted in dealing with physical Whole Foods locations has been the implementation of OTS (Order-to-shelf) inventory

management. This strategy is meant to decrease the amount of food that Whole Foods must throw out by decreasing the amount of food that is held in each store for the purposes of efficiency. As an *SPSCommerce* columnist explains about the system:

[It] allows the stores to take regular stock of what's in the store, order only what they need to restock the shelves for the next day, and then everything will show up late at night, ready for restocking. There's very little to store "in the back," which means there's little to no excess inventory, there's no storage needs, and there's no chance for spoilage because something was missed or misplaced. Everything shows up "just in time," and on a daily basis, rather than refrigerated trucks showing up with the week's supply of milk, eggs, and ice cream (p. 1)

This is a clear example of Amazon attempting to translate the efficiency of its traditional warehouses to Whole Foods stores. Many argue that this has not been a smooth transition for Whole Foods locations or the employees. As *Business Insider* columnist Hayley Peterson reported in 2018 "Employees acknowledge that less food is spoiling in storage rooms, but they describe OTS as a 'militaristic' system that crushes morale and leads to many items being out of stock" (p. 1). This crushed morale can often be seen on the r/wholefoods subreddit where employees discuss the trials and tribulations of adapting to this recently implemented and stringent system.

In this article an anonymous employee shared these frustrations recounting, "At my store, we are constantly running out of products in every department, including mine, Regional and upper store management know about this. We all know we are losing sales and pissing off customers. It's not that we don't care — we do. But our hands are tied" (2018, p. 1). It was not long before this article was posted in the r/wholefoods subreddit and discussed among the contributors. User FoliageCollector stated:

I work at Whole Foods. We have people quitting left and right who have been with the company 5+ years. I am a new buyer and since this system was implemented I wish I hadn't taken on the extra responsibility. I agree that it is militaristic. We are so worried about our back stock percentage, filling out the work logs, updating the comm board and promo map that we are NOT free for more customer service — the contrary, actually (p. 1)

This is an account that not only speaks to the toll OTS is taking on employees, but also the consequence of this system negatively affecting the customers. Instead of OTS creating more efficiency for workers and customers, it seemed to be having effects to the contrary. This is reiterated in the same thread by a user who identified themselves as a customer. In response to the article user MarcyK complained:

This is "news"? I've been a regular at WF for years- at least once a week. I gave it some time but obviously someone doesn't understand how brick and mortar gets and retains customers. You disappoint someone once and, if they have other options, many will walk. You disappoint someone twice or three times (the dedicated customers will put up with a little more) you lose a customer. If Amazon was interested at all in WF stores they would have seen this immediately. They obviously aren't. They must have this strange idea that people who stop shopping at WF will buy online. Maybe that's their end game (p. 1)

The customer account demonstrated that even shoppers understood that new Amazon ownership was at the root of their unsatisfactory experiences at the store. They too, felt that there was a disconnect between Amazon's e-commerce leadership, and its newly acquired Whole Foods stores. They even went as far as speculating that Amazon was intentionally sabotaging in-store experiences in order to propagate Amazon Prime e-commerce grocery delivery. Similar suspicions

and speculations were common in message board discussions of OTS as a system and also Amazon as an umbrella organization.

In a thread titled *Honest opinion, Amazon has ruined Whole Foods* original poster Alexis_Crystal inquired, “Whole Foods had its own issues before Amazon took over but now it’s so much worse. Anyone else agree?” (p. 1). In response to this, user Capri_Sunburn vented, “Yes, it has gotten a lot worse... We frequently get...poorly trained Amazon shoppers that had to have the store remodeled for their check out area, OTS is an almost unnecessary system that comes with audits that makes you wonder what the intentions are.” They conclude that they are: “Basically slowly noticing the poor job quality Amazon has a reputation for. Funny thing is we dont have Echos” (p. 1). The Amazon Echo portion of this post is a joke made to respond to other Whole Foods employees who have posted about having to sell Amazon products like Echos and Echo Dots or as the original poster responded, “the most noticeable impact [is that] you have to now bombard customers [with] amazon prime information and sales” (p. 1). In this way many employees now feel that they have gone from grocery store employees to cogs in the Amazon machine, further increasing the stress of this work.

The precarity of this work is also addressed in a thread titled *Life After Whole Foods* posted by user DrewW58 who offered that “Currently an Order Writer with an ATL [Associate Team Lead] interview coming up, but my anxiety levels are just so high every day, even before Covid, that I don't know how long I can do this and was curious what else was out there” (p. 1). In response user JimmyO writes about their experience leaving the company, and their reasons for doing so:

Was a TL and left after 7 years. I can't even begin to describe the decrease in stress and overall happiness after I left...The final straw for me was OTS and the reality that I was wasting so much labor a week filling out pointless charts while my team was suffering on

the floor...It is an almost certainty that at best the stress level will stay the same and at worst it is likely to get worse as more and more expectations change... Whole Foods is gone and it is just an Amazon grocery store now (p. 1)

Piggybacking on this, user alley121cat replies “Yes Wholefoods and its culture has drastically changed over the past few years - OTS -is a joke- and now everyone is just a number (p. 1). The responses in this thread are indicative of employees trying to cope with the stresses of a new work reality brought on by Amazon and a work environment that they feel they no longer have any control over. What also becomes evident in these threads is that unlike the subreddits studied in the previous MTurk and Flex chapters, here we find that this subreddit is predicated on a different kind of survival advice. Whereas when studying interactions between independent contractors the conversations tended toward maximizing wages and earning potential, when studying employees of Amazon/Whole Foods the conversations tend toward employment coping and day-to-day survival. In other words, when everyone makes similar pay and works similar hours, the talks shift to how to manage as opposed to how to earn. The earning portion is already understood. Ironically, even with the stability of this work, these workers still experience much uncertainty. These conditions are just differently precarious than those studied in previous chapters.

4.4.3 Financial Insecurity and Planned Obsolescence

In the eyes of many employees, changes being made by Amazon, including efficiency measures like OTS, seem to be trending in the direction of inevitable employee obsolescence in favor of automation. This is a common topic among Whole Foods employees and it reiterates the comments of reddit user Jess135 who wrote about feeling like “just a number.” These sentiments are common and when looking at how Amazon previously planned to enter brick and mortar retail

with self-service stores like Amazon Go, these feelings are not farfetched. This type of speculation began upon the announcement of Amazon acquiring Whole Foods. In 2017 *The New York Times* published an article titled “Amazon’s Move Signals End of Line for Many Cashiers” in response to Amazon acquiring Whole Foods and prophesizing about what that could mean for the future of these grocery employees. In the article, columnist Claire Miller comments “Look no further than the Amazon Go store. It has no cashiers or checkout lines. People scan their phones to enter, and sensors with computer vision monitor what they put in their carts. When they leave, they are automatically charged for what they have bought. Amazon calls it ‘just walk out technology.’” She continues, “Our mental image of job-killing automation is robots in factories or warehouses. But the next jobs to disappear are probably ones that are a much bigger part of most people’s daily lives: retail workers and cashiers in stores and restaurants” (p. 1). Others like Erik Brynjolfsson, director of the M.I.T Initiative on the Digital Economy predicted “The bigger and more profound way that technology affects jobs is by completely reinventing the business model... The idea of a cashier won’t be so much automated as just made irrelevant — you’ll just tell your Echo what you need, or perhaps it will anticipate what you need, and stuff will get delivered to you” (Kessler, 2017, p. 1). Since the acquisition this topic has been a source of anxiety for these workers as they see their stores become less like the Whole Foods that they have known and more like the Amazon that they had heard rumors about. Once again this increases the amount of precarity experienced by these workers who use r/wholefoods as an outlet to vent and provide support for each other. This is very much similar to the fear of obsolescence expressed by Mechanical Turk independent contractors in the r/HitsWorthTurkingFor subreddit. Despite different job classifications, the fears and feelings of precarity often overlap. Just like MTurk contractors, Whole Foods workers engage in discussions regarding this possibility and provide support for each other.

In a 2017 thread titled *Amazon to Acquire Whole Foods* from the r/news subreddit (which was frequented by many posters from the r/wholefoods sub), redditor batteryramdar comments “Whole Foods will prob end up looking for like an automated amazon fulfillment center rather [than the] same grocery store model that has been around for the last 80 years” (p. 1). Whole Foods employee oh-just-another-guy responded “One day you are a bag girl at Whole Foods, next day you are an Amazon employee” and in direct response to this user ShaXL added on “Next day she is let go when they automate or eliminate her job” (p. 1). Another now deleted user posed the question “Realistically what does this mean for current whole foods employees?” and in response user AlwaysAgreesWithYou warned “Knowing how Amazon treats their employees.... ouch....” (p. 1). This is followed up with user Midday_Blues clarifying “You’re not a [Whole Foods] employee. You’re a bag girl. At a grocery store. That’s owned by Amazon. ‘Amazon employee’ means you work *at* Amazon” (p. 1). While some were in full panic mode others demonstrated poise and were trying to look on the question of automation from a more rational perspective. Another now deleted user wrote “Even in Amazon’s automated grocery store, it had people stocking shelves. With Whole foods in the mix, I assume Amazon won’t get rid of the bakers and meat counter people. The only people who should be concerned are cashiers and even then, they’ll probably be moved somewhere else in the store” (p. 1). The comment was able to calm some posters, while others still felt uneasy about the shifts they presumed were coming in the future. This thread is representative of many threads on this topic that would emerge in the years to come.

Over three years later these same economic anxieties were still prevalent within the subreddit. In a 2020 thread titled *Is Whole Foods cutting out cashiers?* A user questions whether or not their position within the company is still stable. They write:

There is a very limited number of full time positions for store support and it just became even more limited recently... I asked my team leader if there will ever be a full time position open and she said she can't answer that right now. I also read that amazon is opening up other stores without cashiers and I'm wondering if Whole Foods will soon move in that direction as well. Does anyone know? My team leaders tell me nothing whenever I ask (p. 1)

Despite having steady employment, there is an embedded uncertainty that comes with knowing that Amazon could rescind those jobs. In addition to this, there is established precedent for that type of shift which is certainly a source of precarity for these workers. Sentiments of helplessness and acceptance are espoused by some posters, including user BarneyG who responded "Wholefoods raising its minimum wage to 15\$... That's what happens when minimum wage is raised that high" (p. 1). This user was essentially suggesting that a raise in wages will ultimately cause Amazon to eliminate their jobs. In a frustrated response user Jake421 wrote: "If you think they can't afford it, that's ridiculous. WF itself makes a ton of profit and that's not even mentioning Amazon's spending power. They could easily pay everyone \$15+ and give them insurance if they wanted to. They saw an opportunity to cut benefits and did it, it's as simple as that." They continue "Additionally, advocating for paying workers less than a living wage isn't really a helpful solution when it comes to individual workers bottom lines" (p. 1). This user demonstrates that they are well aware of Amazon's seemingly infinite resources, including its debt. They are frustrated that employees are never considered when Amazon is trying to figure out how and where to allocate those resources. Finally, user AB_35 comments "They do not want to pay a living wage period. If forced to do so they will continue to integrate technology to stay wealthy" (p. 1). Many of these workers have accepted the presumed fact that their time is finite and are planning for that day.

Many of these posters saw this as indicative of a larger plan by Amazon and just part of the reality of working for a corporation that is more interested in profits than the well-being of its employees. In a 2019 thread titled *What direction do you believe Whole Foods to be going?* original poster Dan_B asked “In the last year, we've seen a decrease in the maximum yearly raise, the loss of gainsharing, and the loss of part time benefits. What are your thoughts on the direction of the company?” (p. 1). User spacecase speculated “Heavier focus on APN shoppers, perhaps converting smaller, underperforming stores into warehouses or Amazon specific grocery stores with cashier-less interfaces... It'll be a massive failure but bezos will just keep throwing money at it.” Another poster follows up with the prediction that “It's going to continue to become more economically efficient and lucrative for investors at the cost of workers and consumers at every turn. Each change that has been made since Amazon came in has been for this purpose and this purpose” (p. 1). There is an understanding that the Whole Foods philosophies of the past have been superseded by Amazon’s financial interest and for many this new reality creates working conditions where workers are aware of the fact that they are expendable in a way that was not always evident before the Whole Foods acquisition by Amazon.

Some realize that they are as expendable as the Amazon Prime Now shoppers despite all that they do to delineate themselves from those Amazon employees. Many find confirmations of their fears of obsolescence in reports of newly unveiled shopping technologies produced by Amazon. In a thread titled *The Future of Whole Foods* user Ra1N_strike simply posts a link to a *Digital Trends* article titled “Amazon’s New Smart Shopping Cart Lets You Skip Checkout Lines.” This July 2020 article includes this description of the smart shopping cart:

Furnished with a mix of sensors, a weighing scale, and cameras, the Amazon Dash Cart can tell what you’re placing inside of it. Once you’re done picking out what you want, you

can simply walk out of the store through a special checkout lane and Amazon will bill you automatically. The Dash Cart also has a touchscreen up front, through which you can access your Alexa shopping lists, view the items in your cart, or enter a coupon code. The Amazon Dash Cart processes payments through an Amazon account. With the Dash Cart, Amazon is building upon its quest to bring its digital e-commerce chops to the offline shopping experience (Agarwal, p. 1)

This again illustrates the idea of Amazon utilizing the influence brought upon by this Whole Foods acquisition to extend the reach of its core e-commerce business. In addition, we see the effect that this has on its employees who experience increasing uncertainty as these occupational changes continue to be implemented by Amazon. In the thread where this article was posted one user responded “I don’t think it’ll be the reality any time soon but this is definitely the way things are trending with amazon behind WFM. Things have already changed significantly in the past 3 years, just imagine what another 10 or 20 years will bring” (p. 1) Others also recognize this not to be indicative of an immediate shift but something that could come in the not so distant future. User FIN_20 responded “you can never replace Cashiers. You can have less, make this a perk to Amazon Prime Members, there is a lot of people out in this world who dont use technology. Or arent as fortunate as us to have the technology we have” (p. 1). In some ways it sounds like they are trying to convince themselves that there will always be a need for their occupational skillset. Nonetheless the habitual resurgence of these conversations is representative of an underlying anxiety that many of these workers wake up and deal with on a daily basis. While these are not the independent contractors of the previous chapters, these Amazon employees still face similar uncertainty about their futures under Amazon’s management. Once again, this is an example of how legal employment does not alleviate precarity; it simply causes different precarity.

4.5 Differently Precarious

The aim of my examination of Amazon/Whole Foods in this chapter was to answer a foundational question about whether or not legally protected employees of Amazon experience similarly precarious working conditions than those of their independently contracted counterparts. In addition to this, the exploration of r/wholefoods was meant to shed light on how laborer dynamics shift as the result of new-age conglomeration, with the Amazon acquisition Whole Foods serving as an apt case study for these questions. What I found is that despite falling under legal protections afforded to employees many of these workers had to deal with much of the same uncertainty and anxieties that plagued the independent contractors profiled in the previous chapters. In sum, these Whole Foods employees, in expressing their frustrations on the message board, let it be known that no matter where you fall on the Amazon labor spectrum there is still precarity that is tied to the labor. These employees were simply differently precarious. I use this term differently precarious to illuminate the fact that this Amazon/Whole Foods labor creates a familiar yet uniquely precarious set of conditions for the employees who carry it out on a day to day basis. Specifically, through my embedding in the r/wholefoods subreddit I found that the reality of this work was in many ways antithetical to the promises that were made on the Whole Foods career opportunities website. Workers physical health, mental health, and financial stability all seem to be at risk much of the time. These candid discussions that occurred on this message board made that abundantly clear.

Regarding the physical health of these employees their designations as essential employees during the Covid-19 pandemic served as a premier example of the ways in which these workers find themselves vulnerable in their working environments. The general lack of uniform oversight or systematized protocols in handling a health crisis on site put these workers in positions where

they felt they had to look out for themselves. The thread titled *List of Whole Foods Locations with COVID-19 Cases* was a true demonstration of this as employees kept diligent records of their increasingly dangerous working conditions for possible future use. This was an insightful example of the way that similar to r/HitsWorthTurkingFor and r/AmazonFlexDrivers this is also a community where people come together in order to look out for each other, while also finding tips for protecting their own best interests. For many, this is a necessary pre-labor resource to help mitigate the risk that comes along with working in these Whole Foods stores.

This was also a platform where workers could come for advice about labor protections like health insurance. The availability of health insurance for these workers due to their employee status is one of the aspects of this work that separates it from the labor performed by the independent contractors of the previous chapters. This is something that in theory was supposed to make this work less precarious, but instead turned out to be an example of a way that this work can be differently precarious. It was also an example of the ways in which these workers feel that the transition to Amazon corporate management has left them in a worse position. For these workers there was precarity tied to the fact that they felt that their insurance had become worse since the Amazon acquisition. What good is health insurance if in the time of need it may not cover the employee effectively? All of this tied into feelings of being expendable cogs in a larger Amazon machine that really does not care about them nor understand what made these employees value their working experiences in years past.

The employees who post to the Whole Foods Reddit feel that they are now just numbers in the eyes of Amazon. This is not a unique sentiment as it is also shared by both the MTurk and Amazon Flex contractors on their respective subreddits. What makes the contractors different, though, is that they went into their laboring situations knowing that they were working for Amazon

from day one. Amazon was foisted upon these Whole Foods employees who now have to do their regular work while also adjusting to the environmental changes made by Amazon since the acquisition. These include turning their health food stores into essentially Amazon warehouses where other Amazon selected employees come in daily and impede upon the space of the Whole Foods employees. This is further exacerbated by newly implemented Amazon efficiency measures that are modeled after those utilized in traditional Amazon warehouses and fulfillment centers. All of this makes it abundantly clear to these employees that they are now a part of the Amazon system. For many employees, coming to terms with a feeling of dehumanization weighed heavily on them as they often thought back to the way things were before the influence of Amazon on Whole Foods. This is ironic as the company website promotes “team member growth” and a culture that values employees’ “happiness.” Once again, this is an example of Amazon misleading its labor force and many of its promises being the exact opposite of what the actual experience is for its employees.

Many employees not only feel as if they have been dehumanized by the Amazon experience, but also feel as if they are literally being devalued by the day. Fears of obsolescence have plagued these workers since 2017 as they have watched other sectors of the Amazon infrastructure become more and more open to the ideas of non-human, technology-assisted processes. This is similar to the fears experience by MTurk contractors, many of whom view themselves as placeholders until artificial intelligence technologies make them obsolete. In a similar situation are Whole Foods employees who are watching in real-time as Amazon incrementally pivots toward a day when their services are no longer necessary. This type of uncertainty in regard to the future of their industry or the lack of a potential future also weighs on these employees. The reports of Amazon shifting toward automating translate to increased precarity for those in the Whole Foods grocery stores. The uncertainty and anxiety are realities

that they share with all too many Amazon employees and contractors. They all experience similar precarity but under different circumstances. This is why it may be valuable not to differentiate between the precarity experienced by contractors and employees, but to take all of this into account as a way to paint a more complete picture of how Amazon treats its laborers across platforms and environments.

4.6 Conclusion

What is made abundantly clear through all of the Reddit accounts in this chapter is what the human cost of conglomeration can be. Often ignored, when the press focuses on numbers and financial projections are the people who will be impacted most by large conglomerate acquisitions: the employees. These employees endure increasing precarity and working conditions that dramatically change, often to their detriment. It is ironic that Amazon acquired Whole Foods partially in order to save it from collapse, but in the process created a new reality in which employees questioned whether they would have been better off in their previous position. Amazon had the power and resources to foster employee-focused positive changes into these Whole Foods stores but instead created an environment that was largely perceived to be worse for these employees. This serves as a cautionary tale about what happens when a company like Amazon is allowed to operate with a kind of impunity that many other companies are not afforded. From the ability to amass an overabundance of cheap debt, to being able to skirt employment laws, Amazon is able to get away with much that companies of the past would not due to its position as a new-age conglomerate. This is deeply problematic, not only from a business perspective but also in regard to how it affects the most vulnerable people, including Amazon employees and contractors.

All of this is important because as these new-age conglomerates including Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix, and Google all continue to grow in both scope and societal influence, we must take a hard look at them and the way they impact people. In the same way that we have scrutinized conglomerates of the past, these companies must also be thoroughly examined as they continue to shape and re-shape what are considered acceptable labor practices. In the case of Amazon/Whole Foods it is clear that while these companies are praised in the trade press for their innovation, and expansive growth, it is important to examine what the costs of these innovations. Platforms like r/wholefoods provide a valuable record of the accounts of those who are often the collateral damage of conglomeration.

5.0 Conclusions

As new-age conglomerates continue to grow in magnitude and influence it becomes all the more critical that people understand the impacts that these companies are having on all aspects of their lives. This dissertation project focuses specifically on how these companies affect labor norms through its three main Amazon case studies. These case studies also demonstrate that labor and laborer dynamics are shifting continually as a direct result of unregulated new-age conglomeration. Through investigations of precarious labor—and the precarious pre-labor necessary to compete in these labor environments—much can be learned about labor currently, as well as what directions it may be trending in years to come. It is imperative that we understand not only that labor is changing, but the ways in which these norms are evolving and how this affects both those already in the work force and future laborers. It is also important that we examine the ways in which these laborers cope with their situations and how they rely on each other.

In regard to Amazon specifically, this is a company that is being historically allowed to expand its infrastructural reach with minimal oversight or government regulation. The more this company continues to attain and then extend its growth goals the more important it becomes to further study it and others following in its footsteps. This project focused on three elements of the Amazon labor infrastructure, but as the company continues to enter new sectors it is urgent that we continue to examine and analyze these additional sectors. This acts as a form of regulation and record keeping for the masses who often find themselves voiceless in the face of these growing companies. In the time since the inception of this project, Amazon has expanded into a diverse array of sectors including everything from a podcasting network through its Amazon Music platform, to pharmaceutical distribution through its acquisition of PillPack. This is representative

of how wide this company's reach has become and how it situates itself in the lives of multitudes of people. What is also clear is that regardless of what sector Amazon infiltrates it will always need to expand its labor force in order to achieve the success it seeks. For this reason, there is a need for future projects and research further addressing Amazon, its growth, and its evolving impact on labor and laborers.

No one can say for sure what is on the horizon for Amazon, but recent developments in 2020 and 2021 foreshadow changes for the conglomerate and its laborers in years to come. The research for this project was completed while Amazon was under the leadership of Jeff Bezos. In the short time since the completion of these initial case studies there has been a significant shift within the leadership of the company. On February 2, 2021 it was announced that the former CEO of Amazon Web Services would be succeeding Jeff Bezos as CEO of Amazon INC, as Bezos shifted to the position of executive chairman (Haselton, 2021). As Amazon transitions into a post-Bezos era it is necessary to further examine what – if anything – changes about the company, its business practices, and its labor structures under this new leadership paradigm. Jassy - a company man since 1997 - has worked closely with Bezos on products and platforms, most notably, AWS. While Jassy has not come out and made many statements about his plans for Amazon in the future, a 2021 *New York Times* article shed light on the relationship between the new CEO and his mentor Jeff Bezos. In the article, journalists Karen Weise and Daisuke Wakabayashi report:

In 2002, Andy Jassy, a young executive at Amazon, began closely shadowing Jeff Bezos, the founder of the online bookstore. Mr. Jassy followed Mr. Bezos everywhere, including board meetings, and sat in on his phone calls, said Ann Hiatt, who was Mr. Bezos' executive assistant from 2002 to 2005. The idea, she said, was for Mr. Jassy to be "a brain double" for Mr. Bezos so that he could challenge his boss's thinking and anticipate his

questions... “I thought that I had very high standards before I started that job,” Mr. Jassy said in a podcast interview last fall [2020] about the 18-month period by the side of Mr. Bezos. “Then, in doing that shadow job, I realized that my standards weren’t high enough.” Now Mr. Jassy, having learned from Mr. Bezos for more than two decades in total, has been charged with taking the Bezos Way forward (p.1)

As Jassy has been consistently vetted for this position for 20 years now, it may be reasonable to infer that based on his training to perform as a “brain double” for Bezos not much may change within the Amazon infrastructure as Jassy continues to perpetuate the “Bezos Way” in the future.

Having said that, this change makes future research on Amazon, its dynamics, and its laborers all the more vital. This is especially true as the company moves into the next phases of its growth plans in the decades to come. The *Times* article goes on to emphasize that “Amazon, which has been riding a wave of growth, also faces mounting challenges. In Europe and the United States, the Seattle-based company is under scrutiny from regulators and lawmakers for its power. Its own work force has become increasingly vocal and active in dealing with the company” (p. 1). This means that many of the issues regarding Amazon, regulation and labor must now be navigated by Jassy during his tenure. How will he deal with an ever more vocal workforce, reeling from the continual frustrations of precarious labor for Amazon? Will he enact reforms, or will there be more of the same? Moreover, how will Amazon deal with recently increasing governmental and regulatory scrutiny?

As noted throughout this work, Amazon and other new-age conglomerates have benefitted greatly from a lack of governmental regulation, which has been vital for growth, and more importantly afforded these companies mandate to conduct business in ways that are sometimes legally questionable, and competitively dubious. As these companies become more visible and

better understood they are finally beginning to face increased governmental, and regulatory scrutiny. In 2020 the U.S. House Judiciary antitrust subcommittee released a report that focused on the ways in which Apple, Facebook, Google and Amazon capitalize on and abuse their market power to benefit themselves. The most blatant of these offenses was attributed to Amazon, and related to its Amazon Marketplace platform. As reported in a *Geek Wire* article by Todd Bishop:

[I]f you're looking for the essence of the antitrust case against Amazon, scroll all the way down to this sentence on page 276: "Amazon's pattern of exploiting sellers, enabled by its market dominance, raises serious competition concerns." There's no shortage of supporting details for that statement, including allegations that Amazon uses third-party seller data to inform the creation of its own products; leverages information gleaned from investments in startups as competitive intelligence; compels merchants to use its fulfillment services through preferential placement in product listings; and many more allegations (p. 1)

Simply explained, Amazon leverages its power in order to subjugate those who sell on its Amazon Marketplace platform, for the purpose of positioning its ecommerce business more advantageously. This is yet another example of Amazon taking advantage of those who labor on one of its platforms and increasing the precarity of their work. Despite these judiciary findings of market manipulation, and anti-competitive sabotage Amazon has faced no repercussions, no laws have been changed, and none of the small businesses laboring on Amazon's marketplace, and affected by this have been compensated. Nonetheless this is at the very least representative of a possible shift in the way that government regulators are evaluating these new-age conglomerates and their overly advantageous positions within business and labor marketplaces. Moving forward research on Amazon may need to focus more intently on possible ramifications of antitrust legislations, as these judiciary bodies continue to figure out how to hold these digital

conglomerates more accountable. More importantly, if that day ever comes, how will that affect those laboring for Amazon? The aim is for future extensions of this project to answer these questions and continue to contribute to relevant academic disciplines. I believe this research, and future research on the topic has the potential to contribute to the disciplines of Labour Studies, Political Economy, and Rhetoric. This interdisciplinary approach to researching Amazon and more broadly new-age conglomeration provides the opportunity for more thorough investigation from a plethora of perspectives and utilizing a multitude of disciplinary approaches to answer the complex questions raised by new-age conglomeration in relation to labor.

In many ways this work contributes to Labour Studies in that it is concerned with many of the inquiries posed by the discipline more broadly. These include questions pertaining to how new technologies impact our jobs, whether or not work can be organized so that it is physically safe and mentally healthy, and why are so many new jobs temporary or precarious. Moving forward these question in particular will only become more pervasive and integral to our understanding of evolving labor realities in the 21st century. Amazon, now and in the future, will continue to be an ideal object of analysis to answer these questions.

As Political Economy and more specifically Political Economy of Communication research continues to expand in order to relate to our modern technological circumstance, I believe this work and further research about Amazon and labor is vital. Investigating Amazon can contribute to the study of power relations, which shape communication of information from mass media to publics. The focus within this research on the ways in which Amazon communicates manipulative and often misleading messages about financial freedom, and autonomy to potential laborers through their website, and in advertising builds on previously established Political Economy research. As the internet continues to evolve as a platform for large companies recruiting

exploitative labor it is important to better understand the rhetorical strategies being implemented and the tools utilized by these companies to do so.

Moreover, this research contributes to Communication and Rhetoric. This project has examined the ways in which laborers have utilized the internet in order to create community, and alleviate financial precarity brought about about by their laboring positions. I have studied the ways in which these communities operate and utilize internet platforms as sites of resistance against the conglomerates that they labor for. This includes specific language and terms that are used within these online communities, as well as the accepted norms and behaviors that are specific to these laboring communities. Moving forward, and as online engagement continues to grow, I believe this research will contribute greatly to the canon of Communication Studies, and moreover the Digital Humanities. As we become a more technologically invested society the type of online ethnography work performed in this work will only become more important to understanding communication processes between people and groups, and how these platforms can be used s a means to an end for those who feel voiceless.

Finally, I believe that the most important overall contribution of this work is the conceptualization of *precarious pre-labor* and its theoretical implications moving forward. Simply described as the labor necessary to find work, precarious pre-labor and this study of the labor engaged in by workers in order to navigate increasingly precarious working conditions is pivotal for better understanding the external conditions and obligations faced by the most vulnerable laborers. Precarious pre-labor is not merely an extension of laboring responsibilities; rather it is a survival mechanism. These are the attributes that differentiate it from existing conceptualizations of pervasive labor, which speak more broadly to how intrusive labor can be. This is made evident in all three of these case studies within this work. Future incarnations of this work, and projects

moving forward will continue to focus on the theoretical implications, and more practical applications of this concept. This is certainly imperative as it continues to be applied in order to enhance understanding of the ever shifting laboring landscape.

This project has only scratched the surface in regard to the study of new-age conglomerates, labor and precarity. In doing so, the ultimate goal is to contribute to broader conversations about labor ethics and the unmitigated power of these corporations and conglomerates who produce so much of this labor. Furthermore, this work looked to contribute by making the voices of those laborers who are often ignored, heard. It will be intriguing to see what long-term impacts new-age conglomerates have on societal perceptions of labor and labor realities in the decades to come and furthermore how the lack of regulatory implications for these companies will affect the kinds of labor they produce. Most importantly, how will these shifts in labor norms continue to reinvent the conditions of precarity for these laborers, and how will they mitigate the certain uncertainty? These are the questions that will continue to drive this future research on this topic.

Bibliography

- Abrams, R., & Creswell, J. (2017, June 16). Amazon Deal for Whole Foods Starts a Supermarket War. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/16/business/whole-foods-walmart-amazon-grocery-stores.html>
- Agarwal, S. (2020, July 16). Amazon Dash Cart Lets You Skip Cashier Lines at Supermarkets. Retrieved from <https://www.digitaltrends.com/home/amazon-dash-smart-shopping-cart/>
- Amazon.com, Inc. (2017, November 9). Whole Foods Market Helps Set a Place for Alexa at Your Holiday Table. Retrieved from <https://press.aboutamazon.com/news-releases/news-release-details/whole-foods-market-helps-set-place-alexa-your-holiday-table>
- Amazon.com, Inc. (2020). *Amazon Flex* [Brochure]. Author. Retrieved from <https://flex.amazon.com/>
- Amazon.com, Inc. (2019). *Amazon Logistics* [Brochure]. Author. Retrieved from <https://logistics.amazon.com/>
- Amazon.com, Inc. (2018). *Amazon Mechanical Turk* [Brochure]. Author. Retrieved from <https://www.mturk.com/worker>
- Ansoff, H. I. (1988). *The new corporate strategy*. New York: Wiley.
- Apostolidis, P. (2019). *The Fight for Time: Migrant Day Laborers and the Politics of Precarity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Baym, N. K. (1998). The emergence of on-line community. *cybersociety*, 2(0), 35-68.
- Baym, N. K. (2000). *Tune in, log on: Soaps, fandom, and online community* (Vol. 3). Sage.
- Bentley, R., Baker, E., & Aitken, Z. (2019). The ‘double precarity’ of employment insecurity and unaffordable housing and its impact on mental health. *Social Science & Medicine*, 225, 9-16. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.02.008
- Berlant, L. G. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press.
- Berman, K. (2020, May 05). Big Tech's AAA Balance Sheets. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenberman/2020/05/05/big-techs-aaa-balance-sheets/>
- Bhattarai, A. (2019, March 28). Americans are buying more food at Walmart. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/business/wp/2017/08/17/americans-are-buying-more-food-at-walmart/>

- Bishop, T. (2018, July 16). Owning an Amazon delivery business: The risks, rewards and economic realities of the tech giant's new program for entrepreneurs. Retrieved from <https://www.geekwire.com/2018/owning-amazon-delivery-business-risks-rewards-economic-realities-tech-giants-new-program-entrepreneurs/>
- Bishop, T. (2020, October 10). The case against Amazon: Key takeaways from the U.S. House antitrust report on digital markets. Retrieved from <https://www.geekwire.com/2020/analysis-read-antitrust-case-amazon-key-takeaways/>
- Bloom, D. (2019, February 27). Netflix Won The Oscars Even Though 'Roma' Lost Best Picture. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dbloom/2019/02/27/netflix-oscars-subscribers-roma-alfonso-cuaron-effects>
- Bolduc, S. (2018, May 30). Order-To-Shelf Inventory Management. Retrieved from <https://www.spscommerce.com/blog/order-to-shelf-inventory-management-spsa/>
- Bond, S. (2020, March 27). Gig Workers Would Get Unemployment Safety Net In Rescue Package. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/27/822169893/gig-workers-would-get-unemployment-safety-net-in-rescue-package>
- Brennan, T. (2004). *The transmission of affect*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Bulut, E. (2015). Playboring in the tester pit: The convergence of precarity and the degradation of fun in video game testing. *Television & New Media*, 16(3), 240-258.
- Calo, R., & Rosenblat, A. (2017). The Taking Economy: Uber, Information, and Power. *Colombia Law Review*, 117(6), 1623-1690. doi:10.2139/ssrn.2929643
- Chamaria, N. (2018, October 24). Why 3M Company Finds It Hard to Keep Up With Investor Expectations. Retrieved from <https://www.fool.com/investing/2018/10/24/premium-3m-company.aspx>
- Chase, R. (2015). *Peers Inc: How people and platforms are inventing the collaborative economy and reinventing capitalism*. PublicAffairs.
- Cheng, A. (2019, December 13). Amazon Ships 2.5 Billion Packages A Year, With Billions More Coming, In A Major Threat To UPS And FedEx. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andriacheng/2019/12/12/how-serious-is-amazons-threat-to-ups-fedex-study-finds-it-could-soon-beat-them-in-us-package-delivery-volume/#3e37529268f4>
- Choudhary, R., & Haryana, K. (2013). Multi-Level Marketing (MLM) For Socio-Economic Development. *International Journal of Reviews, Surveys and Research*, 2(1), 123-132.

- Clark, L. (2017). Facebook teaches bots how to negotiate. They learn to lie instead. Retrieved from <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/facebook-teaches-bots-how-to-negotiate-and-lie>
- Clarence-Smith, T. (2017, June 22). Amazon vs. Walmart: Bezos Goes for the Jugular with Whole Foods Acquisition. Retrieved from <https://www.toptal.com/finance/mergers-and-acquisitions/amazon-vs-walmart-acquisition-strategy>
- Constable, N. (2010). *Romance on a global stage: Pen pals, virtual ethnography, and "mail-order" marriages*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press.
- D'Onfro, J. (2015, January 31). Jeff Bezos' brilliant advice for anyone running a business. Retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/jeff-bezos-brilliant-advice-for-anyone-running-a-business-2015-1>
- Davis, G. F., Diekmann, K. A., & Tinsley, C. H. (1994). The Decline and Fall of the Conglomerate Firm in the 1980s: The Deinstitutionalization of an Organizational Form. *American Sociological Review*, 59(4), 547. doi:10.2307/2095931
- Denning, S. (2019, May 27). Why Debt Isn't Killing Netflix Any Time Soon. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stephaniedenning/2019/05/26/why-debt-isnt-killing-netflix/>
- Difallah, D., Filatova, E., & Ipeirotis, P. (2018). Demographics and Dynamics of Mechanical Turk Workers.
- Dogetiev, A. (2018). Uber Revenue and Usage Statistics 2017. Retrieved from <http://www.businessofapps.com/data/uber-statistics/>
- Duhig, J. (2020, January 12). The Sneaker Bot War: Who is on the Front Lines? Retrieved from <https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/sneaker-bots-2019/>
- Dzieza, J. (2020, March 26). Amazon warehouse workers are outraged after a coworker tested positive for COVID-19 and they weren't notified. Retrieved from <https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/26/21194739/amazon-warehouse-workers-coronavirus-covid-19-outraged-informed>
- Faccio, M., & Gamberi, M. (2015). New City Logistics Paradigm: From the "Last Mile" to the "Last 50 Miles" Sustainable Distribution. *Sustainability*, 7(11), 14873-14894. doi:10.3390/su71114873
- Ferguson, T. (1997). Health Care in Cyberspace: Patients Lead a Revolution. *The Futurist*, 31(6), 29-33.
- Fortt, J. (2006, October 09). Cost of failure for Google Video: \$1.65 billion. Retrieved from <https://fortune.com/2006/10/09/cost-of-failure-for-google-video-1-65-billion/>

- Fuchs, C. (2018). 'Dear Mr. Neo-Nazi, can you please give me your informed consent so that I can quote your fascist tweet?'. *The Routledge Companion To Media And Activism*, 385-394. doi:10.4324/9781315475059-41
- Fuchs, C. (2014). *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*. Routledge.
- Graham, F. (2010). Crowdsourcing work: Labour on demand or digital sweatshop? Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-11600902>
- Gray, M. L., & Suri, S. (2019). *Ghost work: How to stop Silicon Valley from building a new global underclass*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Greer, I. (2015). Welfare reform, precarity and the re-commodification of labour. *Work, Employment and Society*, 30(1), 162-173. doi:10.1177/0950017015572578
- Griswold, A. (2018, April 18). More people have Amazon Prime than live in Germany. Retrieved from <https://qz.com/1256217/amazon-has-100-million-amazon-prime-members/>
- Groß, C., & Vriens, D. (2017). The Role of the Distributor Network in the Persistence of Legal and Ethical Problems of Multi-level Marketing Companies. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 156(2), 333-355. doi:10.1007/s10551-017-3556-9
- Halzack, S. (2015, September 29). Amazon Flex: The retailer's Uber-like effort to bring you packages. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/business/wp/2015/09/29/amazon-flex-the-retailers-uber-like-effort-to-bring-you-packages/>
- Hariharan, S. (2016, December 16). The Revival of the Conglomerate? · Babson Thought & Action. Retrieved from <https://entrepreneurship.babson.edu/the-revival-of-the-conglomerate/>
- Haselton, T. (2021, February 02). Jeff Bezos to step down as Amazon CEO, Andy Jassy to take over in Q3. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/02/jeff-bezos-to-step-down-as-amazon-ceo-andy-jassy-to-take-over-in-q3.html>
- Hearn, A. (2008). Meat, Mask, Burden: Probing the contours of the brandedself. *Journal of consumer culture*, 8(2), 197-217.
- Heath, N., & Reese, H. (2017). Inside Amazon's clickworker platform: How half a million people are being paid pennies to train AI. Retrieved from <https://www.techrepublic.com/article/inside-amazons-clickworker-platform-how-half-a-million-people-are-training-ai-for-pennies-per-task/>
- Heath, T. (2017, August 17). Amazon had all the cash it needed to buy Whole Foods. It borrowed money to anyway. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/get->

there/wp/2017/08/17/amazon-had-all-the-cash-it-needed-to-buy-whole-foods-it-borrowed-money-to-anyway/

- Heidkamp, B., & Kergel, D. (2017). *Precarity within the digital age: Media change and social insecurity*. Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer VS.
- Hern, A. (2015, September 29). Amazon enters 'gig economy' with Uber-for-packages service. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/sep/29/amazon-flex-gig-economy-uber-for-packages-service>
- Holt, K. (2017). 11 absurd Mechanical Turk tasks you can do for pennies |. Retrieved from <https://www.dailydot.com/business/11-absurd-mechanical-turk-tasks-pennies/>
- Holtz, P., Kronberger, N., & Wagner, W. (2012). Analyzing Internet Forums. *Journal of Media Psychology*, 24(2), 55-66. doi:10.1027/1864-1105/a000062
- Huws, U. (2014). *Labor in the global digital economy: The cybertariat comes of age*. NYU Press.
- James, G. (2017, September 13). Why Amazon Will Probably Fail With Whole Foods. Retrieved from <https://www.inc.com/geoffrey-james/why-amazon-will-probably-fail-with-whole-foods.html>
- Jones, T. (2020, January 22). Amazon Flex: Everything Australians Need To Know. Retrieved from <https://www.gizmodo.com.au/2020/01/amazon-flex-australia-how-it-works/>
- Katz, M. (2017). Amazon's Turker Crowd Has Had Enough | Backchannel. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.com/story/amazons-turker-crowd-has-had-enough/>
- Keefer, A. (2017, November 21). What Is Considered a Conglomerate? Retrieved from <https://smallbusiness.chron.com/considered-conglomerate-32411.html>
- Kenneth Howe, C. S. (1997, January 30). Pepsi Decides to Sell Chevys Restaurants. Retrieved from <https://www.sfgate.com/business/article/Pepsi-Decides-to-Sell-Chevys-Restaurants-2841859.php>
- Kim, E. (2019, April 26). Amazon to spend \$800 million this quarter to make free one-day shipping the default for Prime members. Retrieved from <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/04/25/amazon-spending-800-mln-to-make-free-one-day-shipping-prime-default.html>
- Kim, E. (2018, November 27). Jeff Bezos to employees: 'One day, Amazon will fail' but our job is to delay it as long as possible. Retrieved from <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/11/15/bezos-tells-employees-one-day-amazon-will-fail-and-to-stay-hungry>

- Kim, M. (2018, August 01). KIM: Will unfriended Facebook 'de-FAANG' the stock market? Retrieved from <https://www.ibj.com/articles/69911-kim-will-unfriended-facebook-de-faang-the-stock-market>
- Kenney, C., & Chase, Z. (2015). Episode 600: The People Inside Your Machine. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2015/01/30/382657657/episode-600-the-people-inside-your-machine>
- Knecht, M. (2014). *Diversification, Industry Dynamism, and Economic Performance The Impact of Dynamic-related Diversification on the Multi-business Firm*. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, Imprint: Springer Gabler.
- Kohler, C. (2017, March 07). Amazon Flex Pays Drivers Up to \$25/Hr to Make Deliveries in Lots of Cities. Retrieved from <https://www.thepennyhoarder.com/make-money/side-gigs/amazon-flex-hiring-delivery-drivers/>
- Krause, R. (2016, June 11). The New Digital Conglomerates: Google, Facebook, Amazon ... And Apple? Retrieved from <https://www.investors.com/news/technology/google-facebook-amazon-apple-digital-conglomerates/>
- Kücklich, J. (2005). Precarious playbour: Modders and the digital games industry. *fibreculture*, 5(1).
- Laskowski, N. (2014). Mechanical Turk supplies Gilt with 'artificial artificial intelligence'. Retrieved from <http://searchcio.techtarget.com/feature/Mechanical-Turk-supplies-Gilt-with-artificial-artificial-intelligence>
- Lori Rozsa, C. J. (2020, June 19). The battle over masks in a pandemic: An all-American story. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/the-battle-over-masks-in-a-pandemic-an-all-american-story/2020/06/19/3ad25564-b245-11ea-8f56-63f38c990077_story.html
- Malin, B. J., & Chandler, C. (2017). Free to work anxiously: Splintering precarity among drivers for Uber and Lyft. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 10(2), 382-400.
- Massumi, B. (2002). *Parables for the virtual: Movement, affect, sensation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Matofska, B. (2014). What is the sharing economy. *The people who share*, 444.
- Matsakis, L. (2020, March 17). Amazon Warehouses Will Now Accept Essential Supplies Only. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.com/story/amazon-warehouse-essential-goods-only/>
- McChesney, R. W. (2008). *The political economy of media: Enduring issues, emerging dilemmas*. NYU Press

- McKercher, C., & Mosco, V. (Eds.). (2008). *Knowledge workers in the information society*. Lexington books.
- Melnick, J., & Dunham, K. (2009). *Malicious Bots: An Inside Look into the Cyber-Criminal Underground of the Internet*. CRC Press.
- Milland, K. (2017). Crowd-working for Amazon took a physical and psychological toll for one woman. Retrieved from <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/opinion/oped/bs-ed-op-0824-amazon-tasks-20170823-story.html>
- Mims, C. (2020, April 14). Will We Forgive Amazon When This Is Over? Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/will-we-forgive-amazon-when-this-is-over-11586577604>
- Mourdoukoutas, P. (2017, September 09). The Real Reasons Amazon Whole Foods Cut Prices. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/panosmourdoukoutas/2017/09/09/the-real-reasons-amazon-whole-foods-cut-prices>
- Nandi, S., Thota, S., Nag, A., Divyasukhananda, S., Goswami, P., Aravindakshan, A., . . . Mukherjee, B. (2016). Computing for rural empowerment: Enabled by last-mile telecommunications. *IEEE Communications Magazine*, 54(6), 102-109. doi:10.1109/mcom.2016.7498095
- Ng, I. C. (2014). *Creating new markets in the digital economy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nickelsburg, M. (2019, December 19). Amazon is delivering half of its own packages, reducing reliance on third-parties, analysts find. Retrieved from <https://www.geekwire.com/2019/amazon-delivering-half-packages-reducing-reliance-third-parties-analysts-find/>
- Otto, I. M., Wiedermann, M., Cremades, R., Donges, J. F., Auer, C., & Lucht, W. (2020). Human agency in the Anthropocene. *Ecological Economics*, 167, 106463. doi:10.1016/j.ecolecon.2019.106463
- Parigi, P., & Cook, K. (2015). Trust and Relationships in the Sharing Economy. *Contexts*, 14(1), 18-19. Retrieved from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1536504214567860>.
- Perez, S. (2019, April 02). Amazon again slashes Whole Foods prices, doubles Prime member weekly deals. Retrieved from <https://techcrunch.com/2019/04/02/amazon-again-slashes-whole-foods-prices-doubles-prime-member-weekly-deals/>
- Perez, S., & Lunden, I. (2015, September 29). Amazon Launches Flex To Rival Postmates In On-Demand, Crowdsourced Delivery. Retrieved from <https://techcrunch.com/2015/09/29/amazon-launches-flex-to-rival-postmates-in-on-demand-crowdsourced-delivery/>

- Peters, J. (2020, March 11). Amazon is giving paid sick leave to all employees diagnosed with coronavirus. Retrieved from <https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/11/21175538/amazon-coronavirus-paid-sick-leave-all-employees-relief-fund>
- Peterson, H. (2018, January 18). 'Entire aisles are empty': Whole Foods employees reveal why stores are facing a crisis of food shortages. Retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/whole-foods-employees-reveal-why-stores-are-facing-a-crisis-of-food-shortages-2018-1>
- Peterson, H. (2019, December 19). Amazon's delivery business reveals staggering growth as it's on track to deliver 3.5 billion packages globally this year. Retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/amazon-package-delivery-business-growth-2019-12>
- Ranieri, L., Digiesi, S., Silvestri, B., & Roccotelli, M. (2018). A Review of Last Mile Logistics Innovations in an Externalities Cost Reduction Vision. *Sustainability*, 10(3), 782. doi:10.3390/su10030782
- Robischon, N. (2017, October 11). Why Amazon Is The World's Most Innovative Company Of 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.fastcompany.com/3067455/why-amazon-is-the-worlds-most-innovative-company-of-2017>
- Rodham, K., McCabe, C., & Blake, D. (2009). Seeking support: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of an Internet message board for people with Complex Regional Pain Syndrome. *Psychology & Health*, 24(6), 619-634. doi:10.1080/08870440802563245
- Roman, L. (2016). Uber Now Tracks Passengers' Locations Even After They're Dropped Off. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/12/01/503985473/uber-now-tracks-passengers-locations-even-after-theyre-dropped-off>
- Ross, A. (2004). *No-collar: The humane workplace and its hidden costs*. Temple University Press.
- Rubin, B. F. (2016, December 07). Amazon: No, we're not opening 2,000 stores. Retrieved from <https://www.cnet.com/news/amazon-no-were-not-building-2000-stores/>
- Scholz, T. (2012). Introduction: Why does digital labor matter now?. In *Digital Labor* (pp. 9-18). Routledge.
- Schor, J. (2016). DEBATING THE SHARING ECONOMY. *Journal of Self-Governance & Management Economics*, 4(3).
- Schoolov, K. (2019, June 19). What it's really like to be an Amazon Flex delivery driver as Prime one-day shipping expands. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/19/how-amazon-flex-delivery-drivers-get-paid-and-what-its-really-like.html>

- Samuels, A. (2020, April 28). I Delivered Packages for Amazon and It Was a Nightmare. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/06/amazon-flex-workers/563444/>
- Sheehan, K. B., & Pittman, M. (2016). *Amazon's Mechanical Turk for academics: The HIT handbook for social science research*. Melvin & Leigh, Publishers.
- Sheetz, M. (2019, December 12). Watch out, UPS. Morgan Stanley estimates Amazon is already delivering half of its packages. Retrieved from <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/12/12/analyst-amazon-delivering-nearly-half-its-packages-instead-of-ups-fedex.html>
- Singer, N. (2014, August 16). In the Sharing Economy, Workers Find Both Freedom and Uncertainty. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/17/technology/in-the-sharing-economy-workers-find-both-freedom-and-uncertainty.html>
- Sisson, P. (2017, November 21). Amazon's bonkers warehouse and delivery empire, by the numbers. Retrieved from <https://www.curbed.com/2017/11/21/16686150/amazon-black-friday-prime-warehouse-delivery>
- Song, L., Cherrett, T., Mcleod, F., & Guan, W. (2009). Addressing the Last Mile Problem. *Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board*, 2097(1), 9-18. doi:10.3141/2097-02
- Soper, T. (2017, December 25). I was an Amazon delivery driver: What it's like to work in the tech giant's citizen package brigade. Retrieved from <https://www.geekwire.com/2017/amazon-delivery-driver-like-work-tech-giants-citizen-package-brigade/>
- Sorkin, A. R. (2017, June 20). Conglomerates Didn't Die. They Look Like Amazon. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/19/business/dealbook/amazon-conglomerate.html>
- Standing, G. (2017). *Basic income: And how we can make it happen*. UK: Pelican.
- Standing, G. (2011). The Precariat-The new dangerous class. *Amalgam*, 6(6-7), 115-119.
- Standing, G. (2014). *Work after globalization building occupational citizenship*. Cheltenham: Elgar.
- Statt, N. (2019, December 13). Amazon is delivering half its own packages as it becomes a serious rival to FedEx and UPS. Retrieved from <https://www.theverge.com/2019/12/13/21020938/amazon-logistics-prime-air-fedex-ups-package-delivery-more-than-50-percent>

- Stefano, V. D. (2016). The Rise of the Just-in-Time Workforce: On-Demand Work, Crowd Work and Labour Protection in the Gig-Economy. *Comparative Labor Law & Policy Journal*, 37. doi:10.2139/ssrn.2682602
- Taylor, K. (2017, August 28). Amazon-owned Whole Foods is starting to look a lot more like Walmart. Retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/amazon-whole-foods-prices-walmart-similarities-2017-8>
- Team, B. (2018, October 14). A Timeline of Amazon's Shipping and Fulfillment Evolution. Retrieved from <https://www.bringg.com/blog/industry-trends/a-timeline-of-amazons-shipping-evolution/>
- Thomas, Z. (2020, April 22). Netflix gets 16 million new sign-ups thanks to lockdown. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-52376022>
- Thompson, D. (2017, June 16). Why Amazon Bought Whole Foods. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/06/why-amazon-bought-whole-foods/530652/>
- Toffler, A., & Alvin, T. (1980). *The third wave* (Vol. 484). New York: Bantam books.
- Townsend, L., & Wallace, C. (2017). Chapter 8: The Ethics of Using Social Media Data in Research: A New Framework. *The Ethics of Online Research Advances in Research Ethics and Integrity*, 189-207. doi:10.1108/s2398-601820180000002008
- Tsianos, V., & Papadopoulos, D. (2006). Precarity: A savage journey to the heart of embodied capitalism. *Transversal Journal*, 11.
- Tucker, R. (2018, November 01). How Does Amazon Do It? Five Critical Factors That Explain Amazon's Incredible Success. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robertbtucker/2018/11/01/how-does-amazon-do-it-five-critical-factors-that-explain-amazons-incredible-success/>
- Turkle, S. (1995). *Life on the Screen*. Simon and Schuster.
- Varadarajan, P. R., Jayachandran, S., & White, J. C. (2001). Strategic Interdependence in Organizations: Deconglomeration and Marketing Strategy. *Journal of Marketing*, 65(1), 15-28. doi:10.1509/jmkg.65.1.15.18129
- Varner, M. (2020, April 7). Amazon's Shifting Definition of What Is "Essential" – The Markup. Retrieved from <https://themarkup.org/coronavirus/2020/04/07/amazons-shifting-definition-of-what-is-essential>
- Vickery, N. (2017, August 14). The Reasons Why Amazon Is One Of The World's Most Innovative Companies: Articles. Retrieved from <https://channels.theinnovationenterprise.com/articles/these-are-the-reasons-why-amazon->

is-one-of-the-world-s-most-innovative-companies#:~:text=The company has changed the,perfect place for cultivating innovation.

- Vincent, J. (2018). Facebook is trying to teach chatbots how to chit-chat. Retrieved from <https://www.theverge.com/2018/1/28/16935700/chatbots-facebook-chit-chit-small-talk-fair-research>
- Wang, Y., Zhang, D., Liu, Q., Shen, F., & Lee, L. H. (2016). Towards enhancing the last-mile delivery: An effective crowd-tasking model with scalable solutions. *Transportation Research Part E: Logistics and Transportation Review*, 93, 279-293. doi:10.1016/j.tre.2016.06.002
- Weise, K., & Wakabayashi, D. (2021, February 03). How Andy Jassy, Amazon's Next C.E.O., Was a 'Brain Double' for Jeff Bezos. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/03/technology/andy-jassy-amazon-ceo-jeff-bezos.html>
- Welzel, C., & Inglehart, R. (2010). Agency, Values, and Well-Being: A Human Development Model. *Social Indicators Research*, 97(1), 43-63. doi:10.1007/s11205-009-9557-z
- Williamson, V. (2016). Can crowdsourcing be ethical? Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2016/02/03/can-crowdsourcing-be-ethical-2/>
- Wingfield, N., & Merced, M. J. (2017, June 16). Amazon to Buy Whole Foods for \$13.4 Billion. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/16/business/dealbook/amazon-whole-foods.html>
- Wise, W. (2017, June 16). Amazon buying Whole Foods in \$13.7 billion deal. Retrieved from <https://apnews.com/84ffc79097c94a5da8a0906939c76eac>
- Yamamoto, K., & Fiorino, C. (2019, December 12). Inside the Wild World of The Sneaker Shopping Bots. Retrieved from <https://www.perimeterx.com/resources/blog/2019/inside-wild-world-sneaker-bots/>
- Yemenu, D., & Cerenzio, R. (2012). Contractor and supplier management: Mitigating risk by better decision making. *The APPEA Journal*, 52(2), 642-657. doi:10.1071/aj11056
- Yglesias, M. (2017, June 20). The real reason Amazon buying Whole Foods terrifies the competition. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/6/20/15824718/amazon-whole-foods-profit-margin>

Bibliography of Reddit Threads

R/AmazonFlexDrivers - Am I just checking the app at the wrong time or are there just hundreds more drivers gobbling up PrimeNow and WFM deliveries? (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonFlexDrivers/comments/g5kyzq/am_i_just_checking_the_app_at_the_wrong_time_or/

R/AmazonFlexDrivers - Any Amazon Covid19 stats available? (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonFlexDrivers/comments/g30nkg/any_amazon_covid19_stats_available/

R/AmazonFlexDrivers - Anyone having trouble or success filing for UI in AZ? (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonFlexDrivers/comments/g6duxb/anyone_having_trouble_or_success_filing_for_ui_in/

R/AmazonFlexDrivers - Be Safe Out There Fellow Flexers! (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonFlexDrivers/comments/fvs8nu/be_safe_out_there_fellow_flexers/

R/AmazonFlexDrivers - Bots - 1: Honest Driver - 0. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonFlexDrivers/comments/g74lr2/bots_1_honest_driver_0/

R/AmazonFlexDrivers - Delivering to unsafe neighborhoods (DSF5). (2017). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonFlexDrivers/comments/7mrz18/delivering_to_unsafe_neighborhoods_dsf5/

R/AmazonFlexDrivers - Delivery instructions: 'deliver to side door,' but the small gate was closed. Went to open it and a USPS worker behind me said don't, there's a dog in there. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonFlexDrivers/comments/fp2j45/delivery_instructions_deliver_to_side_door_but/

R/AmazonFlexDrivers - DON'T deliver to the back of a house. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonFlexDrivers/comments/fpnf9n/dont_deliver_to_the_back_of_a_house/?utm_source=amp&utm_medium=&utm_content=post_title

R/AmazonFlexDrivers - Feeling the love. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonFlexDrivers/comments/frew5d/feeling_the_love/

R/AmazonFlexDrivers - First route ever in Detroit, basically got robbed of a package. (2018). Retrieved from

https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonFlexDrivers/comments/9km6gv/first_route_ever_in_detroit_basically_got_robbed/

R/AmazonFlexDrivers - Flex driver in Pennsylvania unemployment problem! Anyone successfully navigate this? (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonFlexDrivers/comments/g8s6cw/flex_driver_in_pennsylvania_unemployment_problem/

R/AmazonFlexDrivers - It's not worth it anymore. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonFlexDrivers/comments/fs2obs/its_not_worth_it_anymore/

R/AmazonFlexDrivers - Packed together like flies. BYOP (BRING YO OWN PROTECTION). (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonFlexDrivers/comments/fv54ps/packed_together_like_flies_byop_bring_yo_own/

R/AmazonFlexDrivers - Significantly less routes popping up. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonFlexDrivers/comments/fymhgb/significantly_less_routes_popping_up/

R/AmazonFlexDrivers - Stop delivering. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonFlexDrivers/comments/g6slch/stop_delivering/

R/AmazonFlexDrivers - Thanks Amazon nice way of saying we don't care and you really don't matter. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonFlexDrivers/comments/fqif3x/thanks_amazon_nice_way_of_saying_we_dont_care_and/

R/AmazonFlexDrivers - The love is real for us Flexers. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonFlexDrivers/comments/fqwkwu/the_love_is_real_for_us_flexers/

R/AmazonFlexDrivers - Unemployment Insurance. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonFlexDrivers/comments/fqwf3a/unemployment_insurance/

R/AmazonFlexDrivers - Unemployment line. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonFlexDrivers/comments/fxj0j8/unemployment_line/

R/AmazonFlexDrivers - Unemployment/CARE Act. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonFlexDrivers/comments/fu4v6w/unemploymentcare_act/

R/AmazonFlexDrivers - 🙄. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonFlexDrivers/comments/frhjxn/_/

R/AmazonWFShoppers - What does a „Whole Foods Shopper" do? (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/AmazonWFShoppers/comments/fug9b0/what_does_a_whole_foods_shopper_do/

R/HITsWorthTurkingFor - US - Google a term - PK - \$0.03/0:12 - (Location is not IN) *batch*. (2018). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/HITsWorthTurkingFor/comments/82yoog/us_google_a_term_pk_003012_location_is_not_in/

R/HITsWorthTurkingFor - US - Survey: Would you pay \$10 out of pocket for a rapid. (2018). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/HITsWorthTurkingFor/comments/834bh2/us_survey_would_you_pay_10_out_of_pocket_for_a/?utm_source=amp&utm_medium=&utm_content=post_title

R/mturk - I just got the Master Qual today. (2018). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/mturk/comments/6cqw6p/i_just_got_the_master_qual_today/

R/mturk - Worst year this far on MTURK! (2017). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/mturk/comments/7d4ctx/worst_year_this_far_on_mturk/

R/news - Amazon to Acquire Whole Foods Market. (2017). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/news/comments/6hmdtl/amazon_to_acquire_whole_foods_market/

R/personalfinance - Please stop suggesting Mechanical Turk to people in financial need. its a horrible waste of time. (2016). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/personalfinance/comments/4kj9h0/please_stop_suggesting_mechanical_turk_to_people/

R/wholefoods - 'Entire aisles are empty': Whole Foods employees reveal why stores are facing a crisis of food shortages. (2018). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/wholefoods/comments/7rlyfs/entire_aisles_are_empty_whole_foods_employees/

R/wholefoods - Dear wholefoods/amazon employees, good news:. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/wholefoods/comments/hyicq/dear_wholefoodsamazon_employees_good_news/

R/wholefoods - Employees at my store are wearing fake masks. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/wholefoods/comments/hy9704/employees_at_my_store_are_wearing_fake_masks/

R/wholefoods - Honest opinion, Amazon has ruined Whole Foods. (2018). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/wholefoods/comments/9e0xma/honest_opinion_amazon_has_ruined_whole_foods/

R/wholefoods - How do you do it everyday? (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/wholefoods/comments/hxusiq/how_do_you_do_it_everyday/

R/wholefoods - I HATE AMAZON SHOPPERS!!!! (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/wholefoods/comments/gy6s23/i_hate_amazon_shoppers/

R/wholefoods - I just quit after 1 year and it was one of the best feelings I've ever had. This company is slowly becoming an evil that is amazon. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/wholefoods/comments/hr56h9/i_just_quit_after_1_year_and_it_was_one_of_the/

R/wholefoods - I'd rather be guaranteed full time hours and a raise each year than be an Amazon shopper, but go off buddy. Not sure where this hate comes from, as I have no issues at my store. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/wholefoods/comments/hptoes/id_rather_be_guaranteed_full_time_hours_and_a/

R/wholefoods - Life after Whole Foods? (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/wholefoods/comments/g8os6d/life_after_whole_foods/

R/wholefoods - List of Whole Foods locations with COVID-19 cases. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/wholefoods/comments/fy0519/list_of_whole_foods_locations_with_covid19_cases/

R/wholefoods - The future of Whole Foods. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/wholefoods/comments/hrc4y3/the_future_of_whole_foods/

R/wholefoods - What are your experiences relying on WFM health benefits? (2020). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/wholefoods/comments/hrfrib5/what_are_your_experiences_relying_on_wfm_health/

R/wholefoods - What direction do you believe Whole Foods to be going? (2019). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/wholefoods/comments/dwzdz9/what_direction_do_you_believe_whole_foods_to_be/