Digital Crowdsourcing and Public Understandings of the Past: Citizen Historians Meet Criminal Characters

Abstract: Criminal Characters is a research project examining both who criminals actually were, and who they have been imagined to be, in order to deconstruct historical and contemporary understandings of 'the criminal' as a form of social identity. In particular, it aims to deepen public and academic understandings of the characteristics of historical offenders by using crowdsourcing to transcribe the detailed biographic and criminal career information held in Victoria's prison registers from the 1850s to 1940s. This paper will use Criminal Characters as a case study for discussing the challenges and opportunities presented by engaging public volunteers to perform research tasks. It will question the degree that the terms 'crowdsourcing' and 'citizen science' can be considered interchangeable, and how digital history projects can be designed to incorporate crowdsourcing in ways that facilitate volunteers becoming 'citizen historians' who gain greater historical literacy as a result of their contributions. The benefits of such collaborative processes and knowledge exchange for criminal justice history will be explored.

Introduction

This article on my research project Criminal Characters focuses on its use of crowdsourcing. For anyone unfamiliar with the term, academic crowdsourcing refers to engaging volunteers to help assemble research data at a scale that would not be possible by traditional means. In the case of Criminal Characters, this involves an online platform through which volunteers are currently transcribing tens of thousands of prison records

created in Victoria between 1855 and 1942.[1] The information contained in these records includes: prisoners' height, weight and colouring; birthplace and birth year; religion, occupation and literacy; year of arrival in Australia and the ship they arrived on if a migrant; marital status, and sometimes other notations about family background, such as if they had relatives in the prison system or children who had been taken into the care of the state; physical descriptions of prisoners, including markings such as tattoos and mentions of disabilities like blindness, deafness or missing limbs; a list of convictions, which would be subsequently added to on further prison returns; and details about their time spent in prison, such as any disciplinary infractions committed and the punishments awarded, or transfers to different gaols or other institutions, such as charity homes or lunatic asylums. This rich data will enable a large-scale historical analysis of the lives and criminal careers of prisoners. This constitutes an important intervention into existing historical scholarship, as detailed quantitative discussions of the backgrounds of Australian criminal offenders are currently limited to studies focused on the convict period,[2] or on female offenders.[3]

While the academic research goals of such work may be clear, the reasons why members of the public would, or should, participate in it are perhaps less readily apparent. One of the most common questions asked about academic crowdsourcing is why people freely volunteer their time and labour to such projects. Studies suggest that motivations are varied (especially between projects that involve an anonymous crowd versus a more established volunteer community)[4], but that the main ones consist of: an interest in the research subject and desire to learn more about it; a competitive-based enjoyment dependent

[1] Public Records Office Victoria (PROV), VPRS 515, 516, Register of Male and Female Prisoners (1855-1947). A few of the later registers in the series are still closed access and so have not been digitised at this time.
[2] Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, 'The State, Convicts and Longitudinal Analysis', Australian Historical Studies 47, no. 3 (2016): 414-429.
[3] Alana Piper and Victoria Nagy, 'Versatile Offending: Criminal Careers of Female Prisoners in Australia, 1860-1920', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 48, no. 2 (2017): 187-210.
[4] Caroline Haythornthwaite, 'Crowds and Communities: Light and Heavyweight Models of Peer Production,' Paper presented at the 42nd Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, 2009.

upon improving one's skill or speed in completing the task; a sense of good citizenship that derives from seeing the aims of the project as important to wider society; and finally an opportunity for social interaction or sense of being part of a community centred around the project.[5] Crowdsourcing projects are more likely to be successful in having the work asked of volunteers completed if they actively encourage such motivations.

However, recently a Criminal Characters volunteer explained on the site's chat forum that they had a more personal reason for volunteering for the project. They disclosed that following their mother's death four years ago, they had discovered a box of papers that revealed she and her sister had been arrested for pickpocketing American soldiers at a German café following the Second World War, a period of extreme impoverishment for many German citizens.[6] Rather than being dismayed at the discovery, the volunteer felt that this improved their understanding of their family's story, particularly their mother's decision to emigrate from Germany to Australia.[7] This vignette undermines the prevalent social practice of 'othering' offenders, whereby criminals are represented as somehow fundamentally different from other people,[8] instead revealing an offender to be someone familiar, and whose offence was rendered, perhaps not excusable, but understandable by their socio-historic context. As each prison record transcribed on the Criminal Characters site represents the life of an individual (although not the entirety of their life experiences), they

[5] Tae Kyoung Lee, Kevin Crowston, Mahboobeh Harandi, Carsten Østerlund, and Grant Miller, 'Appealing to Different Motivations in a Message to Recruit Citizen Scientists: Results of a Field Experiment', *Journal of Science Communication* 17, no. 1 (2018): 1-22; Joe Cox, Eun Young Oh, Brooke Simmons, Gary Graham, Anita Greenhill, Chris Lintott, Karen Masters, and Jamie Woodcock, 'Doing Good Online: The Changing Relationships between Motivations, Activity, and Retention among Online Volunteers', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 47, no. 5 (2018): 1031-56; Sultana Lubna Alam and John Campbell, 'Temporal Motivations of Volunteers to Participate in Cultural Crowdsourcing Work', *Information Systems Research* 28, no. 4 (2017): 744-59; Charlene Jennett, Laure Kloetze, Daniel Schneider, Ioanna Iacovides, Anna L. Cox, Margaret Gold, Brian Fuchs, Alexandra Eveleigh, Kathleen Mathieu, Zoya Ajani and Yasmin Talsi, 'Motivations, Learning and Creativity in Online Citizen Science', *Journal of Science Communication* 15, no. 3 (2016): 1-23.
[6] Petra Goedde, 'From Villains to Victims: Fraternization and the Feminization of Germany, 1945-1947', Diplomatic History 23, no. 1 (1999): 1-20.
[7] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1826/998559 (Posted 15 May 2019).
[8] Susan J. Stabile, 'Othering and the Law', *University of St. Thomas Law Journal* 12 (2016): 381-410.

have the potential to resonate with an immediacy and sense of personal connection that may similarly serve to humanise offenders to volunteers.

This goes to the heart of questions that the Criminal Characters project seeks to explore. How has the Australian public understood criminality across time? Who were considered to be criminal characters, and how do past representations of the figure of the criminal compare to the historical patterns revealed by the prison records? I am interested in crowdsourcing not only as a methodology for compiling the data to answer the latter part of this question, but also as a means of exploring the popular image of the criminal. Moreover, I believe that this project offers a means of examining the extent to which participating in crowdsourcing might encourage a deeper historical consciousness about the complex meanings of criminality. The following article thus uses data from the Criminal Characters project to argue that crowdsourcing can play an important role in shaping public understandings of the past, but that careful thought is also needed about what 'citizen history' is intended to achieve, and how research design can support such approaches.

Crowdsourcing and citizen history

The term crowdsourcing first emerged in 2006 when it was used to describe how various industries were increasingly turning to internet marketplaces, such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, in order to recruit people to complete simple human intelligence tasks online in exchange for micropayments.[9] The late 2000s also witnessed the rise of academic crowdsourcing, in which researchers would ask members of the public to volunteer to undertake small tasks, such as classifying images or transcribing handwritten texts. Crowdsourcing was quickly adopted in particular within scientific disciplines such as astronomy and wildlife studies, where a tradition already existed of interested 'amateurs'

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[9] Jeff Howe, 'The Rise of Crowdsourcing', *Wired* 14, no. 6 (2006): 1-4.

contributing to the research community in different ways.[10] Its use within humanities

research has also expanded over time,[11] popularised by projects such as Transcribe Bentham,

launched in 2010 to transcribe the unpublished works of philosopher Jeremy Bentham.[12] In

the Australian context, the hundreds of millions of lines of corrected historical newspaper

text generated by users of the National Library of Australia website Trove since 2008 has

been described as 'the most successful historical crowdsourcing project in the world'.[13] The

GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives, museums) sector has been a particular proponent of

crowdsourcing, seeing it not only as a means of augmenting their collections but of engaging

the public with those collections in new ways.[14]

The facilitation of public engagement is recognised as an important by-product of

academic crowdsourcing. It is for this reason that crowdsourcing has become almost

synonymous with the term 'citizen science'.[15] However, while the two terms are often used

interchangeably, the concept of citizen science, which predates digital crowdsourcing,

actually refers to the more specific practice of encouraging community participation in

academic research in order to democratise disciplinary knowledge.[16] As originally conceived

of by British sociologist Alan Irwin, citizen science – by opening up disciplinary processes –

would empower citizens to more fully understand the world in which they live, which in turn

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[10] Arne A. Henden, 'Amateur Community and "Citizen Science"', *Paper presented at the New Horizons in Time-Domain Astronomy Proceedings IAU Symposium* (2011): 255.

[11] Mark Hedges and Stuart Dunn, *Academic Crowdsourcing in the Humanities: Crowds, Communities and Co-Production*, Cambridge, MA: Chandos Publishing, 2018.

[12] Tim Causer, Justin Tonra and Valerie Wallace, 'Transcription Maximized; Expense Minimized? Crowdsourcing and Editing the Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham', *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 27, no. 2 (2012): 26; ; Tim Causer and Melissa Terras, '"Many Hands Make Light Work. Many Hands Together Make Merry Work": *Transcribe Bentham* and Crowdsourcing Manuscript Collections', in *Crowdsourcing Our Cultural Heritage*, ed. Mia Ridge, Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014, 57-88.

[13] Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker, 'Making History Online: The Colin Matthews Lecture for the Public Understanding of History', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (2015): 81.

[14] Stuart Dunn and Mark Hedges, "Crowd-Sourcing as a Component of Humanities Research Infrastructures," *International Journal of Humanities and Arts Computing* 7, no. 1-2 (2013): 151.

[15] Ria Mae Borromeo and Motomichi Toyama, 'An Investigation of Unpaid Crowdsourcing', *Human-Centric Computing and Information Sciences* 6, no. 11 (2016): 6-7.

[16] M. V. Eitzel, Jessica L Cappadonna, Chris Santos-Lang, Ruth Ellen Duerr, Arika Virapongse, Sarah Elizabeth West‖, Christopher Conrad Maximillian Kyba, 'Citizen Science Terminology Matters: Exploring Key Terms', *Citizen Science: Theory and Practice* 2, no. 1 (2017): 6.

would support more active civic engagement on public issues.[17] While different conceptions of the meaning of citizen science have since developed, the term still holds implicit reference to the potential educative value that participation in research projects can have for the volunteers involved.[18]

Under this conception, crowd involvement in citizen history projects has been described as not 'just a means to an end, it is an end in itself'.[19] However, whereas crowdsourcing was initially viewed as an automatically 'democratising process' that empowered individuals simply by exposing them to research data and methods,[20] more recently it has been recognised that the development of disciplinary knowledge and skills by volunteers often varies considerably according to how a crowdsourcing project is designed.[21] Digital curator Mia Ridge points out that transcribing historical documents will improve an individual's ability to decipher historical handwriting, but not necessarily their ability to evaluate the source itself.[22] Ridge suggests that for a crowdsourcing project to also claim the mantle of citizen science, or citizen history, it must offer volunteers opportunities for developing their critical abilities to independently interpret the meanings of the research data.

Such critiques need to be taken seriously given that one of the main responses to ethical questions about crowdsourcing's employment of volunteer labour is that such projects not only benefit researchers, but the volunteers themselves through the enjoyment and learning they derive from the tasks.[23] The need for serious consideration of how

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[17] Alan Irwin, *Citizen Science: A Study of People, Expertise, and Sustainable Development*, London; New York: Routledge, 1995.

[18] Rick Bonney, Tina B. Phillips, Heidi L. Ballard and Jody W. Enck, 'Can Citizen Science Enhance Public Understanding of Science?' *Public Understanding of Science* 25, no. 1 (2016): 14.

[19] Michael Lascarides and Ben Vershbow, '*What's on the Menu?*: Crowdsourcing at the New York Public Library', in *Crowdsourcing Our Cultural Heritage*, ed. Mia Ridge, Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014, 130.

[20] Paddy Padmanabhan, 'Executive Edge: Democratization and Crowdsourcing', *Analytics Magazine* (2015): np.

[21] Hedges and Dunn, *Academic Crowdsourcing in the Humanities*, 82.

[22] Mia Ridge, 'Citizen History and Its Discontents', *Paper presented at the Institute of Historical Research Digital History Seminar* (2014): 5-6.

[23] Trevor Owens, 'Digital Cultural Heritage and the Crowd', *Curator: The Museum Journal* 56, no. 1 (2013): 121-30; Allana Mayer, 'Crowdsourcing, Open Data and Precarious Labour', *Model View Culture* 33 (2016): np.

crowdsourcing projects can be designed to support these aspects of the volunteer experience become all the more important as the technical barriers to setting up crowdsourcing projects are lowering. To some extent, low-tech options for crowdsourcing have always existed; the engagement of hundreds of nineteenth-century readers in the compilation of the first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary is just one example of pre-digital crowdsourcing.[24] The twenty-first century popularity of academic crowdsourcing has come as a result of sophisticated online interfaces, but wide adoption of the methodology has been inhibited as a result of the significant technical and financial investment required for the custom-built platforms most early crowdsourcing projects entailed.

However, in the last few years generic crowdsourcing tools have been developed that provide a platform on which many different types of research projects can be designed and hosted. These crowdsourcing tools have usually been derived from a platform that was initially custom-built for a specific project. The DigiVol website was started as a platform for the Australian Museum project 'Atlas of Living Australia', but has since been adapted to host crowdsourcing projects from a range of Australian GLAM institutions.[25] Similarly, the Zooniverse website originates from infrastructure initially built for the Galaxy Zoo project, a citizen science initiative created by astrophysicists at Oxford University.[26] Zooniverse is currently the largest academic crowdsourcing platform, officially hosting some 110 research projects across a variety of disciplines.[27]

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[24] Yin Liu, 'Appeal to the Public: Lessons from the Early History of the *Oxford English Dictionary*', *Digital Studies* 6 (2016): 1-9.

[25] Irit Alony, Debbie Haski-Leventhal, Leonie Lockstone-Binney, Kirsten Holmes and Lucas C. P. M. Meijs, 'Online Volunteering at Digivol: An Innovative Crowd-Sourcing Approach for Heritage Tourism Artefacts Preservation', *Journal of Heritage Tourism* (2019): 1-13.

[26] Karen L. Masters and Galaxy Zoo Team, 'Galaxy Zoo: Outreach and Science Hand in Hand'. in *Highlights of Astronomy, XXVIIIth IAU General Assembly*, ed. T. Montmerle, International Astronomical Union, 2012.

[27] Samuel T. Barber, 'The Zooniverse Is Expanding: Crowdsourced Solutions to the Hidden Collections Problem and the Rise of the Revolutionary Cataloging Interface', *Journal of Library Metadata* 18, no. 2 (2018): 85-111.

The open-source Zooniverse project builder can be freely accessed by anyone, and does not require any knowledge of programming languages or advanced level of technical skill to set up a project upon it. Part of Zooniverse's appeal though, is that it also offers a high capacity to support both formal and informal learning opportunities for volunteers. In her paper "Citizen History and Its Discontents", Mia Ridge commends the Zooniverse architecture for encouraging volunteers on projects such as *Operation War Diary* and *Old Weather* not just to contribute to historical research, but engage in 'historical thinking'.[28] The following section will analyse how different Zooniverse features support historical reflection in the case of the Criminal Characters project by exploring the ways in which volunteers interact with the site.

Criminal characters and its volunteers

The online presence of Criminal Characters consists of a front-end website that links to a transcription site built on the Zooniverse platform.[29] The Zooniverse infrastructure allows researchers to load research materials, such as images of scanned pages, as subject sets, along with metadata such as archival identification numbers of the images. The researcher can then create tasks for volunteers to complete using these subject sets, such as transcribing text into free-text boxes, or answering questions about features of the record from a list of options. In order to ensure accuracy, Zooniverse enables researchers to determine how many times each task should be performed by different volunteers on the same record. For instance, in Criminal Characters records are transcribed three times to produce a consensus version of the data. Many volunteers become more accurate in their transcriptions as they transcribe more records, and the Zooniverse architecture can also be

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[28] Ridge, 'Citizen History and Its Discontents', 7.
[29] https://criminalcharacters.com/

modified so that records transcribed by trusted volunteers do not require the same level of repeat transcriptions.

The project launched in October 2018 and was promoted in Australia on social media and through family and local history networks to solicit transcribers. It was also submitted for beta review to be adopted as an official Zooniverse project. Zooniverse projects do not have to go through beta review if they only want to rely on their own volunteer recruitment, but acceptance as an official project means that Zooniverse will promote it to their almost two million registered volunteers.[30] The beta review process was useful in improving the formal learning materials provided to volunteers, which include a step-by-step tutorial on the transcription task, a field guide about the types of notations encountered, and an About page that includes a series of FAQs about the research and records. In Criminal Characters these tools have been adapted to help volunteers not only be able to complete the crowdsourcing task, but also to promote their understanding of the information being transcribed and its historical context. The front-end website also provides a variety of additional resources about criminal justice history, including timelines, maps, thematically-organised reading lists and a blog.

The project was launched as an official Zooniverse project on 8 May 2019. Between October 2018 and the May 2019 launch there had been 9,801 transcriptions of records by volunteers who had heard about the project either through social media, historical networks or via ABC radio interviews in which I mentioned the website. When Zooniverse emailed its over one million registered volunteers on 8 May to notify them about the project, there were 4009 transcriptions on that day alone. After this initial burst of enthusiasm, the rate of transcriptions dropped down, but is still proceeding faster than prior to the Zooniverse

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[30] https://www.zooniverse.org/ (Accessed 24 October 2019). There were 1,933,210 registered volunteers on this date.

launch. As of 15 August 2019, there had been 33,622 record transcriptions done by 1,744 volunteers. This enthusiastic response has perhaps been contributed to partly by the recent popularity of the 'true crime' genre in podcasts, television series and other popular culture; the prominent place that convictism and bushranging hold in the national cultural memory may likewise have spurred activity from Australian volunteers.[31]

Volunteers remain pseudo-anonymous on the Zooniverse platform; volunteers can even participate in the projects without any registration or sign-up process (although this prevents them from posting in the Talk forums). Those who do register to receive notifications about Zooniverse projects use screen names that appear when they post comments on the public chat forum and attach as metadata to the records that they have transcribed. The Zooniverse privacy policy, which users agrees to upon registration, stipulates that any contributions, including posts on the Talk pages, may be used by researchers.[32]

The application does not collect any information about the background of volunteers. However, some metadata provides insights. The time of day transcription occurs suggest that the preponderance of volunteers are likely Australian, with the lowest rate of transcription occurring between 6am and 12pm AEST, when most Australians would likely be busy at work or getting ready for the day (see Table 1). However, that transcription occurs fairly evenly across the day at other times also suggests good take-up from volunteers in different timezones. Some transcribers also offer some general background information about themselves in the public chat forum that the site offers, which is known as Talk. These comments likewise suggests an international makeup, with contributors introducing themselves as being from the United States, United Kingdom, Finland, Italy and Brazil.

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[31] Bruce Tranter and Jed Donoghue, 'Convict Ancestry: A Neglected Aspect of Australian Identity', *Nations and Nationalism* 9, no. 4 (2003): 555-77; Bruce Tranter and Jed Donoghue, 'Bushrangers: Ned Kelly and Australian Identity', *Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 4 (2008): 373-90.
[32] https://www.zooniverse.org/privacy

[Table 1 near here]

The Talk data also gives some insight into people's reasons for transcribing the data. Several volunteers noted they are retired, and find the transcription work an interesting way to fill their time. These individuals often note that they have worked on other Zooniverse projects, such as Old Weather or Shakespeare's World. A volunteer from Texas revealed that they normally worked on Zooniverse's astronomy projects, but found learning about the 'different crimes' had made the transcription interesting; they planned to share the project with students in a forensics class that they teach.[33] Others also mentioned having a pre-existing interest in the area, with a Victorian volunteer who had studied criminology and always 'had an interest' in history stating that they felt the site shared 'incredible information on both accounts'.[34] Another revealed that she was 'loving being involved in this research' in part because she had kept gaol records earlier in life, so transcription was 'just like putting on an old shoe'.[35] This volunteer, Trishmary50, is the project's most active, responsible for 9 per cent of all transcriptions. As with other crowdsourcing projects,[36] a high proportion of the work on Criminal Characters is completed by a small group of super-contributors, with the top ten volunteers contributing 26.5 per cent of all transcriptions.

Existing scholarship that has surveyed crowdsourcing volunteers demonstrates that supporting intellectual curiosity among contributors is an important factor in maintaining volunteer motivation.[37] However, the degree to which volunteers are seeking learning experiences from crowdsourcing also differs across individuals.[38] Most crowdsourcing projects work on the principle that the amount of time people will invest into the work will

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[33] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1826/764556?comment=1639281 (Posted 10 May 2019).

[34] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1826/998559?comment=1700292 (Posted on 21 June 2019).

[35] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1826/764556?comment=1291901 (Posted 4 November 2018).

[36] Hedges and Dunn, *Academic Crowdsourcing in the Humanities*, 116.

[37] Lee et al., 'Appealing to Different Motivations in a Message to Recruit Citizen Scientists', 2.

[38] Lee et al., 'Appealing to Different Motivations in a Message to Recruit Citizen Scientists', 10.

differ, but that even those who might only contribute a little are still moving the research forward. This is because most crowdsourcing work consists of what has been referred to as 'data-shaping' tasks, such as transcribing handwriting into typed text, that are relatively cognitively undemanding.[39] Not all volunteers will necessarily be equally willing to engage in 'knowledge shaping tasks' that ask them to shape knowledge about the data by interpreting or adding a meaningful context to it.

For instance, when the London historical court records site, Old Bailey Online, invited the public to contribute content through specially created wiki pages, the underwhelming response eventually led to the wiki being discontinued. The site experienced much greater success in engaging users through a simple text-correction feature, which some then used to offer helpful comments on a range of content-related topics.[40] Geoffrey Rockwell suggests the best approach in developing humanities crowdsourcing projects then is to cater to a range of users, from those for whom simple, manageable tasks might represent their entry point or entire experience of the project, through to more creative activities that allow users to make small original contributions about the data.[41]

The Zooniverse architecture supports such an approach. Volunteers can use 'tags' to describe records they have transcribed and make them visible to others on the site, allowing contributors to assign their own meanings to the records independent of any researcher-devised ontologies. As of 15 August 2019, there were 117 different tags in use on Criminal Characters. The ten-most popularly used tags were: waterdamage; alias; repeatoffender; youngoffender; female; governors_pleasure; habitualcriminal; cooffender; whipped; and absconded. Many of these tags denote an interest in particular types of offenders – recidivists,

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[39] Alam and Campbell, 'Temporal Motivations of Volunteers to Participate in Cultural Crowdsourcing Work', 751.
[40] Hitchcock and Shoemaker, 'Making History Online', 83.
[41] Geoffrey Rockwell, 'Crowdsourcing the Humanities: Social Research and Collaboration', in *Collaborative Research in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Willard Mccarty and Marilyn Deegan, Farnham, England; Burlington, Vermont: Routledge, 2012, 148.

juveniles, women – that will be discussed in more detail later on. Others speak to an interest in how the criminal justice system has changed – or been slow to change – in its treatment of prisoners over time. For instance, some volunteers began using the tag 'whipped' after expressing surprise over the continued use of corporal punishment on prisoners into the twentieth century, whipping not being discontinued as a criminal sentence in Victoria until 1981.[42] The hashtags governors_pleasure and habitualcriminal similarly have been used by volunteers to mark records where prisoners had been given indefinite sentences, or confined under the 'governor's pleasure'. This was usually as a result of being declared a 'habitual criminal' under legislation introduced in Victoria in 1907 that allowed such offenders to be detained on an indeterminate sentence.[43]

Zooniverse also lets contributors 'favourite' a record they have transcribed to their favourites list, or 'collect' a record to add it to a collection (which may be kept private or made public) on a particular topic of their devising. There are currently 13 public Criminal Characters collections on themes such as 'crime – white collar', 'Laborers', 'Lifer', 'Unusual Criminals', 'Good Looking Criminals' and 'whydude'.[44] These varied categories denote the different interests and intents with which individuals are likely to approach crowdsourcing work. Some have developed categories of analysis that would be equally applicable in scholarly research on criminal justice history. Others suggest a more light-hearted mode of engagement with the records. (Although this is not to say that those who develop collections on more seemingly frivolous topics are not also broadening their historical understandings by engaging in the crowdsourcing process.)

The feature on Zooniverse that most prominently both supports and offers evidence of informal learning among volunteers is the Talk forum. As at 15 August 2019, there were

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[42] *Penalties and Sentences Act 1981* (Victoria).
[43] *Indeterminate Sentences Act 1907* (Victoria).
[44] The record that prompted the 'whydude' collection is one where a prisoner was punished for 'indecency with lock of cell'.

1,029 comments posted on the Talk board; 60.1 per cent were posted by volunteers, and 39.9 per cent were posted by me in response. This provides some indication of the time costs of managing crowdsourcing projects, which has led Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker to surmise that 'saving money – as opposed to deepening public engagement – may be the wrong motivation for using this methodology'.[45] In all, 112 volunteers had posted on Talk, but as with transcriptions, some users were disproportionately active, with three individuals accounting for 34.5 per cent of all 618 volunteer comments.

Initially the forum was largely used by volunteers to ask for help in transcribing material correctly. Of 618 volunteer comments, some 22.3 per cent were partly or entirely concerned with clarifying the transcription process. However, Talk also acts as a socialising hub where volunteers can discuss their work on the records. In all, 63.8 per cent of volunteer posts on Talk contained a question or comment about the history disclosed by a specific prison record (the remaining proportion of comments consisting of more general comments about the site or volunteers introducing themselves). As has occurred on other crowdsourcing projects, volunteers on Criminal Characters quickly started going beyond the remit of the transcription task to undertake additional research on the records. Some 16.2 per cent of volunteer comments contained information from web searches conducted on prisoners' histories. Most of these consist of links to newspaper articles on Trove, but links have also been established to military records, births, deaths and marriages data, museum, family and local history sites, Wikipedia and Austlii. For instance, one volunteer who transcribed the prison record of former Ballarat mayor James Job Brokenshire, imprisoned for fraud in 1919, then found links to him on Trove, the national archives, the Ballarat and District Industrial Heritage Project wiki and the Victorian Police Museum collection.[46]

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[45] Hitchcock and Shoemaker, 'Making History Online', 82-83.
[46] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/802684 (Posted 1 December 2018).

Where individuals have thus been inspired to investigate the history of an individual found in the prison record, or even remark upon interesting information in the prison record itself, the comments in the Talk forum offer insights into public understandings of how crime and criminality operated in the past. The following sections will examine what these comments reveal about interpretations of who is meant by the term criminal, and the utility of history as a means of understanding the present.

Interpreting crime and criminality

In his memoir, written in 1937, about his career as a police detective in Melbourne, Alfred Stephen Burvett made a seemingly oxymoronic remark when he stated that 'It must be remembered that it is not always criminals who commit offences or crimes.'[47] The Macquarie dictionary defines the noun criminal as 'a person guilty or convicted of a crime'. However, as Burvett's comment illustrates, the term criminal is more loaded with meanings within the popular zeitgeist than this simple definition allows. While anyone may commit a crime, criminality tends to be an identity associated with a particular 'type' or 'class' of persons within the cultural imagination. Such representations have proved an enduring facet of public discourses across time, with the 'criminal class' of the nineteenth century revived as an 'underclass' in contemporary discussions of crime.[48] As David Garland observes, this archetypal construction of the criminal as an 'alien and threatening' entity, essentially different from society as a whole, serves to garner support for crime-control policies that reinforce the archetype by making it harder for individuals convicted of offences to reintegrate into wider society.[49] In criminological terms, this is referred to as labelling theory,

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[47] Alfred Stephen Burvett, Crimes and Their Detection, or Justice is Done, ca. 1899-ca.1919, page 28, MS Box 2498, State Library of Victoria.
[48] Barry S. Godfrey, Paul Lawrence and Chris A. Williams, *History and Crime*, London: Sage, 2008, 69-88.
[49] David Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 135.

which argues that stigmatising someone as a 'criminal' – that is as someone distinct from, outside of or in opposition to mainstream society – counterproductively compels them to act in criminal ways or internalise a criminal identity. It is a theory that continues to receive support in recent criminological studies.[50]

First-hand engagement with historical records of crime has the potential to challenge such understandings of criminality by revealing the varied backgrounds of offenders and the complex circumstances often surrounding offending. Yet, as historical criminologist Barry Godfrey has recently explored, digital exposure to the 'ruined lives' revealed in crime records may convey little meaning to the public, or even breed contempt, in the absence of contextual understanding.[51] An important feature of the Zooniverse Talk forum is thus that it enables researchers to directly engage volunteers in discussions about their findings, including providing feedback about how overall trends revealed by the data might contextualise individual records discussed by volunteers on the forum. Notably, the records that inspire the most remarks on the Criminal Characters forum tend to be ones that either fulfil or subvert popular images of who criminal characters are.

Repeat offenders in particular inspire a lot of commentary. Of 394 comments about the history revealed by a specific record, 43 or 10.9 per cent related to repeat offenders. This preoccupation with repeat offenders may be due in part to such individuals conforming to volunteers' understanding of who is meant by the term criminal, such recidivism perhaps suggesting someone who commits crime not as a vagary of a moment, but as part of a dangerous, delinquent lifestyle. A volunteer thus added the telling hashtag crimcharacter, to

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[50] Megan Denver, Justin T. Pickett and Shawn D. Bushway, 'The Language of Stigmatization and the Mark of Violence: Experimental Evidence on the Social Construction and Use of Criminal Record Stigma', *Criminology* 55, no. 3 (2017): 664-90; Katerina Hadjmatheou, 'Criminal Labelling, Publicity, and Punishment', *Law and Philosophy* 35, no. 6 (2016): 567-593.

[51] Barry Godfrey, 'Liquid Crime History: Digital Entrepreneurs and the Industrial Production of "Ruined Lives"', in *Liquid Criminology: Doing Imaginative Criminological Research*, ed. Michael Hviid Jacobsen and Sandra Walklate, London: Routledge, 2017, 151.

their description of a prisoner as '8 convictions, bullet wound over left elbow, a #tattoo of a scroll over a flower, and 5 different prisons'.[52] Another contributor expressed a sense of disjunction between the physical appearance of a prisoner and their perceived criminal persona:

> I think he has a kind of James Bond look about him (the first photo of a prisoner in a tuxedo & in a bow tie!) - but obviously the reality is he was less 'suave' from the long history of threatening violence with weapons.[53]

While this record thus seems to have challenged the volunteer's expectations about what an offender will look like it, their remark implies a belief that someone with a lengthy criminal history will possess a particular type of personality, specifically one not 'suave'. In the case of another repeat offender, the volunteer who transcribed the record was far more scathing in their conception of the inmate's disposition, commenting 'He has crooked mind and plotting to steal and never miss a chance'.[54]

However, judgemental comments about the innate character of recidivists were the exception rather than the rule in the remarks posted on the Criminal Characters forum. Often volunteers reflected instead on the circumstances that may have led to such repeat offending. Describing the record of an individual first institutionalised at the age of 15 years old when sentenced to the Bayswater Boys Home, one volunteer thus speculated, 'What a lengthy record to acquire by age 22. I guess when one of your earliest offences is being a "neglected

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[52] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/991719?comment=1635103 (Posted 8 May 2019).
[53] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/799468?comment=1324206 (Posted 28 November 2018).
[54] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/991231?comment=1634322 (Posted 8 May 2019).

child" things are really stacked against you.'[55] Another volunteer observed that most of the

53 convictions against a Bendigo offender consisted not of serious offences but charges that

had arisen during altercations with police, such as obscene language and resisting arrest,

following up their observation with the 'anguished' emoji.[56] Other contributors likewise

noted that recidivists' criminal histories overwhelmingly consisted of petty offences, in

particular frequent convictions for public drunkenness.[57] Some additionally pointed out that

their experiences working on other records clearly showed that those with long histories of

offending were exceptional, with most having only one or two convictions.[58]

Violence is another characteristic typically associated with public constructions of

criminality, although, like recidivists, violent offenders have historically accounted for a

small minority of those convicted of crimes in Australia.[59] Perhaps surprisingly, given that

representations of crime in popular culture largely centre upon sensationalistic violence,[60]

violent offending does not appear to attract a disproportionate amount of attention in the Talk

forum. Just 16 or 4.1 per cent of the 394 comments about specific prisoner records concerned

those convicted of murder or manslaughter. The observations that were offered by

contributors about such homicide records tended to be brief details of facts from the case,

such as the relationship between prisoner and victim.[61] While one individual noted that they

found the news clipping about a prisoner's death in an apparent murder-suicide to be

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[55] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/1013230?comment=1669232
(Posted on 28 May 2019).

[56] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/1001118?comment=1649696
(Posted on 16 May 2019).

[57] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/1025173?comment=1690943
(Posted on 12 June 2019).

[58] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/1024363?comment=1689449
(Posted on 11 June 2019).

[59] Satyanshu K. Mukherjee, Evelyn N. Jacobsen, and John R. Walker, *Source Book of Australian Criminal and Social Statistics 1804-1988*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, 1989.

[60] Suzanne Bray and Gérald Préher, 'Introduction' in Fatal Fascinations: Cultural Manifestations of Crime and Violence, ed. Suzanne Bray and Gérald Préher, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, vii.

[61] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/1049003?comment=1726844
(Posted on 8 July 2019).

interesting in a 'macabre' way,[62] in general there was little evidence from the Criminal Characters Talk forum that individuals were engaging with the records as a type of digital dark tourism.[63]

However, special interest was evinced about prisoners who do not conform to classic conceptions of criminality, such as white-collar offenders. Some 14 comments (3.6 per cent) dealt with offenders from a middle-class background. Such offenders were described in ways that indicated that volunteers regarded such backgrounds or offending as peculiar. A case in which the son of a clergyman was convicted several times during the 1930s on robbery and firearms charges was thus described as 'quite a weird story'.[64] Similarly, another referred to the 'weird history' of a company director and former doctor who was twice incarcerated.[65] In another instance where a prisoner's physical appearance apparently did not match expectations of criminality, a volunteer commented that they had been inspired to do further research on the prisoner as 'after reading a few of these records, a well-dressed older man stood out a bit'.[66] It emerged from their newspaper research that he had been a pay clerk for Victorian Railways convicted of stealing funds from the company.[67] Historians have speculated that the perception of middle-class crime as a bizarre or unlikely occurrence has acted as self-fulfilling prophecy by making juries and the authorities reluctant to convict such offenders.[68] Recent historical scholarship on fraud further suggests that during the nineteenth century a conviction or even several convictions for financial offences did not necessarily

[62] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/878849?comment=1451102 (Posted on 6 February 2019).
[63] Godfrey, 'Liquid Crime History', 140-55.
[64] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/1007140?comment=1659297 (Posted on 22 May 2019).
[65] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/1025338?comment=1691182 (Posted on 13 June 2019).
[66] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/1003150?comment=1652855 (Posted on 18 May 2019).
[67] 'Railway Clerk's Peculations', 11 April 1935, *The Age*, 10.
[68] Rob Sindall, 'Middle-Class Crime in Nineteenth Century England', *Criminal Justice History* 4 (1983): 23-40.

result in a 'tipping point' between respectability and criminality, in either societal judgements or offender's self-conceptions.[69]

Volunteers also encountered individuals within the records that they regarded sympathetically, rather than as criminals. There was surprise over the extent that poverty in itself was treated as a criminal offence historically.[70] It was noted that one prisoner had been 'arrested almost exclusively for begging in the course of 20 years'.[71] Another volunteer revealed the 'sad story' of a husband and wife convicted for insufficient means in 1929 after they were found living in a shed.[72] Others rightly observed the links between poverty-related convictions and old age, which one volunteer summarised as follows 'A very sad situation, he was in his mid-70s and single. He obviously had no family to look after him.'[73]

Young offenders were the subject of almost as much discussion as repeat offenders. There were 36 comments (or 9.1 per cent of the 394 comments on specific records) that mentioned the youth of the offenders. For some, the young age at which the offender had entered the criminal justice system raised questions about their later life, and whether they had been able to escape their troubled pasts:

This #youngoffender offender has a long career of convictions when he's just 24. His first recorded offence was a housebreaking + stealing when he was just 13! [flushed emoji] Wonder what became of him...[74]

[69] Guy N. Woolnough, 'A Victorian Fraudster and Bigamist: Gentleman or Criminal?' *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 19, no. 4 (2019): 439-55.

[70] Susanne Elizabeth Davies, 'Vagrancy and the Victorians: The Social Construction of the Vagrant in Melbourne, 1880-1907' (PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 1990).

[71] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/1035593 (Posted 25 June 2019).

[72] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/1031189?comment=1700268 (Posted on 20 June 2019).

[73] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/826155?comment=1364522 (Posted on 17 December 2018).

[74] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/1002595?comment=1651988 (Posted on 18 May 2019).

Such a sad face on this girl! I really hope her life eventually got better.[75]

Other volunteers focused on the wider context of such stories, wanting to know more about the period's juvenile justice operations, and the conditions that imprisoned adolescents would have encountered.[76]

The past workings of the criminal justice system often did not just prompt sympathy, but outrage. This was especially evident in the case of historical offences that targeted individuals on the basis of gender or sexuality:

I feel sorry for the women I'm seeing who were arrested under the V.D. Act, and not even one man's file mentions V.D! Didn't they do health checks for VD on the men? I wonder how these women, victims of human trafficking, were viewed and treated typically at that time. What were their options?[77]

Is this an example of the criminalization of gay sex? It sounds like what Oscar Wilde was imprisoned for, and I wonder if the "treatment" in the Mental Hospital was an attempt to change his orientation. Very tragic.[78]

It may thus seem that volunteer responses to records (at least as expressed on the Talk forum) are primarily emotive, rather than analytical. This does not necessarily mean that volunteers

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[75] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/996691?comment=1643498 (Posted on 14 May 2019).
[76] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1828/996618?comment=1643416 (Posted on 14 May 2019).
[77] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/995292?comment=1641338 (Posted on 11 May 2019).
[78] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/996563?comment=1643323 (Posted on 13 May 2019).

do not also form analytical opinions of the records; however, they may be more reluctant to express these in comparison to their emotional reactions due to a sense that they do not have the authority or skills to comment analytically.

The engagement of volunteers in empathetic understandings of marginalised individuals should be regarded as an important outcome in itself. Moreover, as the above comments demonstrate, such emotive responses also prompt individuals to ask questions about the histories they are engaged in transcribing, and thus making an initial foray into becoming 'citizen historians'. Interest and sympathy in an individual's story has sometimes encouraged volunteers to posit their own interpretation of the prisoner's experiences based on evidence within the record. For instance, one volunteer observed that a 16-year-old Catholic offender who had been convicted of gross indecency with a male person entered prison with a number of scars on his palm and about his legs; from this she speculated that he had been repeatedly punished at school, perhaps because his sexual inclinations were known or suspected.[79] The Talk forum thus encourages volunteers to reflect on the meanings of crime and criminality, providing a space for the types of critical questioning and interpretation of sources that citizen history should seek to encourage.

Connecting past and present

What value does such engagement with historical sources have? Digital curator Mia Ridge not only challenges researchers to consider how digital crowdsourcing projects can promote greater historical literacies, but to consider what the intended outcomes of such learning is where volunteers are not planning to pursue history professionally.[80] Early conceptions of citizen science argued that increased scientific literacies on the part of the

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[79] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/998189 (Posted on 14 May 2019).
[80] Ridge, 'Citizen History and Its Discontents', 12.

public might empower citizens to engage more decisively on science-related policy issues, such as climate change.[81] The study of history, and the humanities more generally, is similarly championed by universities and GLAM institutions as a means of encouraging a more socially-conscious citizenry capable of critically questioning contemporary conditions. History's value then is routinely discussed in terms of the extent to which it can act as a resource for helping make sense of the present.[82] The 2014 treatise *The History Manifesto* thus championed the notion of a greater historical consciousness within public discourse, pointing to the area of legal history in particular as an example where such historical contextual awareness could act as an important intervention in public debates.[83]

Part of a crowdsourcing project's success in developing a citizen history approach on the part of volunteers might thus be based upon the degree to which contributors are able to connect the historical material that they have engaged with to contemporary issues or concerns. However, historical scholarship has recognised that the default interpretation of the relationship between past and present in the general popular consciousness is usually one that assumes a narrative of forward progress.[84] Such positivistic understandings are occasionally hinted at in remarks posted on the Talk board that ascribe troubling aspects of the justice system revealed by the records to the bygone era of their creation. Often this is not a completely inaccurate portrayal; however, it may wrongly serve to reinforce an image of injustice as something confined to the past. For instance, prefacing a description of a case in which a man was imprisoned for a homosexuality offence with the comment 'How times have changed',[85] points to the historical reality that sexual acts between men were

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[81] Deborah J. Tippins and Lucas John Jensen, 'Citizen Science in Digital Worlds: The Seduction of a Temporary Escape or a Lifelong Pursuit?' *Cultural Studies of Science Education* 7 (2012): 851-852.

[82] Constance Saint-Laurent and Sandra Obradović, 'Uses of the Past: History as a Resource for the Present', *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* 53, no. 1 (2019): 1-13.

[83] Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 94.

[84] Martin L. Davies, *Imprisoned by History: Aspects of Historicized Life*, London and New York: Routledge, 2010, 132.

[85] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/995408?comment=1641574 (Posted on 12 May 2019).

decriminalised in Victoria from 1981.[86] However, it does not take into account the continuing legacies that such policies have had on queer communities or the ways that they continue to be policed into the present.[87]

Yet many volunteers were sensitive to how comparatively recent some of the oppressions revealed in the records were. One reaction to a record in which a woman was incarcerated as a result of venereal disease legislation thus reads, 'I am flummoxed as to why a female is imprisoned indefinitely for having a disease given to them by a man. This is not even 100 years ago. Very very sobering.'[88] The imprisonment of a 16-year-old on a two-year sentence in an adult prison was likewise considered to be 'incredible even for 100 years ago'.[89] The infliction of corporal punishment on twentieth-century prisoners seemed to occasion considerable surprise.[90] Disbelief was also expressed over the provisions in habitual criminals legislation that allowed for indefinite detention of offenders at the end of their sentence.[91] Perhaps the realisation that such practices formed part of the relatively recent past were sobering for volunteers in part because they called into question the narratives of progress and modernity associated with the twentieth century.

In a recent article calling for criminologists to engage more extensively with history, Paul Lawrence argued that the 'explanatory power of the past' for the discipline lies in both its problematisation of complacent narratives of progress within the criminal justice system, and its revelation of 'surprising continuity' in criminal offending and the structures

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[86] *Crimes (Sexual Offences) Act 1980*, (Victoria).

[87] Emma K. Russell, *Queer Histories and the Politics of Policing*, Milton: Routledge, 2019.

[88] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/1089288?comment=1786888 (Posted on 14 August 2019).

[89] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/1065699?comment=1751566 (Posted on 23 July 2019).

[90] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/995594?comment=1664069 (Posted on 25 May 2019).

[91] https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/786312?comment=1303851 (Posted on 13 November 2018).

responding to it.[92] Only a few volunteers directly remarked upon continuations between past and present. One volunteer observed that the role of economics in determining the likelihood of going to gaol was the same 'then as now'.[93] Another contributor commented that engaging with the records had reminded them of reading news articles when they were growing up in Western Australia about men convicted of traffic offences being locked up in Fremantle prison alongside 'rapists and murderers',[94] again suggesting clearly understood distinctions between 'real' criminals and others who may have been convicted of crimes. They followed this up by noting that not much had changed, with many of those incarcerated in contemporary gaols still 'locked up for drunk & disorderly or drugs'. They then commended the 'good work' being done by the project, suggesting they appreciated that the project was problematising essentialised understandings of criminality.

While this is encouraging, there were other areas where continuations between past and present – while they may not have escaped volunteers – were not explicitly mentioned. For instance, it is curious that despite the significant commentary on the Talk forum about young offenders, their incarceration was treated as anomalous or a problem of the past, despite the high rate of institutionalisation of minors being a prominent public issue in Australia in recent years. Given this, the ways that academic crowdsourcing and public history projects can be constructed to contextualise sources not only within understandings of the past, but understandings of the present, should be a continuing concern for scholars.

Conclusion

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92 Paul Lawrence, 'Historical Criminology and the Explanatory Power of the Past', *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 19, no. 4 (2019): 495.
93 https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/1069887?comment=1757602 (Posted on 26 July 2019).
94 https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ajpiper/criminal-characters/talk/1821/1069887?comment=1760351 (Posted on 28 July 2019).

In adopting a crowdsourcing methodology, Criminal Characters thus not only aims to produce data that can ultimately be used to communicate ideas about the meanings of crime and criminality, but to encourage first-hand public engagement with these meanings during the research process itself. Citizen history projects should have an ambition distinct from the crowdsourcing objective, one that addresses the question of why it is important to develop historical literacies among the wider community. Just as the public value of citizen science has been linked to ecojustice principles, citizen history might similarly be grounded in developing social justice perspectives. Close reading of historical sources can stimulate cognitive empathy with historical subjects;[95] in the context of crime history, this means engaging citizens in the intellectual and imaginative apprehension of the conditions experienced by some of society's most marginalised individuals. The design of Criminal Characters therefore aims to situate the project's crowdsourcing component within a space that empowers users to start engaging in critical interpretation by offering varied opportunities for formal and informal learning.

Table 1. Time of day transcriptions completed on Criminal Characters.

Time period	% of transcriptions GMT	% of transcriptions AEST
12am-6am	26.9	25.8
6am-12pm	25.5	19.5
12pm-6pm	26.4	27.6
6pm-12am	21.3	27

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[95] Neil McCaw, 'Victorian Murder and the Digital Humanities,' *Humanities* 7, no. 82 (2018): 2.