

Reddit Culture: Modes of Interaction and Abstraction in the Self-Referential Online Community

As we move forward in our technological development, the internet continues to become a bigger and bigger part of our lives. One of the effects of this ubiquity is the rise and prominence of “online communities” such as social media sites, internet forums, mailing lists, and other websites and internet-based groups, where individuals from various real-life locations can gather to interact on the internet. These communities greatly extend our ability to communicate and collaborate with one another, with the network acting as a mediator between people with different viewpoints, physical locations, and preferred methods of communication. However, it is also important to consider the potential hidden effects that this oft-ignored mediation has. By altering our structure of communication from that of traditional offline communities, the existence of these online communities doesn’t merely allow connection between individuals, but has the potential to change how they relate to one another—sometimes in drastic but not immediately obvious ways.

As de Souza and Preece note, “Intuitively everyone seems to understand the concept of ‘online community’ but so far there is no agreed upon definition” (579-580). Therefore, let us begin by clarifying the meaning of the term “online community”. One initial attempt at a definition might be “a group of people on the internet who all have something in common”. However, this allows us to talk about “communities” defined as “people whose names begin with the letter ‘A’” or “people who have microwaves”, which is clearly not what is meant by the term. Why? Because there is no active connection between them; their relationship is purely theoretical, passive and not utilized.

De Souza and Preece define an online community as “a group of people, who come together for a purpose online, and who are governed by norms and policies” (580). That is, an online community is defined by an active, mediated relationship between its members via the internet. This relationship can be effected in two primary ways: directly between individuals, such as in the case of social networks, or through a central object, such as in the case of fandom. Utilizing de Souza and Preece’s concept of

the “online community constituent” (591), a “directed graph” in which “nodes...stand for *entities*” and “arcs stand for *binary relations* between entities”, we can represent the two cases in Fig. 1.

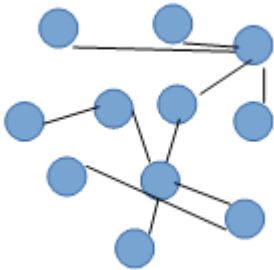


Figure 1A: an online community with direct connections between users.

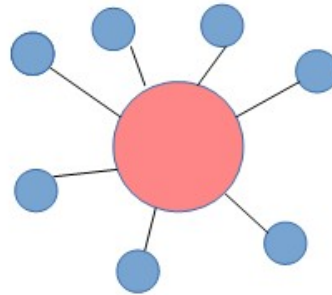


Figure 1B: an online community in which the users interact indirectly through a central object.

There are a number of differences between these two types of online community, but the most significant is that the second has the ability to form a culture, while the first does not.

Consider Facebook. As a social network, its primary conceit is acting as a mode of connecting through already-existing relationships. This is reflected in both its branding—“Connect with friends and the world around you on Facebook” (“Facebook - Log In or Sign Up”)—and its site structure. Facebook users have no access to the community as a whole; their interactions are limited to their personal network of friends. Once again, Facebook encourages users to base these networks on already-existing relationships: when a user receives a friend request, Facebook displays a message warning them to “Only accept Friend Requests from people you really know.” While there exist “pages” for organizations and celebrities where any user can view and comment on posts, the content itself is provided by a single individual or organization. None of this is to say that there is no culture on Facebook whatsoever; however, there is no unified “Facebook culture” on the basis of which any two users on the site could potentially form a relationship. Instead, Facebook consists of many separate

instances of the object-focused model centered around individuals and organizations, each with their own culture.

Compare this to the popular video game *Minecraft*, which is known for its strong community element. As the game itself contains no documentation or tutorials, even players who prefer the Singleplayer Mode are compelled to turn to community-created sources of information, such as the Minecraft Wiki or the Minecraft Forum. As Alex Leavitt points out, “a veritable ecosystem of player-creators exists that creates *alongside* the official production process” (2); that is, the players contribute back to the game that they then experience.

Unlike on Facebook, it is possible for the average user to access the community as a whole by affecting Minecraft’s culture. For example, the pervasive myth created by a user known as Copeland of an aggressive non-player character named Herobrine (“Herobrine”) became popular enough that it has been featured in official release notes (Persson), while structures or “builds” as well as game modifications (“mods”) created by non-celebrity players are featured frequently on the front page of the popular Minecraft Forum, where they are visible to all of the forum’s users. Optifine, a popular mod created by user sp614x that allows users to change the game’s graphical settings to better fit the power of their computer, ran an ongoing poll for its users on the Minecraft Forum; as of 10 Dec. 2015, 61,680 users had submitted a vote (Sp614x). Even without having such a large impact on the *Minecraft* community, two previously non-acquainted users can form a relationship mediated by this culture; for example, two players might commiserate over fear of the iconic Creeper (a monster that has become a symbol for the game), compare circuits made with in-game electrical mechanics, share a liking for a community-made music video, or simply play the game together in Multiplayer Mode. All of this is possible due to a shared relationship with the community’s central object.

Facebook and the *Minecraft* community are both typical examples of their own type of online community. Facebook is clearly based on preexisting relationships, while interactions within the

Minecraft community are clearly mediated through the game. It is notable that each carries some rhizomatic characteristics: Facebook the decentralized structure, and *Minecraft* the ability for each individual to contribute to the community as a whole, and therefore collaborate with other users, without needing to hold a hierarchical position—“the ability of any node to be connected to any other node” (Galloway, *Protocol*, 61). A third online community, Reddit, attempts to go further and build an entirely rhizomatic structure; however, this belies the hierarchy implicitly but heavily present in the community. This is not to condemn hierarchical structures, but there is danger in presenting one form while implementing another. In this case, that danger manifests as a fetishization of self-reference and abstraction that stifles discourse and exchange, appearing to empower users within the virtual “space” of Reddit by hiding the heavily mediated human interactions in favor of interaction with the “community” as a single entity.

As a website, Reddit was originally created as a link aggregator, in which users (known as “Redditors”) were able to post links to other sites, which were then sorted based on “upvotes” and “downvotes” from other users. Initially, most of these were related to pornography, technology, or science (Olson), but the range of topics has diversified; according to redditmetrics.com, there are currently over 750,000 different subforums (“subreddits”), each with its own topic (“New Subreddits by Date”). Reddit initially functioned much like a crowdsourced newspaper. However, comments allowing direct user interaction were added in December 2005, seven months after its founding (Huffman, “Comments!”); Reddit’s community element has existed since nearly the very beginning.

Reddit’s community constituent is more complex than that of Facebook or *Minecraft*, and it doesn’t perfectly fit either of their models. Like the *Minecraft* community, Reddit as a link aggregator and forum is clearly built around an object; most of its millions of users don’t know each other offline, and generally come together to discuss a topic from a link (or, at times, a text post). However, there is no single immediately identifiable object, as Reddit is divided into a multitude of different subreddits,

each with its own topic. In this respect, it resembles Facebook's localized objects, but unlike Facebook's personal networks, the vast majority of subreddits are open to all users, and there is a large overlap between users of different, often unrelated subreddits. Indeed, Reddit is designed specifically to allow this, giving the user the ability to subscribe to multiple subreddits whose top posts will then be shown on their personalized version of the website's front page. It goes so far as to automatically subscribe new users to 50 selected subreddits by default, and even display particularly popular posts from subreddits the user is not subscribed to. As such, the lack of global interconnection displayed by Facebook is nonexistent on Reddit. This is the first clue to the nature of Reddit's object.

Singer et al. hypothesize that "Reddit has been experiencing an increasing, fundamental shift from 'out-reference' to more 'self-reference'", noting instances in which "Reddit is clearly preoccupied with itself", such as the subreddit /r/circlejerk, creating for mocking common trends and memes on Reddit, and posts "so particular to Reddit's community...that only frequent Redditors can fully get the intended meaning" (521). That is to say: Reddit's collective perception of its own culture has become its object. From a practical point of view, this should hardly be surprising. Without any predetermined central object, but with the need of such an object through which users can relate, the content generated entirely by the community itself can serve as common ground. Two different Reddit users may not play the same games, watch the same movies, or hold similar political viewpoints, but it is likely that they have both come into contact with the popular "switcheroo" meme (one of Reddit's long-running jokes, based on the deliberate misidentification of the subject of a sentence or picture) or have an opinion on Reddit's controversial ex-CEO Ellen Pao.

An object-based community recirculating its own content is not unheard of; in fact, one might even argue that this is a trivial observation. But it is important to ask: what is the purpose of this form of mediation? What are its effects? While some self-referential content is at least tangentially relevant to the outside world (such as the race and gender-related controversy regarding Ellen Pao), much of it

(such as the “switcheroo” meme) is entirely self-contained, and fails to generate any new meaning whatsoever.

Compare this to Wendy Chun’s critique of programming culture in *Programmed Visions*. She notes that “programming languages...model the world as a ‘game’” (47), reducing it to a set of abstract rules, with which the programmer can create and the computer produce “an internally consistent if externally incomplete microworld” (46). This “[establishes] the programmer as a sovereign subject, for whom there is no difference between command given and command completed” (47). While Chun is discussing programming, this applies equally well to Reddit.

One of the primary goals of Reddit is to obtain points known as Karma, which are gained when a user’s posts and comments are upvoted and lost when they are downvoted; Singer et al. note that “submitting Redditors are ever hunting for ‘karma’” (521). The name comes, of course, from the spiritual concept in several Asian religions, in which the moral standing of individual’s actions help to determine their future; however, unlike the religious version, Reddit’s Karma confers no tangible benefits whatsoever upon the user other than the knowledge that they are approved by the community as a whole. As such, Karma merely represents the user’s level of “success” on Reddit, unassumingly substituting individual interactions with learning how to use the system efficiently. Galloway describes the process of playing *Civilization*, saying that “the gamer is not simply playing this or that historical simulation”, but “instead learning, internalizing, and becoming intimate with a massive, multipart, global algorithm. To play the game means to play the code of the game” (*Gaming*, 90-91). It is the same on Reddit. Redditors are not simply using this or that mode of interacting with other users, but instead learning how to play the “code” of Reddit.

In addition to Reddit’s game-like characteristics, it clearly represents the “microworld” that Chun speaks of with its heavy use of the cyberspace metaphor. In a recent announcement, for example, co-founder Steve Huffman (known on the site as /u/spez) referred to Reddit as “a place”, and mentioned

not being able to “hang out in the comments”; commenters used the same terminology, with Redditor /u/867-53OhNein, for example, expressing their desire for Reddit to remain a site where “Users can go from looking at pictures of kittens, and then hop over to a subreddit where people are getting their heads sawed off” (Huffman, “Content Policy Update”), once again using action and location-based metaphors to describe the website. In a short PBS documentary about Reddit, co-founder Alexis Ohanian expressed his desire for “people to have the freedom to operate in that space”, while another Reddit staff member went so far as to say that “the internet is a place” (PBS Offbook), positioning Reddit as a sub-space within the virtual world of the internet as a whole. Of course, Redditors are not alone in this; as previously mentioned, de Souza and Preece describe users in an online community as “coming together”, while this very essay uses the term “gather” to describe the phenomenon.

The phrase “internally consistent if externally incomplete” is apt to describe this space; phenomena such as the culture created around the April Fools Day joke known as “the Button” (The Reddit Admins) and the aforementioned “switcheroo” meme are reminiscent of programs created by “power users” for no purpose other than to increase their control over their system. Each of these is almost entirely isolated in both cause and effect from the external world, and exists solely for the pleasure of taking part in empowering self-referential manipulation: control-increasing programs augment the power of these aptly-named “power users” even if they will rarely or ever need to use it, while Reddit’s internal memes allow the users to provide their own content to the community and gain its approval in the form of Karma, even though the content has no creative or productive relationship to the outside world whatsoever. Just as the fetishism of source code “[turns] time into space” and “enables a logic of repetition” (Chun, 52), fetishism of the abstraction found in Reddit’s culture creates a space from what is essentially repetition of a central theme. Chun says that “The distinction between programmers and users is gradually eroding”; but if “programmers are becoming more like simple users” (46), users are

also becoming more like programmers.

Galloway claims that “The Net...is not narrative in a conventional sense; its terms are not produced in a differential relationship to some sort of universal equivalent” (*Protocol*, 69-72). Perhaps this was the case when *Protocol* was originally published in 2001; but today, on Reddit, content theoretically representing the relationship between users is in reality generated in relationship to a central object. That object is “the community” as a whole, represented discretely by Karma, which acts as a universal measure of value—value, that is, of users’ opinions and their overall value as individuals within the context of the community. Though this is the source of Reddit’s apparent rhizomaticism, it is also the source of its hierarchical nature. For how can this production be distributed, even if it is technically crowd-sourced, when it is all generated in relation to a central systemic narrative that determines which content is promoted?

This system of production and relations is a uniform repetition of (micro-)universally accepted empty forms based off a prevailing narrative, reproduced by the community not as individuals, but as a mass, and justified by the fetishization of abstraction; it is “an *end in itself*” (Kracauer, 76) and “[its] closure is brought about by emptying all the substantial constructs of their contents” (77). In other words, it is nothing more and nothing less than Kracauer’s Mass Ornament. And thus the role of this structure in user interaction becomes clear. It serves as an impediment to the type of meaning that can be created when “the people...arise out of a community” (76). This collaboration surging with “A current of organic life” is directly opposite to the “pure assemblage of lines” (76) that is the Mass Ornament, which arises out of a system that encourages and practically forces users to interact with the mass rather than individuals.

The problem is not merely the existence of abstraction and the enjoyment users derive from it; as Kracauer argues, “the *aesthetic* pleasure gained from ornamental mass movements is *legitimate*” (79). Users are making their best effort to create in a virtual “world” where traditional methods of interaction

do not exist; and “When significant components of reality become invisible in our world, art must make do with what is left” (79). No; the problem with Reddit’s fetishization of abstraction is that it “establishes a spiritual space that encompasses all expression” (81). The constant reproduction of the central narrative fails to leave any room for critical discussion with other users; Reddit’s refusal to recognize its own implicitly hierarchical nature leads to the illusion of creativity and critical thought where they do not exist, failing to give Redditors the chance to separate their abstraction from genuine collaboration and leading to the inevitable proliferation of the former due to a phenomenon that, on its own, is harmless aesthetic pleasure. That is to say, the problem is not that Reddit *has* a culture, but that it positions that culture as its central object.

Reddit is not the only online community that can have this structure. The elements that lead to this abstraction have the potential to appear in other online communities as well, and as we continue to do more and more of our interaction through the internet, this will inevitably be a risk. Thus, when constructing online communities, it is important that we keep in mind the ability of individual users to interact with each other organically, rather than solely as a mass. For it is only in allowing users to separate abstraction from collaboration and experience them both independently, the aesthetic pleasure of abstract forms and the organic creativity of genuine human interaction, that we can take full advantage of our growing technology, revolutionizing our ability to communicate across previously impenetrable borders while maintaining the humanity that makes it worthwhile.

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