Crowdsourcing Africa:
New Communications Technologies in Politics and Social Science Research

International Studies Association Venture Research Workshop

FINAL REPORT

Coordinator: Robert Blair

Overview of workshop

The workshop was divided into five sessions:

1) *Presentation.* **Robert Blair**, "Crowdsourcing: Variations on a Theme." Presentation on a variety of crowdsourcing-based research and advocacy projects, with a focus on recurring themes.

2) *Panel.* **Ruth Carlitz**, "Improving Government Responsiveness for Water Provision through Crowdsourcing and Crowdfeeding." **Paul Zachary**, "What You Can't Read Won't Hurt You: Internet Censorship in Authoritarian States."

3) *Panel.* **Michael Findley** et al., "Extrinsic, Intrinsic, and Social Incentives for Crowdsourcing Development Information in Uganda: A Field Experiment" **Mark Buntaine** and Bradley Parks, "NGOs as Monitors of International Development Organizations." **Grant Gordon**, "The Micro-Level Effects of Monitoring Conflict."

4) *Panel.* **Robert Blair** and Nicholas Sambanis, "Crowdsourcing Racist Violence." **Peter van der Windt** and Macartan Humphreys, "Crowdseeding Conflict Data." **Sasha Jesperson**, "Mapping Organized Crime Flows in West Africa through Crowdsourcing."

5) *Roundtable.* Recurring themes, open questions and next steps.

All participants were expected to have read all papers in advance. Each session began with a 2-3 minute presentation by each of the presenters, followed by feedback from a pre-designated discussant and Q&A from the rest of the group.

The workshop raised a number of interesting "meta-level" questions about crowd-based projects:

- When collecting data from the crowd, how should we motivate sustained participation over time? To what extent do material incentives alter data quality, for better or for worse?
- Can (do) governments use crowdsourcing as a tool to survey, monitor and otherwise "see" (in James Scott's use of the word) their citizens?
- What is a "crowd?" When do crowds have characteristics similar to those of social networks? Of mobs? Of samples? Of the populations from which samples are drawn? (When is crowdsourcing just non-probability sampling? When is it not?)

- If aid and development projects risk raising expectations that cannot be met, does the use of ICTs to increase communication between implementers and beneficiaries risk raising expectations even further? More generally, what are the ethical implications of crowdsourcing? Where should we draw the line between research and advocacy in adopting a tool that is typically used for the latter rather than the former? Wherever we draw the line, how (should) we avoid crossing it?

The first of these questions will be familiar to anyone involved in crowd-based research, but the others are quite novel. On a personal note, these questions—and the workshop more generally—caused me to re-think my perspective on crowdsourcing in a number of important ways, and to consider new avenues for research that had not occurred to me before. I suspect that many of the other participants feel the same, and would agree that the workshop was a success.

The workshop inspired several new collaborations:

1) Michael Findley and Paul Zachary are considering a project that uses deportation data to establish a baseline for crowdsourcing projects. I am including Findley and Zachary's project in our panel proposal for ISA 2014.
2) Grant Gordon and I are exploring the possibility of writing a co-authored methodological paper on the use of Bayesian methods for verification of crowd-based data and data sources.

Plans for future workshops and publications

We are proposing at least one (and hopefully two) panels on crowdsourcing at ISA 2014. We are also planning to propose a journal special issue to showcase some of the papers presented at the Venture Research workshop, as well as other crowd-based projects by colleagues who were unable to attend. Although I will lead this effort, several participants have prior experience preparing journal special issues, and I will rely on them for their expertise.

Final budget

Several participants—James Long, Sudakshini Perera and Jen Ziemke—withdrew from the workshop weeks or months in advance. One participant—Guy Grossman—withdrew from the workshop the day before due to a family emergency. Our final budget is as follows:

Item	Unit Cost	Units	Total
Room rental	$200	1	$200
LCD screen and netbook rental	$350	1	$350
Patch from netbook to house sound or external speakers	$125	1	$125
Internet for participants' computers*	$200	11	$2,200
1 night in hotel for US-based participants	$204	7	$1,428
2 nights in hotel for non-US-based participants	$204	6	$1,224
1 day of per diem for US-based participants	$75	7	$525

2 days of per diem for non-US-based participants	$75	6	$450
Boxed lunches with beverages*	$45	11	$495
2 coffee breaks*	$7	22	$154
Total			**$7,151**

* I assume that the cost of internet, lunch and coffee for our participant who had to withdraw the day before the workshop will not be recouped.