

# **From Community to Collective: Institution and Agency in the Age of Social Networks\***

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In thinking about new media and the processes of communication, interaction, and participation, it seems that our instinct to read the new in terms of the old is nearly irresistible. Accordingly, we often find ourselves making assumptions about new ways of interacting and participating that no longer fit the new media we use to communicate.

Most recently, we have witnessed an explosion of social networking sites, which have created a new phenomenon which seems to resist efforts at categorization within our known frameworks for media analysis. Accordingly, we have begun to speak of “online communities” as a way to characterize what happens in spaces such as MySpace, Facebook, Friendster and other forums where people creation new social identities and engage in new networked practices.

That term, however, may be something of a misnomer. What we are witnessing is a transformation not only of practices, but also a transformation of the social, cultural and material constraints of participation in online networks. Many of these have been chronicled and theorized in works such as Henry Jenkin’s *Convergence Culture*, Manuel Castells’ *Network Society*, Yohai Benkler’s *Wealth of Networks*, and Mimi Ito’s work on youth culture and digital media and learning. And that work has gone a long way to lead us to the question of how differently structured media for interaction can give rise to new forms of social consciousness and participation.

More recently, my book with John Seely Brown, *A New Culture of Learning*, has introduced the term “collective” as a framework for thinking about how networks are reshaping what we think of as online social interaction.<sup>1</sup> In that book, we argue that one of the most fundamental shifts that has occurred with the growth of the networked age (and networked imagination) has been the creation of new social formations that radically transform the relationship between structure and agency.

## **The Flow of Investment**

The core idea that separates communities and collectives is that investments in communities are structured to flow from the individual to the institution (e.g. structures), while investments in collectives are structured to flow from the institution to the individual. By investment, I mean three things:

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- First, the basic motivation for interaction differs between communities and collectives. In a community, the general motive for participation is belonging, principally, belonging to an institution greater than oneself or even the sum of its members. In a collective, the investment is in participating. That participation allows the individual to take action that is meaningful to a larger group of people (if not aided by advice or information from the larger group) but without the immediate sense of reciprocity that community entails. In other words, in a community, individual agency flows toward the creation and maintenance of the community itself. For a collective, its value is determined by the degree to which the institution invests in an individual's agency. While members of a community may be willing to give up certain rights or freedoms to belong to something larger than themselves (and reap benefits as a result), members of a collective are much more intensely focused on the affordances of a particular institution (qua collective) and are highly resistant to any loss of agency or freedom.
- The second type of investment involves entry and exit costs to a community and collective. As a general rule, communities are judged more by who they exclude than by who they include. In that sense, the cost to enter a community may often be high and constitutes an actual investment, if not in money then in time, training, or probation. In contrast, collectives work to mitigate entry costs, making it easy to join and requiring few barriers for membership. On the other hand, the collective itself maintains a substantial investment in both time and money to maintain an active user base, especially as it faces competition from other collectives. Collectives are required to invest in member agency.
- Third, communities are often exclusive to one another, meaning investment in one may require exclusion from another. While this is not always the case, because investment entails a sense of belonging, investment in a community can also become constitutive of identity. Collectives manage identity in the opposite way. Instead of constructing an identity through community participation, collectives provide tools for the unique and individual expression of identity within the collective itself. On Facebook, for example, people construct an identity by carefully selecting what affiliations they want, who they add as friends, and what groups they join. Social network identity is not constructed by belonging to any particular group, but by selectively filtering what information you want to have access to and controlling what you see and what others can see about you.

In comparison, we have the concept of communities as institutions that are structured by individual investment and reduced agency within the community, that have high barriers to entry and costs for exit, and that construct a sense of identity for members as part of the whole. Collectives are designed to enable a

sense of individual agency, reduce or eliminate barriers or entry costs, and function in support of the expression of multiple, even conflicting identities across a wide range of users.

In communities, investment flows toward structure, while in collectives, investment flows towards agency.

### **Online Community**

By far the more interesting pairings are the ones which mismatch investments. Our standard notion of community is one which has the individual acting for the benefit of the institution. While definitions of community are wide ranging, problematic, and conflicting, in almost every case, they recognize the two component parts: communities are composed of individuals acting in a way that is of benefit to some structure larger than them. In that sense, communities are structures, made of up individual investments.

In most cases, then, we can begin to understand what communities look like based on a very simply formula. Communities form when individual agency is applied to the creation of institutional structure. The difficulty for “online communities” is that the notion of structure and institution can be difficult to pin down. Communities in the physical world often have a material or even geographical component. Meetings occur in a particular place, with a regular group of people, and form a component of any particular individual’s identity.

When we move to the space of online communities, many of the properties that we use to define community are either absent or rendered intangible. Chief among them is the ability to recognize the identity of others. We are skeptical of the first of our two terms, investment, when we are dealing with online spaces because anonymity provides a hedge against commitment. How fully can one invest in a community when they are unknown, have limited social ties, and have minimal exit costs for leaving the community at any time?

Participation, as a result, is transformed by virtue of the fact that online communities often lack the social and cultural systems of approbation, discipline, and social pressure that define many of our physical world structures and institutions. In short, the dynamic what relies on institutional benefit from individual agency is constantly at risk when there is no promise of continued investment on the part of the individual.

### **Understanding Collectives**

Our decision to use the term “collective” in *A New Culture of Learning* was not an easy one, because it also carries its own baggage both in relation to political movements, collective intelligence, and collective action theory. And while we

feel there is some resonance with those areas of study, our use of the term is designed to be much simpler.

Collectives, as we understand them, are spaces defined by structural investment for individual benefit. It is, literally, the opposite end of the spectrum from how we define community. Where communities use individuals to create something bigger than themselves, collectives are structures and institutions designed to afford individual agency.

The benefit of this reversal is also contrary to notions of community, yet it is a defining characteristic of most of the great successes of the Internet age. Facebook, Google, Ebay, Amazon are all large institutional structures that have the singular and sole purpose of affording an individual agency.

What has made this possible is the nonmaterial nature of the Internet. While there are clear material costs to creating a massive business such as Ebay or Facebook, those costs are in no way tied to the individual investment in the site. By keeping costs and building in the structural domain (e.g. institutional investment for institutional benefit) these sites are able to create collective spaces that allow individuals to use, rely on, and develop their own personal relationships through the collective.

Because the functionality of any collective is designed to enable and enhance agency (e.g. find what you want, connect with your friends, buy hard to find items), the success of any collective is inherently bound to how well it manages the user's desire and ability to control what he or she does and sees.

Collectives then are able to leverage that autonomy into a framework that improves or enhances agency. As a result, collectives scale perfectly. Size and growth become beneficial in nearly every aspect of a collective's functioning. Having more items listed in a store or auction site increases the chance you will find what you want. A larger database of web links increases the chance you will find that you are looking for. And if the system can build in a way to get smarter with individual use, then both size and frequency of traffic become benefits, rather than draw backs.

Collectives and communities are, at the same time, not incompatible. It is easy to understand how community might be one of the things that a collective affords as a function of individual agency. However, because the flow is from structure to agency, rather than agency to structure, the problems that present risks to any particular community with the collective, leave the broader collective untouched.

A community collapsing within a collective, for example, does nothing to reduce the agency of any individual, which is the primary function of the collective. Because it is a matter of institutional investment in individual agency, collectives

are able to survive the birth, growth, and dilution of communities in a way that leaves the broader structure unaffected.

### **From Community to Collectives: An Epistemic Shift**

Mapping out the transformation of how people use the Internet and social networks may begin to tell us something about new media practices, but it also represents a fundamental shift in how we think about *knowing*. We live in an age of unprecedented access to media and information, in which we are invited to feel as if we have agency and control over what it is we know and what it is we are exposed to.

One of the great failings in the effort to monetize the Internet has been the failing of traditional models of advertising. Until Google's Ad-Sense, most major efforts at banner advertising and other more traditional push methods of attractive customers' attention had failed. Other forms of pay-for-access models also had incredible difficulty finding traction. A web site such as *The New York Times* could not maintain a pay for service model, even though the very thing it was selling (a newspaper) had existed in a pay for service form in print since 1851.

Put simply, we think differently about information in the collective. We see it as a resource for us to make better choices, not as an end product in itself. As a result, collectives start informing not only what we know, but how we know. Web sites such as Amazon.com are as valuable for their product reviews as they are for the availability of products themselves. We are able to assess and evaluate the things we buy much more easily now and we are able to do so not because of a shared sense of community, but because we have a trust in the collective nature and purpose of the sites we visit.

Amazon's review system is not designed to direct us to choose one product over another; it is designed to enable our agency to make the best choice for us. Likewise, Google wants us to believe we have found the best site for our needs through search, not the one that profits them the most.

The lessons of a collective epistemology invite us to reframe our understanding of both collective and community identity and have far ranging implications for how we think about everything from advertising and business to politics and elections, from diplomacy and foreign policy to redesigning our educational institutions.

Understanding the shift from community to collectives may be a first step in beginning to understand how and why the Internet and social networks are transforming our culture and how we might harness those changes to advance our thinking about social, cultural, and economic issues that define and affect us all.

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<sup>1</sup> As I am writing this paper, we are witnessing a political revolution in Egypt. There is no doubt that social media is influencing the shape and form of that political action and may, in fact, be defining it. We are witnessing what might be called a “flash collective,” reminiscent of earlier “flash mobs” that were afforded by mobile devices. As this paper examines, these new collectives are more focused on agency and moments like these may give us deep insight into how the agency afforded by collectives may radically transform our notions of structure and institution.