

Welcome to the Front Page

An Ethnographic Exploration of Free Speech within Reddit

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Abstract

Reddit, the self-described Front Page of the Internet, presents a front row seat to the commodification of the internet's earliest aspiration into a marketable good. Yet unlike other platforms in the web 2.0 era, Reddit's users resist, finding means to counter the prevailing trend. The platform with its long, and often tortured relationship to free speech suggests the means towards locating the root of such resistance. Expressing a desire for autonomy, free speech within Reddit highlights the clash between competing directions for Reddit. Like much of the internet, Reddit's future can be distilled to a single question, does it exist as a private property, or a public good? Welcome to the front page is an ethnographic exploration of the role that free speech plays within Reddit. Addressing how free speech is understood and deployed by users, moderators, and administrators, the following thesis contends that to understand Reddit's successes and failures, one must first begin by understanding the importance of free speech, and the direction such an attachment portends.

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Glossary of Terms and Concepts

Key Concepts

Commodification: The process by which *use value* is transformed into *exchange value*. More precisely, described as the process “of transforming products whose value is determined by their ability to meet individual or social needs into products whose value is set by their market price” (Mosco, 2009, pp 132).

Digital Literacy: A series of practices, aptitudes, knowledges, and awareness that together allow individuals the competence to both *consume* and *produce* material within digital environments. Within this thesis digital literacy is comprised of three domains of competency, the *ability to evaluate*, the *ability to create*, and the *ability to participate*.

Free Speech: A nebulous concept within Reddit, free speech represents a rallying cry for user’s extolling their autonomy, an heir to the hacker belief that information should be free and boundless (McChesney, 2012). As a result free speech in the context of this thesis represents the locus for clashes between users and site administrators.

Equipotentiality: A meritocratic belief which suggests each participant holds an equal chance at impacting collaborative projects, more succinctly equipotentiality reflects “the assumption that while the skills and abilities of all participants [in the project] are not equal, they have an equal ability to make a worthy contribution to the project” (Bruns, 2006, pp 25).

Platform: A framework on top of which users, apps, and programs operate. More concisely platforms are seen as “[providing] a set of shared techniques, technologies, and interfaces to a broad set of users who can build what they want on a stable substrate” (Kenney & Zysman, 2016. Pp 64).

Recursion: A method of problem solving in computer sciences that adheres to a ‘divide-and-conquer approach’ in order to locate a solution. More specifically, recursion specifies “[breaking] the problem into several subproblems that are similar to the original problem but smaller in size, solve those problems recursively, and then combine these solutions to create a solution to the original problem” (Cormen, Leiserson, Rivest & Stein, 2009, pp 30).

Social Media: Technologies that interconnect disparate users, described as “networked information services designed to support in-depth social interaction, community formation, collaborative opportunities and collaborative work (Hingsinger & Senft, 2012, pp 1). Popular examples include Reddit, Facebook, and Twitter.

Web 2.0: The current architectural framework of the internet. Unlike web 1.0 that favored a static system, web 2.0 favors dynamism by situating users as a primary means of data generation. Far from a definitional category, web 2.0 has evolved into a popular buzzword evoking ideals of participation, engagement, and interactivity between users (Mandiberg, 2012).

Reddit Terminology¹

Reddit: A social media platform and content aggregator, self-described as the *front page of the internet*. Founded in 2015 by Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian, the site has developed into “one of the more news oriented social spaces on the web” (Pew, 2016, pp 3).

Subreddit (*sub*): The individual forums of Reddit catering to specific content. Subs are created by users, who come to manage them through moderation. As Reddit explains “By default, new users are subscribed to a selection of the most popular ones, but you'll get a lot more enjoyment out of the site if you take the time to subscribe to ones that appeal to you. After doing so, the front page will change to show a customized listing tailored to your interests.”

Front Page: The first page seen when one reaches Reddit. Totalling 25 posts the front page consists of the material most upvoted throughout the site. By reaching the front page a post receives immense visibility.

Thread: The singular message forums connected to posted materials. Threads are the area within Reddit where users congregate to discuss, evaluate, debate, and voice their opinions towards the material on Reddit. Threads are posted to subs, and if they receive enough votes can reach the front page.

¹ All terms taken from Reddit FAQ unless otherwise specified. FAQ can be located at <https://www.reddit.com/wiki/faq>

User (*Redditor*): Participants engaging within the collaborative project of Reddit. Defined as a group of individuals who engage with the platform either viewing, posting, voting on, or commenting on material. To post, vote, or comment on material is only enabled by having an account.

Lurker: A subset of users, who do not directly engage with the site through commenting or voting. While they may have an account with the site, lurkers remain solely as an audience and not as participants in the activities taking place.

Moderator (*Mod*): Redditors who volunteer their time in order to perform custodial duties and sub specific maintenance. The position of moderator is sub specific, as a result users can become moderators for a variety of subs, but their status as mod does not transfer outside of the sub they moderate. Mods are distinguished in threads by their username being highlighted in green.

Administrator (*Admin*): Employees of Reddit. Their status is expressed in Reddit by their usernames highlighted in red.

Karma: The social currency used in Reddit to demonstrate positive contributions to the site. As explained by Reddit, karma is a “reminder of your legacy”.

Meta: Denotes a quality of self-awareness, a self-referential understanding of itself. Redditors in particular appreciate material and submissions that embodies a self-awareness of the platform, its tastes, preferences, and often its limitations. Deployed through humor, meta suggests a degree of reflexivity present within the userbase.

Flair: A text or icon that appears next to a user’s handle when they post. Flairs are sub specific, and exist as a means of presenting additional information regarding a user. In some subs this additional information can be a user’s particular expertise (such as /r/Science), or an expression of a user’s preference (favorite team in /r/Hockey), or in some instance flairs can denote aberrant behavior (/r/CringeAnarchy).

Gold (*gilding*): A subscription service, Reddit Gold is a membership program that unlocks additional features throughout the platform. The most notable is guiding a user with a gold flair attached to their post. By gilding a post one declares that the post in question is of particular note.

Gilding both rewards positive submissions, while also allows a post to gain more visibility by virtue of being gilded.

Upvoting & Downvoting: The means through which individual users express their reactions to content they engage with (Pew, 2016). Each user is afforded one vote, either upvoting if they enjoy the material, or downvoting it if they disagree with it.

Shit-posting: Posting inflammatory materials in order to interrupt the flow of activities or conversations taking place.

Circle-jerk: The event in which users devolve into group-think and validate similar positions to their own.

Introduction: The Age of Cybercrud Welcomes You!

The Internet is among the few things humans have built that they don't truly understand

- Eric Schmidt & Jared Cohen

Since its idealistic beginnings, the internet has inspired a connection between knowledge production and emancipatory potentials. Perhaps the crescendo of utopian rhetoric resides in the work of Marshal McLuhan, particularly his conception of the *Global Village*, an idyllic future set in motion by the presaged electronic frontier. The world, by virtue of these emergent technologies would unify through electronic networks (McLuhan, 1962), this romanticism would come to represent one of the guiding narratives within successive waves of the internet's development (Coyne, 2001). The technological determinism implicit within McLuhan's thoughts assuaged digital celebrants' aspirations for a revolution premised upon unification and cultural rebellion, an era in which "big business and big government would be imminently overthrown by the intrinsically empowering effects of new technology on individuals" (Barbrook & Cameron, 1995, pp 3). The counterculture mentality at the root of the Internet's development would invite consecutive waves of developers keen on maximizing the disruptive elements implied. In adopting a McLuhanist understanding towards the impacts of communication technologies, immortalized by the maxim 'the medium is the message', the development of the internet during its infancy would occur under the belief that its appearance would automatically usher the utopic goals its architects envisioned. Described as *Internet-centrism*, this practice conceives the digital medium as "the alpha and omega of technologies, an agency that overrides all obstacles" (Curran, 2012, pp 3); left to its own, the internet will inevitably resolve the issues of the present, and transform society for the better. We simply must be patient.

The digital revolution supported by a romance of unification, and myths of idyllic utopias, advocates particular goals. At issue in these narratives however is their vagueness regarding temporality, regularly “downplaying current achievements, which are inevitably more modest than predications” (Coyne, 1999, pp 19). The repeated hyperboles stirred by digital celebrants particularly prevents objective assessments of the internet’s present impacts, most notably in reference to envisioned political objectives, believed to be a central component of the digital revolution (Hindman, 2009). As the digital revolution was thought to be rooted in disruption, particularly towards a sweeping redistribution of power, this promised democratization was assumed to indicate a social and cultural renaissance, especially in regards to political forums (Glister, 1997; Benkler, 2003; Hindman, 2009; Rheingold, 2012). The liberal sentiment that emancipation resides within knowledge, paved the theoretical groundwork for much of the internet’s association with societal renewal. Supported by the promise of the freedom to access and share information, the digital revolution was envisioned as supporting novel media and political environments where individuals were “encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (Jenkins, 2006, pp 3). Yet due to the specter of internet-centrism, such assumptions rarely become publically challenged, particularly as it is believed with “firm conviction that we are living through unique, and revolutionary times, in which the previous truths no longer hold, everything is undergoing profound change” (Morozov, 2013, pp 15). As a result, public debates centering upon digital technologies and their impacts have often been shallow, unproductive, and reliant on the ignorance of the general public to adequately question the decisions occurring within their digital ecosystems (Postman, 1993; Morozov, 2013).

With the ascendancy of internet-centrism, we are beholden to technology we don’t understand, whose direction we are assured is focused upon a better, more open, and more empowered future. Far from a new age of enlightenment, the digital age is one characterized by *cybercrud*, an ever-expanding divide of competence between the intended public meant to benefit from digital technologies empowering potentials, and the architects designing these technologies (Nelson, 1974). Racing towards this supposed utopic future, internet users are instead confronted with an increasingly commodified myriad of social media platforms that suggest freely sharing personal information as akin to empowerment. The information highway, once seen as roaring towards the electronic agora, somewhere veered towards the electronic marketplace. The resignation of the internet as a public good is dependent on ignorance, thriving on an inability to

push back the tide of commodification that has altered the nature, and general direction of the internet: from a platform for individual empowerment, to a social factory harnessing sociability for profit, the divide between the internet's initial promise, and current function continues to widen. All that remains of the internet's democratic promise seemingly resides in its mythologized remnants, which have become manipulated and commercialized in order to perpetuate the need for the technologies, and their continued centrality within our lives (Mosco, 2005). With the increasing reliance on the internet to support ourselves, the frightening truth is how few of us truly understand what is presently occurring, and where these decisions are leading us. If the internet, as the quote opening this chapter suggests, is something we don't fully understand, then it is a decision by design, not by accident.

Welcome to the Front Page of the Internet-

If the battle for the institutional ecology of the internet is currently underway (Benkler, 2006), then arguably at this moment firms are winning. The increasing commodification of the internet presents a scathing rebuke to the utopic rhetoric of the internet's early celebrants. The supposition that the internet would usher with it a new era of openness - the removal of barriers promoting inclusiveness, innovation, and competition from non-market actors – suggested once a cultural revolution akin to the printing press's introduction (Rheingold, 2012; Taylor, 2014). Yet the banality of the internet within contemporary society points to the alienation between ourselves, and the machines of our supposed emancipation. While the reach of the internet expanded under the tutelage of corporations, the general public's understanding of these technologies grew shallower. As a result, while web 2.0² suggests accessibility, the current era ironically becomes one characterized by a participation gap, a deepening divide relating to competencies both to engage, and add onto these platforms (Jenkins, 2006). Being unable to fully participate undercuts the potentialities of web 2.0, subsequently fostering an environment rife for exploitation and alienation by interests supporting commodification. Uninformed internet users equate to uncritical users, both in how to engage with content, other users, and the platforms themselves. This thesis

² Seen as the result of the web becoming mainstream (Taylor, 2014), web 2.0 refers to the focus on user generated information and content. In contrast to the top-down broadcasting focus of web 1.0, the focus on web 2.0 can be surmised as seeking to harness the collaborative spirit first intoned by the internet's earliest architects (Hunsinger, 2014; Herman, 2014). Instead of being passive consumers of information, users in web 2.0 are afforded an opportunity to also create and broadcast their own information.

as a result suggests that a means of countering such commodification resides in the development, and proliferation of digital literacy skills. Becoming informed about how to participate, create, disseminate, and congregate, all facets of digital literacy within the era of web 2.0, highlight not only the original ethos of the internet's radical nature, but supports the promise of democratization. The potentials residing within web 2.0 however remain inert, so long as platform users remain passive agents. By lacking the full array of digital literacy skills, users are limited in what activities they can engage in, while also lacking awareness of how these platforms accrue information for profit; digital literacy, the aptitude and ability to participate and engage within digital domains, comes to educate users both to the cultural, and material conditions required for their activities to take place. If the initial promise of the internet was the utopic potential of bringing knowledge and information to a mass audience, than its implementation is equally reliant on users being informed, both of their own capabilities individually, and also collectively.

Social media brings to the surface the romance these technologies weave, the myths that depict our collective longings, and the paradoxes which emerge when pursuing profit within these domains. Social media as a result allows a more intimate exploration of the impacts of these larger processes, anchoring them in the narratives, behaviors, and aptitudes of the users who congregate, and socialize within these digital spaces. Additionally social media platforms present suitable sites to recognize the commodification of digital spaces, where the users themselves are transformed into both laborer and product. Social media arguably presents a synthesis of the internet's early aspirations and of the commodification that would later contest those rosy aspirations. While Postman (1995) argued that all technology presents a Faustian Bargain, each corresponding advantage inviting subsequent disadvantage, social media connotes a more nebulous appraisal in its impacts. The sociality engineered into these platforms becomes a point of contention amongst competing ideological outlooks for the internet. On one hand, such sociality suggests social media as incubators for successive digital literacy development. Sociality equally represents the resources captured by firms, and transformed into profit. Currently the latter remains the dominate narrative and direction which social media has generally adhered to, and will remain, lest some radical change occurs to upend this dynamic. As a result the position of this thesis is that such opportunity resides primarily in digital literacy. Its proliferation is the first step in righting the internet towards its proper role as a public good.

Up until now the emphasis has been on the internet at a macro scale, navigating its development through the romance it ushers, the myths it fosters, and the paradoxes which undercut such ambitions. Social media platforms bring these tensions to the surface. As a result, this thesis will focus on one such platform. Reddit broadly speaking is a content aggregator, and home to a unique, and raucous userbase. Their collective labor, like with other social media platforms, forms the basis of the site's functionality, anchoring the platform's operation in the activities of its users. Reddit comes to be distinguished however by its habit of mobilizing in protest when user's sentiments are not properly received. This distinction has arguably directed Reddit on a unique course. Unlike rival social media platforms, Reddit's users often seem incensed by alterations to the site, changes that veer from the site's original outlook. Much like the history of the internet, Reddit's development is one that begins with a disruptive and utopic aspiration, which over time became warped by aspirations to monetize. Reddit's development in fact represents a microcosm of the internet as a whole: the clash between the electronic agora and the electronic marketplace, and a failed attempt at synthesizing the two. What connects these various strands of thought is the community's veneration of free speech. Free speech within this thesis as a result comes to represent the locus for clashes between users and site administrators. User's expectations towards how Reddit should operate are often expressed through their individual and collective assessments of free speech's vitality; free speech intones a metric for determining Reddit's increasing commodification. Free speech within Reddit comes to illustrate the tension between opposing outlooks of how the platform, and the internet in general should function, whether as public good or private profit venture.

Welcome to the Front Page as a result focuses upon a series of research questions question meant to highlight the tension between observing Reddit as either a public good or private venture. To do so this thesis observes how the various parties on Reddit understand the concept of free speech, and how these understandings impact the site's operation. To perform such an analysis, three successive research questions will be put forth: first *how do users assess and enact the ideal of free speech?* Second *how does the operation of the site, reflected in the labor of the moderators (unpaid volunteer users) enable or constrain such activities?* Finally *how does the site administration as represented by head office enable and constrain these occurrences?* In order to investigate these questions this thesis will apply an ethnographic approach that seeks to anchor the abstract idealism of free speech in the attitudes, behaviors, actors, and structures that together

constitute the site. By observing these three parties on Reddit, this study hopes to consider how the ideal of free speech arises, and the factors that come to enable and constrain its appearance.

In order to accomplish the aforementioned analysis of Reddit's attachment towards free speech, this thesis will be divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 provides a brief introductory overview of Reddit, highlighting important terms and concepts necessary for understanding the platform and the userbase it supports. Chapter 2 will provide a methodological overview for the present research initiative. Chapter 3 will elucidate a framework for understanding free speech within Reddit, and how Reddit's development has been intertwined with its dialogue towards what constitutes free speech. Utilizing ethnographic examples, chapter 3 will suggest that far from unfiltered speech, free speech activities throughout Reddit are in fact highly editorialized forms of speech that come to reflect cultural, and material idiosyncrasies nascent to Reddit. In chapter 4 the focus will be directed to how free speech transmutes into action. Focusing on two distinct examples, chapter 4 argues that the Reddit community's collective mobilizations highlight an understanding of the cultural and material conditions through which the site comes to exist. Chapter 5 aims to continue this thought and apply it to an understanding of the political economy of Reddit. The reliance on unpaid labor supports Reddit, while equally fostering its instability, expressed through user protest. Within chapter 6 an analysis of digital literacy and its importance in Reddit will be discussed, highlighting the irony that Reddit's profitability is reliant upon arming its users with the means to protest. Finally in chapter 7 some concluding remarks, lamentations towards limitations, and directions for future research will be discussed. Rarely researched, Reddit presents a unique, and educative forum for understanding how the digital revolution failed to materialize, but also suggesting that perhaps while flawed, that dream isn't fully out of reach.

Chapter One: A Brief Introduction to Reddit

Reddit is kind of like the best and worst parts of the internet and humanity rolled up into one space

- Adrienne Massanari

Reddit to the uninitiated can be an unfriendly place. Its design is archaic, being both aesthetically unpleasant, while often functionally impotent – case in point, the platform lacks a robust search function. The site and its design suggest a throwback, a relic from the past, where control was less rigid and overt, where creativity and unruliness were seen as synonymous. Much of this rowdiness can be traced to an energized and committed userbase (known as *Redditors*), who often cling to a belief that their labor entitles them to less restrictions, and a greater voice in the platform’s development. Reddit is best understood within this tension, as users seek unrestricted opportunity to pursue their interests, while the platform’s ownership pursues a means to both placate and harness this esprit for their own profit. Users, as this project will explore, reflect the brand of Reddit. The product Reddit represents becomes dependent upon user activity, behavior, and character – together these elements populate Reddit with the unique content it advertises. By boldly declaring itself as the *Front Page of the Internet*, Reddit’s intentions are made clear: to become a focal element in the larger digital ecosystem. To do so it requires its userbase, both as participants and commodity. The result, a site unique within the social media era of the internet. Case in point users have leveraged their labor and communal output to position themselves as stakeholders within Reddit’s operation. As a result Reddit has come to view itself as democratic (Massanari, 2017), a view supported by administrators acquiescing to user opinion and demands, and upholding a degree of transparency towards the site’s development.

As this chapter will explore, the taxonomy of Reddit is difficult to pinpoint. For every potential classification, Reddit poses a stipulation that undermines a neat and tidy conclusion. A mixture of a content aggregator, online message board, social-networking site, and emporium for internet culture, Reddit links these disparate elements through its users who freely evaluate, comment, share, and discuss the material posted. Perhaps it is the site's veneration of free speech which presents the best means of roughly defining Reddit, on terms amenable both to its functionality and user's evaluations. Understanding Reddit as a conversation, focused on discussing events that intrigue the community, anchors the platform within its sociality. Furthermore in observing Reddit as a conversation, it equally enables political connotations, especially as such a classification suggests Reddit supports the emergence of a public – or at least a segment of one. Proposing that users throughout Reddit represent a public, and not simply an audience, is meant to distinguish the active engagement entailed by participating on the platform (Rheingold, 2012); the passivity implied by an audience runs counter to the active participation suggested by web 2.0³. As a perpetual conversation, Reddit invites successive discussion, evaluation, and collective action, hallmarks of an active public. Furthermore, the discourse undertaken by a public is one focused on the critical evaluation of the society that it is part of (Balkin, 2016). Reddit's voracious appetite for new content, and the subsequent evaluation through discussion seem to fall in line with such classification. As this thesis will elucidate, in approaching Reddit as a conversation, one deemed reliant on free speech's vitality, the site's unruliness, dissent, and vitriol come into focus as negotiations between the myth and reality of free speech's impacts. I argue that any attempt to classify and understand Reddit must commence with the knowledge of free speech's importance, both to the community, but equally in understanding how the platform functions. By evaluating Reddit as a conversation, not only is the integral role of free speech cemented, but the functionality of Reddit equally becomes highlighted, as a conduit promoting and equally constraining users most cherished ideal.

³ The shift from purely passive consumption, to a synergy of consumption and production afforded by web 2.0 has long been a well-documented trend (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Rheingold, 2012; Taylor, 2014). Bruns in particular focuses on this shift in media consumption, suggesting a novel and emerging tendency called *produsage* (2008).

The Who, What, Why and How of Reddit

Reddit like any conversation is reliant on rules, norms, mores, and protocols. Some of these are located within the design of the site, others are the result of communally ensconced values. The rest of this chapter is a primer of the site, its basic functionality, an overview of its users, and an introduction to the communal values that order the site. The material elements of the site, its design, architecture, and layout, together promote and valorize certain qualities and ideals, often drawn from the supposed idyllic past of golden era hackers. Such values in turn become engrained in the community. The material elements and cultural elements present the two pillars that support the uniqueness of Reddit, equally informing the other, with serious alterations to one capable of undermining both. This balancing act is one of the chief reasons behind the administrators' general reluctance to interfere with the userbase; a fear that intervention could precipitate a flight of users has often been seen as a crippling issue towards Reddit gaining wider legitimacy (Massanari, 2017). This codependence equally helps to explain why users are prone to outbursts and tantrums when confronted with alterations to the platform. Understanding these two components of Reddit, how they organize the site, promote collaboration, and rely entirely upon user labor and engagement remains the focus of this chapter⁴.

What is Reddit? Aggregation, Participation, and Organization

The adherence to free speech within Reddit is often at odds with the site's basic functionality. Reddit is a content aggregator, a platform centered on filtering material in relation to collectively agreed upon criteria. Users engaged within Reddit become intelligence filters, parsing through the information cavalcade, discerning which content is of merit in relation to Reddit's tastes. Content aggregation however is never neutral; aggregation suggests preferences which inform selection processes. Ultimately content that reflects Reddit's preferences becomes upvoted, the more content becomes upvoted, the higher the ranking it achieves, and the more visibility it is rewarded with. Content accruing the highest amount of upvotes is then able to reach Reddit's front page, from here posts are easily capable of reaching untold thousands of individuals⁵. A primary activity for users

⁴ The following chapter is drawn from the same ethnographic research as this thesis. For more detail chapter two recounts in full the methodological designs and ethnographic choices which informed this entire thesis.

⁵ While Reddit keeps much of its internal analytics private, thereby complicating attempts to deliver exact figures in terms of number of users and traffic to the site, a high level of traffic can be surmised from a high Alexa ranking (4 in the United States, 6 Globally). Alexa is an independent web analytics firm that charts and tracks traffic online. Their

within Reddit then is voting, the expression of evaluating, reflecting, and responding to the myriad of information shared on the site. The distributed process, in which each user is afforded only one vote towards each content post, alludes within Reddit a supposed adherence to democratic ideals, while equally suggesting an expedient and efficient means of quickly evaluating large amounts of content. Reddit co-creator Alexis Ohanian, in his evaluation of the distributed watchdog functions' efficiency, cheekily stresses that "it turns out that an entire building full of editors, no matter how smart or tireless they are, can't match the speed or efficiency with which the Reddit communities discover, create, and promote interesting content" (2013, pp 68). Users acting as intelligent filters are simultaneously the hungry audience for content, the unpaid laborers assessing this new content, and ultimately existing as the brand promoting 'interesting' material. While the front page represents the highest stage for content to reach, content is never posted directly onto the front page. Instead content is posted onto the plethora of unique subreddits that constitute the site, and that are created by the users themselves. Reddit is constructed from a fractal of subreddits (subs), each echoes of the front page, just at a smaller scale. Subreddits are unique in that each is meant to focus upon a singular topic, issue, activity, etc. Equally important in considering subreddits as fractals, is that such an arrangement highlights the meritocratic idealism that underscores much of Reddit, while emphasizing the openness the platform valorizes.

While voting represents a frequent behavior throughout Reddit, the major draw for most Redditors is the comment sections attached to each post. Comment threads are vibrant arenas for users to debate, argue, and contest the veracity of content and claims. Comment sections equally present forums for users to demonstrate witticisms, and the glib humor that plays well with their peers. Figure 1 presents a clear example of how rhetoric, humor, and witticism are utilized by users, and rewarded by their peers (in this case being guilded). Much like content posted, comments are evaluated, with presentation and rhetoric both playing integral roles in receiving positive responses. In fact certain subs are particularly devoted to capturing and deriding failed posts attempts, /r/TitleGore for example locates incomprehensible titles drawn from Redditors botched attempts at marketing their posts. Adherence to both stylistic and cultural criteria is essential if one's content is to gain visibility. Comments that reflect Reddit's temperament and

rankings are "a measure of how a website is doing relative to all other sites on the web over the past 3 months. The rank is calculated using a proprietary methodology that combines a site's estimated average of daily unique visitors and its estimated number of pageviews over the past 3 months" (Alexa About, 2017).

preferences become more visible by virtue of gleaning more upvotes. Visibility becomes the reward for additions seen as positive by the userbase. The counterpoint to this however



Figure 1: From an /r/AskReddit question of *What is something you're pretty sure has only happened to you?*, this exchange presents an example of Redditors propensity for, and appreciation for wordplay, wit, and humor.

is that material not appreciated by Redditors is rarely discussed as it is rarely seen. As comment threads are organized by tiers that become collapsed when not passing a certain vote threshold, submissions that are not agreeable become cached unless directly sought out. Material or opinions contrarian to the platform are therefore rarely seen, or engaged with, oftentimes buried under an avalanche of competing discussions.

Reddit is premised upon a diffused and distributed gatewatching function. Gatewatching sites focus less on the “publishing of complete, finalized news reports than in the *publicizing* of the news stories which have become newly available in other information sources” (Bruns, 2005, pp 19). As a result the major function of the userbase is to syphon through the information stream and evaluate, and subsequently promote content deserving of increased visibility. As subsequent chapters will explore such an arrangement presents immense challenges for the platform, in particular that it relies on users self-organizing themselves to filter this content (Benkler, 2006). At the various levels discussed, whether it is the front page of Reddit, the individual subs, or singular threads, users are constantly pressed to evaluate and discern the information they are confronted with, and do so without prompt. Self-organization over the course of this thesis will play an important and implicit caveat in the site’s analysis, as its appearance enables and promotes certain qualities to take hold within the userbase. The most noticeable being Redditors dialogue concerning free speech, seen as an extension of the autonomy denoted by their self-organization throughout the platform. As a content aggregator, all information in theory passes through users. The filtration of content subsequently endorses Redditors as stakeholders in Reddit’s operation – a thought process at the heart of the platform’s collective protests. The reliance on users, both as evaluators, audience, participants, and even content generators – in essence cultural gatewatchers – places them squarely at the center of Reddit’s operations, and equally places their attitudes as a thorn in the side of the platform’s operators.

How does it work? Karma, Visibility, and Meta

The impetus for much of the labor undertaken is the acquisition of karma, a social currency that quantifies a user's propensity for pro-social, and communally supportive behaviors. Upvotes become transformed through Reddit's algorithm into karma. While the exact variables weighed within the algorithm remain unknown, protected as trade secrets within Reddit proprietary concerns, the underlying logic remains: high karma reflects well received submissions. Karma equally expresses a metric for communal approval, both of content and user behavior. While users upvote to voice their approval, they equally downvote material and behavior they disagree with. What is often overlooked is that such approval is contextual, and while Reddit as this section will explore holds certain general values, their expression is sub specific. While the constellation of subs that together assemble Reddit all function in similar manners, the specific sensibilities which inform the evaluation of content, remain specific to the subreddits where the material is posted. Enough votes from a subreddit can direct the content to reach the front page, the central directory of Reddit content, while enough upvotes on a comment can surge it to the top of the thread. Upvotes equate to visibility, successful additions to the platform become illustrations then for subsequent additions to the platform.

While individual subreddits support unique additional criteria towards evaluating content, Reddit overall can be seen to favor three broad qualities when approaching material. Content must first be seen as being *authentic in character, presentation, and delivery*. Redditors detest the practice of re-posting, instances where users share old content, usually to score easy upvotes and karma. *Karma whoring*, the attempt to regurgitate previously popular content solely for the resulting karma, reflects for users a nefarious behavior that affronts Redditors mandate for authentic expressions – and authentic intentions. The practice ruffles Redditors sense that interactions be genuine, and based upon a good faith system. As a result, if users recycle older content, but state in the title that they are reposting the response becomes more favorable. Authenticity within Reddit suggests both candor of one's message, and transparency in its meaning (Massanari, 2015). Karma codifies this reputational economy, banking users past instances of positive behavior, pushing forward the trust accrued for future experiences.

Reposting furthermore alludes to the second feature that Reddit relishes, that of *originality*. Original content (OC) is a revered quality in Reddit, a reminder of the vitality of the platform.

Users often admonish the platform for what is seen as the proliferation of reposted material, suggested to be evidence of the platform's degradation. Redditors have been noted to be particularly nostalgic towards the platform (Massanari, 2015), in particular a fascination towards a primordial and idyllic iteration of Reddit, believed to be less formal and mundane. Many subs on Reddit, some which will be discussed in this thesis, express this fear as the threat of *normification*: the moment a trend crosses over from niche to mainstream. The most overt frustration is often directed at the 'default subs' of Reddit. These subs, as their designation implies represent the introductory subs for many users, which in turn is reflected in a higher rate of reposting. Default subs for many older Redditors present evidence of their gravest fear: the platform itself being jeopardized through normification, with uniqueness of the site's character in peril. In the supposed idyllic past of Reddit, OC was bountiful, and reposting was unheard. Original content harkens back to this tension, and equally confronts Reddit's fascination with authenticity, in this case directed at itself, and its nostalgic longings.

Rounding out the major features is *meta*, a quality whose appearance is a direct outgrowth of Reddit's fixation towards authenticity and originality. Meta is the most overt, and perhaps the most frequently observable of the three features discussed. Drawing from Reddit's observed self-directed and deep rooted cynicism (Massanari, 2015), meta intones a quality of self-awareness, a self-referential understanding of itself. This awareness suggests a self-reflexivity at times, an

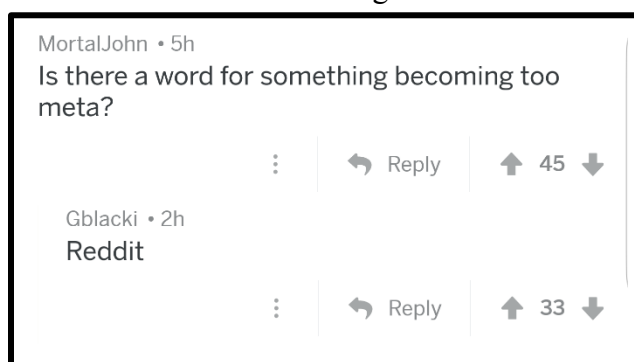


Figure 2: The exhaustion expressed by, and towards meta on the platform

understanding of the platform, both its functionality and preferences, but even more so of its limitations. Meta within Reddit is predominately expressed via humor, the saccharine exterior coating the sardonic reflections of the platform and its userbase. Figure 2 for example highlights the glib appreciation and usage of meta often seen

within Reddit discussion threads. Furthermore subreddits focused entirely on meta-criticisms of Reddit such as /r/ShitRedditSays, /r/Cringe, and /r/CreepyPMs are popular retreats for user often frustrated with the routine toxicity the platform placates by ignoring. While subs such as /r/TheoryofReddit, reflect meta communities whose users act as armchair scholars engaging in critical analysis of the platform. Meta communities suggest that segments of users engaging with

the platform act as critical observers, drawing material through inward explorations of the platform. Meta is itself rooted in the hacker ethic Reddit often emulates⁶. Hackers characteristically engage in what Himanen (2001) calls ‘playful explorations’, which for hackers is directed towards understanding computers themselves, the elements that foster their cherished activities. For Reddit meta is connected towards such an outlook. Whereas for hackers this curiosity is directed towards the material elements that give rise to their activities, for Redditors such curiosity is focused towards the cultural elements supporting their sociality. Part of the dialogue of Reddit is focused inward, towards understanding how the platform itself functions.

The qualities of authenticity, originality, and meta together present Reddit as a platform both confident in what it represents, but one equally insecure of what those conclusions imply. Yet these criteria simultaneously express a longing within the platform. Such criteria importantly present pragmatic concerns in the face of the information avalanche afforded by the digital age. Authenticity implies trusting the information presented, while originality suggests material is new, or current. Meta presents an interesting attribute. Suggesting a collective understanding to how the site operates, meta denotes an awareness to the patterns, and trends adhered to on the platform, which often promote toxic behaviors. Craving authenticity, hungry for novelty, while remaining glib in the face of these impulses, Reddit’s temperament and character become visible through its editorial preferences.

Who is behind the keyboard? Demographics, Geeks, and Toxicity

Reddit’s users are the vital ingredient for the platform’s success - a truism that will become more apparent as this thesis progresses. Yet like much of Reddit, contradictions emerge: Reddit’s failures are equally bound to their source of success. The snark and cynicism implicit in Redditors observations of the outside world are equally directed inward, deriding their fellow participants with similar vigor. Redditors generally loath other Redditors. Case in point the post on /r/ShowerThoughts titled *The Average Redditor probably thinks they are smarter than the average*

⁶ Reddit like many bastions of internet culture draws heavily from hackers, both emulating their thought process, and valorizing their supposed disruption. Yet while hackers expressed their ideology through the technical mastery of programming, Reddit expresses these tendencies in the development of cultural artifacts. The geek culture of Reddit trades technical mastery of coding for cultural hacking through memes and gifs, yet always maintaining the hacker outlook that many users perceive of as an ideological forbearer to the platform.

Redditor, the top comment drolly continued the assessment, “the average Redditor read this and agreed with the assumption that this post is directed towards others, because they know they’re smarter than the average Redditor” (/u/NebulaicCereal, 2017, June 27th). Redditors suspicions towards their peers is a constant throughout the platform, one which aids in the evaluating process, but one which plagues the platform with discontent, often expressed in the myriad of derisive subs that openly mock the supposed ‘average’ Redditor. Locating the structures that bind such disparity and prevent chaos forming within the platform becomes of immense interest then in deducing what constitutes a Redditor, while equally serving as a means of locating what informs the shared project that Reddit represents for the full spectrum of its users.

Reddit has regularly been criticized as a male-dominated forum, one at times hostile to those who do not identify with the geek masculinity endemic to the platform. Demographics have long played an issue for Reddit, presenting an integral component towards understanding the issues preventing profitability. In the departure of Ellen Pao, then interim CEO of Reddit in 2015 (discussed at more length in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4), demographic features were seen by some observers to be integral in her dismissal, one commentator specifically lambasting the site as a “man cave of the internet” where “it was seen as alright to bully woman” (“The rise and fall of”, 2015). Briefly surveying Redditors demographics, there appears to exist evidence confirming such an evaluation, especially as the majority of users are male (69%), white (63%), and college-educated (63%) (Pew, 2015). Taken together Redditors seem to reflect privileged groups, with many users failing to appreciate or demonstrate an awareness of such status. The pseudo-anonymity of the platform users attest, prevents prejudice or discriminatory behavior, a belief further supported by the espoused meritocratic functioning towards content evaluation. Yet as this thesis will discuss, like much of Reddit’s idealized self-conception these beliefs are rarely grounded in reality. At its best such rhetoric suggests a utopic longing for the openness of the internet, at its worst these tendencies promote an ignorance and lethargy towards actions to correct the platform’s frequent toxicity.

Compounding Reddit’s issues with demographics is its commitment towards geek culture, which has often demonstrated “a fraught relationship to issues of gender and race” (Massanari, 2017, pp 232). Geek culture is focused towards mastery, primarily in domains connected to technology, computation, gaming, and science, therefore social capital and status within geek

cultures is reliant towards knowledge acquisition (Taylor, 2012; Salter, 2017). When paired with an aggregating function, as in Reddit's context, such a temperament can hold immense potential towards the distribution of editorial practices. In fact Reddit threads can be seen as contests between users seeking to express their mastery of both the topic at hand, and the means of advertising such knowledge through rhetoric. Where geek sensibilities run awry is in geek's propensity towards exclusive practices and intolerance to those outside the narrow definition of geekdom⁷. While an exhaustive treatment of this topic is outside the scope of this thesis, it remains an important element in understanding Reddit, its aspirations, its limitations, and contradictions. Geek masculinity, often "valorizing intellect over social and emotional intelligence" (Massanari, 2017, pp 332), is rife in Reddit's culture, and often promotes an environment where winning one's argument is more important than weighing the impacts of what is said – geek masculinity rarely heeds time towards empathetic reflections⁸. This has been at the crux of Reddit's issues with toxic communities, a focus in chapter 4. The belittling and harassment endemic to these toxic communities draws from geek masculinity's pursuit of superiority through intellect, and averseness towards compassion and empathy.

Reddit is home to a myriad of individual users, and while not all ascribe towards the above mentioned classification, the users who do often present extremely vocal contingents of the general user base; these rancorous groups come to dominate much of Reddit's image to outside observers. Like in much of Reddit, such toxicity becomes fodder for successive dialogues, and sometimes communities devoted directly to mocking such ignorance⁹. While its predisposition towards geek culture has been mostly observed in its negative connotations, it is important to note that geekdom is far from monolithically negative. It's equally notable that geek culture outside of online forums often reflect a marginalized group, as such, geek culture is usually supportive of alternative subcultures and lifestyles outside of heteronormative standards (Taylor, 2012). Yet this often

⁷ It must be noted that this tendency is frequently expressed in the disdain towards 'normies', the supposed layperson of the internet.

⁸ It is perhaps a result of this tendency that the first core value Reddit seeks to promote in its userbase is *Remember the Human*, which they explain as "treat others as you would in person, and remember we all make mistakes" (Reddit Values, 2016, May6).

⁹ The community of /r/JustNeckBeardThings is an example of these practices. Here users post content that lambasts the prototypical Neckbeard, described as "a man who is socially inept and physically unappealing, especially one who has an obsessive interest in computing" (/r/JustNeckBeardThings). Mocking what is seen as a common category of Reddit user, the sub presents a meta-criticism – harnessing the community to discuss the community – on the toxicity and ignorance of these individuals. Part roast, venting session, with a focus on educating users on how not to act, /r/JustNeckBeardThings presents just one example of how Geek Masculinity's toxicity is leveraged for humor.

becomes contorted as it represents an extension of geek masculinity's deep rooted connection with techno-libertarian views (Turner, 2006). Here liberty and autonomy are dominant values, as a result these communities often reside under what Massanari identifies as the 'banner of choice', where the argument for why "women or people of color do not participate is because they do not want to – rather than a recognition of the structural barriers that might make participation difficult or unappealing" (2017, pp 332). An awareness of such limitations would inevitably require the emotional and social intelligence often lacking in geek masculinity. Geek culture as a result comes to reflect opposing tendencies of promoting niche interests, thereby helping disparate individuals find individuals with similar interests, while geek cultures also espouse forms of masculinity that directly undermine attempts at inclusivity¹⁰ and community development. While not all users are engaged in practices that support toxicity, the bellicosity and raucousness of these segments of Reddit's userbase, cast a long and heavy shadow over the platforms operation, and appearance to much of the world.

Why Stay? Free Speech and Participatory Cultures

Being a product of its context, in this case web 2.0, Reddit like other social media platforms endorses a participatory culture, which in Reddit's case becomes intertwined with free speech aspirations. Jenkins et al. in their evaluation of participatory cultures, discern certain key features, explaining,

A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to the novices (2006, pp 3).

For Reddit participatory culture cements connections towards free speech. As Jenkins et al. (2006) elucidate in their definition, low barriers for engagement must be present in order to invite successive expression. For Redditors this quality is expressed through free speech policies and their intonation of openness. The participatory qualities of the platform equally reflect the tendency

¹⁰ Case in point geek masculinity and its representation of feminism, which is often seen simply as an attempt to attack and undermine men (Massanari, 2017).

of Redditors to evaluate Reddit through the lens of techno-libertarianism; the means to create and participate remain, so long as the freedom to do so continues. Control equates to censorship, openness as exemplified through free speech, presents for Redditors the sole avenue for authentic and original additions to the platform. Participatory cultures equally invite connections to democratic cultures online. This connection is not lost on Redditors, who often envision and promote the site, its functionality, mandate, and ideology as being in line with democratic principles (Massanari, 2017). Participatory cultures, with their suggested democratic trappings come to leverage “their freedom of speech to talk back to, comment on, parody, appropriate, remix, and alter the cultural forms, values, and mores of the world in which they live” (Balkin, 2016, pp 1079). As participatory cultures rely on users envisioning that their participation holds impact (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins et al 2006; Rheingold, 2012), free speech becomes the mechanism that divines the openness to participate. Participation is a testament of individual users developing from passive consumers of information, to active participants in media environments.

Equally important in participation is the development of status as an in-group member, in this case becoming a Redditor. Thomas and Brown neatly describe the journey of becoming an in-group member through participation as commencing with a question of ‘learning to be’ and concluding with the question of “how can I utilize the available resources, both social and technological, for deep exploration” (2013, pp 105). Identifying as a member, or Redditor, commences in first learning the rules that govern the experience, with mastery being achieved when users are capable of benefiting and leveraging the collective labor of their peers towards expanding their own knowledge. Redditors therefore remain committed to the platform by a shared sense of purpose. As one user aptly described, Reddit is a “collective of semi-anonymous people from all over the world gathered together under common banners of curiosity, stories, niche hobbies, and a sense of community” (/u/ EspressoTheory, 2017, May 21). Participation therefore denotes commitment by users, while equally presenting a forum for users to cultivate and master skills to help them further participate with, create, and distribute content. As Jenkins et al (2006A) suggest in the quote above, an integral feature of participatory cultures is informal mentoring system, one which informs novice users of how to engage and explore the same spaces as experts. As previously discussed such a system is present within the voting structure at the root of Reddit’s functionality. Both validating individual additions, while also presenting a collective appraisal of content, voting within Reddit equally helps direct users on their path to becoming active

participants on the platform. When asked *Why do you like being on Reddit*, reflecting on their experiences, one user noted their appreciation stemmed from the uniqueness of the site, contending that “so many peculiar and interesting things have happened to every single person on this planet, and Reddit is the voice through which people can tell the world about the *amazing* things that have happened to them” (/u/ russellp1212, 2017, May 21). The more individuals engaged, the greater the chance of original and unique content to be shared; Reddit’s thirst for original content suggests an openness to participate, with a learning curve to inform and perpetuate its editorial and ideological commitments.

Self-Organization and Self-Determination

Geeks share a resemblance to hackers, most evident in their shared message, commitment, and vision for digital space. As Coleman (2011) noted, the categorical differences exist in the skills valorized between these groups – for hackers a technical mastery resides in programming, whereas geeks locate mastery in digital media and having the skills to produce such content. These two groups do overlap in shared ideological commitments and concerns towards freedom of information, openness of the internet, while displaying a mistrust of central-authority, and a disdain for capitalistic intervention (Lévy, 2010; Coleman, 2011; McChesney, 2013). In Reddit’s case these anxieties are observed through the prism of free speech. With the political mobilization and protest on the platform, the focus of chapter 4, displaying examples of what Coleman articulates as geek and hackers propensity “to enter the political arena to secure their own productive autonomy” (2011, pp 516). Reddit as a publically curated dialogue is dependent upon user participation. As this thesis will explore this requirement poses grave problems when understood economically. The platform is dependent on a user base, one sometimes toxic, often unruly, and that occasionally protests when its expectations are not met. Further complicating matters, the participatory culture at the heart of Reddit connects novice and skilled users together, in a project to disseminate information and skills, thereby informing and training new adepts in digital unruliness, and cyber protest in a perpetual manner.

Free speech is supported, as this thesis will continue to reinforce, both in the cultural and material elements of the site. This is expressed best in the process of self-organization that guides the site’s day to day operations. Self-organization as explained by Fuchs refers to the “process

where a system reproduces itself with the help of its own logic and components [...] this new order can't be reduced to single elements; it is due to the interactions of the systems elements" (2008, pp 11). In Reddit's case the site's reliance on user labor, a strategy for reducing financial overhead, is a strategy reliant upon users populating the site without strict direction; Reddit's perpetual activity is born from its self-organization. Equally important is that this behavior isn't centralized, but instead distributed – self-organization is not located in a single element, but distributed throughout the system. The fractal development of Reddit, the openness of the platform for new user centric development, and a general hands-off approach from administrators, together suggest Reddit's cohesiveness is the result of its users shared conception, or mandate, for the platform. As self-organization implies a system that "reproduces itself through its own logic" (Fuchs, 2008, pp 32), within Reddit this is observed in the continuity of the site. The unceasing stream of content, and the never-ending flurry of activity surrounding such content, all suggest that Reddit is never static, but instead a space of flows (Castells, 1999). What fosters cohesiveness is the familiarity drawn from self-organization. Pressure derived from cultural and material structures innocuously form Reddit's boundaries, prompting, and directing activity, informing expectations, and suggesting how one is to behave on the platform. The cultural filters previously discussed that inform editorial decisions for users, reflect one such force. Much like participatory cultures, the mechanisms that enforce self-organization require cooperation in order to succeed (Fuchs, 2008), suggesting as this chapter has alluded to, that users share a rough consensus towards the platform's vision and mandate.

Self-organization in light of its purview relies on qualities in alignment with democratic (oftentimes libertarian) objectives. The root of self-organization is the concerted performance of multiple elements bound together by principles of "cooperation, participation, self-determination, and grassroots democracy" (Fuchs, 2008, pp 31). When understood in the context of Reddit, the self-organization of the platform expressed within users' volunteer labor, neatly connects towards instances of political mobilization. Self-organization is arguably the expression of communal cooperation and participation, directed and expressed within the activities that constitute the site. Free speech exists as an assurance that these activities occur from within the community, in a sense that the community independently decides the direction of the platform. The prism of hacker/geek politics further stresses such connection, as freedom of information remains the paramount aspiration. The process of self-organization, much like the gatewatching function of the site, and

the participatory culture that supports these activities, all highlight users centrality in the platform, a thought not lost on Redditors. Far from passive consumers, Redditors emboldened by their labor, comforted by their peers, and energized by ideals that promote their agency, are therefore more likely to view themselves as stakeholders in Reddit's operation. What instances of political mobilization suggest, is that users equate their labor as a means of exchange, rewarding them a say in the direction the platform pursues. Redditors instead of platform consumers tend to view themselves as members of a communal project. The tension surrounding free speech results then from a simple question, who owns Reddit?

User Centrality in Reddit's Successes & Failures

Reddit's successes and failures are both located within its userbase. As this chapter has elucidated, Reddit is reliant on the labor of its users in order to function. While this arrangement has made Reddit a unique domain online, it arguably is also the source of much of the tension and toxicity strewn throughout the platform. By classifying Reddit as a perpetual conversation generated by users, this chapter sought to explore the various elements that sustain such activity. Whether through the distributed gatewatching function that evaluates content, the participatory culture that encourages activity, or the self-organization that directs user labor without prompt, each element highlights the centrality of users within Reddit's operation. Ultimately users labor is visualized through material posted, as such, the very brand of Reddit is synonymous with its user activity. While a strategy aimed at reducing overhead, this reliance on user labor often places Reddit in precarious situations. As this thesis will explore this situation holds great promise for alternative developments that situate communal ownership of the platform, while also presenting a major component in the toxicity rife throughout Reddit.

Chapter Two: Methodological Designs & Ethnographic Choices

Approaching Reddit with the intention for research invites a series of methodological difficulties. Perhaps this is the reason there exists a dearth of material focusing specifically on the site. The scope and scale of the platform present serious challenges. Boasting an active user base of millions, with users visiting millions of pages, adding and creating vast swells of content, and connecting to a myriad of subreddits, together present a torrential output of data. The second and perhaps most challenging barrier towards engaging with Reddit are the users themselves. Reddit boasts a unique userbase bound together through a collective understanding of the space, its history, culture, beliefs and values. The userbase often relishes in their inscrutability, to be a Redditor implies an investment in the platform and its shared mandate. The knowledge required to understand the litany of self-references to prior events (a common occurrence in comment sections), and the meta-observations Redditors routinely utilize to characterize their reactions to posts, present barriers to novices. Adequately knowing the myriad of subreddits in existence requires a substantial amount of prior experience navigating the platform. With the decision to explore Reddit from the vantage of free speech, a familiarity of both the platform and its users is required, as together the material and cultural elements give rise to free speech practices. In order to understand Reddit, particularly how it regards free speech, one must first understand how Redditors themselves engage with the platform, and how the platform directs such engagements.

To overcome these aforementioned complications, this thesis will explore Reddit through an ethnographic approach. Such an approach aims to ground the complexity, scale, and scope of the platform within the mundane day to day behaviors that populate and give rise to the platform. Through ethnography what is initially observed as banal, instead comes to be understood as behaviors infused with social meaning, rooted in histories, ideals, attitudes and beliefs (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). The root of ethnography resides then in capturing the lived experiences of those engaged within a particular site; as such the role of the ethnographer is

primarily conceived of as an engaged listener (Forsey, 2010). Ultimately ethnography presents a journey towards an engaged understanding of a specific group, observing their daily activities and behaviors in order to capture an authentic account of their experiences, and to discern the meanings that ultimately underpin such activity. In regards to Reddit the pursuit of an authentic and naturalistic recounting of user activity, and the subsequent meanings that direct these behaviors, is a much needed analysis; the dearth of academic materials centered on the site, coupled with the negative interpretation that Reddit incurs from the general public, means that Reddit is primarily understood via opinion rather than fact. This is not to suggest that these opinions are not informed by accurate accounts of the site at its most raucous, merely that they represent one facet of Reddit - albeit an incredibly vocal one. During my own experiences researching Reddit and presenting information both to academic and general audiences, the prevailing tendency is to react to the platform with outright suspicion at best, but more frequently such discussions surrounding Reddit are met with contempt. The adoption then of an ethnographic design is a means of countering these prevailing attitudes. What ethnography affords is the opportunity to foster a dialogue centering on Reddit that presents a fuller and richer spectrum of voices and opinions, instead of an image of Reddit as a site that is dominated by a vitriolic vocal minority. Through ethnography and the sustained engagement with the wider userbase that such methods entail, the hope is to present a more balanced assessment of Reddit – particularly towards understanding free speech. In doing so the intention of this thesis is to present Reddit as a site befitting academic attention, instead of simply being pigeon-holed as a ‘man-cave’ of the internet.

My personal experience with Reddit began in earnest with a curiosity towards the oddity the site seemed to cherish. Like many Redditors my journey began as a lurker, simply reading the content posted to the site. The openness of the site allowed me and untold others to simply read Reddit. For a long period I was a lurker without an account to participate with the platform. This was back in 2013, and since that time I grew to understand the contradictory impulses of Reddit, the humor and warmth that it regularly displays, and the utter contempt and vitriol it often spews when its userbase believes themselves to have been crossed. Perhaps no event came to visualize these opposing tendencies more so than the ousting of interim CEO Ellen Pao in 2015, an event that came to inspire this very project. The event brought to the surface tensions often ignored, especially towards free speech, an ideal that Redditors have constructed into a crucial myth, one that confers meaning towards much of the behavior taking place on the platform. This thesis then

is the result of over two years of ethnographic research within the site, and assisted by two years of informally learning how to roughly navigate and utilize the platform. This thesis is arguably indebted to these prior experiences, they present vital instances of learning how to generally navigate the platform, and how to engage with the userbase. Yet this also presents an issue towards maintaining distance towards the field site itself. Similar to others commentators (Masanarri, 2015), prior familiarity with Reddit is both a boon for research, while equally at times a hazard. Since unlike traditional field sites, digital ethnography requires familiarity with both cultural and material elements on these environments, in many cases such knowledge is essential before one can participate fully within the site itself (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012). In Reddit's case learning the basic functionality of the site, and the means of navigating can be a particular roadblock for some. Sustained and prolonged engagement with the platform can equally numb individuals to the more vitriolic elements present throughout the site, simply observing these events as par for the course. Failure to account for these regular micro-aggressions would amount to failure for a thesis devoted to recognizing how free speech is understood. As such it comes to inform an important directive within this thesis, to present a balanced assessment of Reddit – discussing and evaluating both the grotesque, and the decent facets that together reflect the total experience of Reddit. Ultimately the tension to balance proximity and distance towards Reddit remains at the heart of this thesis.

Research Questions:

This project aims to understand how free speech is understood and utilized at the levels of individual users, volunteer moderators and of the administrators running the site. As noted in the introduction, this thesis uses a multilevel research question. *First how do users assess and enact the ideal of free speech online, second how does the community of the site as reflected by its moderators enable or constrain these activities and finally how do the activities of the site administration enable and constrain the usage of free speech?* Taken together these three questions are meant to give a comprehensive and nuanced perspective of how free speech transpires on the site. I address these questions by engaging with user narratives that outline the necessity of free speech, the community's conflicted evaluation of its importance, and finally its administrators struggle with its relationship in regards to profit generation. By doing so the project seeks to use

Reddit to address growing concerns with the internet and its development towards increasing commodification as a whole.

Data Capture:

Ethnography as a methodological orientation represents a wide spectrum of activities, and directions. The cornerstone however is participant observation, the “embodied emplacement of the researching self in the field site as a consequential social actor” (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, pp 65). As this thesis is premised upon an ethnographic approach, participant observation remains the primary strategy, both in cultivating expertise within the platform, while also representing the chief means of data capture. Inspired by the work of Beyer (2014) this thesis adopts a similar strategy of *deep holistic watching*, characterized as,

A method that includes hours of observation and/or participant observation; creating physical maps of the online space (e.g. formal rules, internal geography, spatial divisions, and conversation flow); attempting to gain a deep understanding of community norms (e.g. informal rules, culture, and expectations); becoming well versed in community history, stories, and inside jokes; creating a mental map of connections of the foundational community space to other online spaces (Beyer, 2014, pp 141).

This approach benefits an analysis of Reddit, by focusing both on the material and cultural features which together give rise to the site’s idiosyncrasies. Free speech is not simply an activity undertaken between users, but one equally informed and supported by the design of the site itself. Moreover Beyer’s approach boasts an appreciation for historical perspectives, seeking to ground the experiences of individuals in larger trends and flows of history (Willis & Trondman, 2002). As Redditors are particularly nostalgic for an idealized bygone period, understanding the gradual shifts in policy towards free speech remains an integral component of this thesis. In some instances this information was located in archived posts from earlier periods of Reddit, though the majority of information was gleaned from more contemporary materials.

Apart from user submissions (either posted material or comments), Reddit supports an innumerable amount of user generated wikis. Some simply contain additional information

pertaining to individual sub rules, whereas in other cases wikis are more general, explaining how Redditors should behave (*Reddiquette*), or how moderators should perform their duties (*Modiquette*). Wikis codify the unspoken and informal rules that guide much of Reddit's activity. These wikis equally play important roles as repositories of previously developed information such as in the case of /r/PersonalFinance, or offer users additional information on a sub's mission statement as in /r/TheRedPill. Due to the importance wikis play in contextualizing Reddit, they play an important role in this thesis. Likewise /r/Blog the official blog of Reddit, run by admins, remains a similar means of contextualizing sitewide events, and displaying admin's opinions on current events impacting Reddit (i.e. Net Neutrality). Finally Reddit is home to a bevy of policy documents and that aid users in understanding the site's rules, mandate, and overall functionality. These documents such as the *user policy agreement*, *content policy*, and *privacy policy*, each present valuable insights towards understanding how the site is organized. These supporting documents scattered throughout Reddit present important pieces of cultural history for the site, encapsulating larger narratives, while also distilling the complex histories of subs and the site itself. While not the primary means of data capture, these documents and wikis nevertheless were essential insights into how Reddit seeks to operate.

Deep holistic watching blends observation with performativity. Understanding Reddit involves not simply observing events, but also learning the means to participate. Learning the rules to participate, and the norms that inform proper discourse, is best accomplished through trial and error. Much of the early period of data capture was learning the means to participate, how to act, and most importantly how to speak to other Redditors. While each sub presents a unique assemblage of rules, norms, performances, and activities, Reddit overall compels a general uniformity, therefore knowledge and expertise is ultimately transferable between subs. As such much of this thesis grounds the complexity and nuance of free speech within the behaviors, attitudes, and activities of Redditors, all informed by the researcher's understandings of these engagements through the accrument of proficiencies related to Reddit activity. The norms, informal rules, and expectations of Reddit's userbase only become apparent through familiarity with the site itself.

Reddit, as this thesis will continue to elucidate is a content aggregator. By gaining familiarity with the users themselves, over time one is able to deduce what is often unspoken by

what is granted visibility. As such it would be a mistake to not utilize such an understanding methodologically. What is visible, is what Reddit deems interesting, and most crucially, worth discussing. The filtering process then presents a unique means of interpreting Reddit. The benefit of extended participant observation is in locating the patterns and trends that come to inform much of how Reddit operates. As a result, this thesis performed observation using the default filter, which ranks content by the amount of upvotes received – characterized as best. This means that all content utilized is material upvoted, or receiving a high level of positive reactions from other Redditors. The logic being that this represents first the default view, and therefore the most common manner which users parse through the site. Furthermore higher upvoted content suggests a rough consensus towards how the collective responds to the material in question. All material used in this thesis was observed through this particular filter, unless otherwise specified. Reddit presents a particular narrative, one derived through consensus of its myriad of users, and expressed through its aggregation processes. Understanding said patterns grants an intimate understanding of the platform and its users.

Participant observation ultimately permits a holistic perspective, as it seeks to “understand shared social practices, meanings, and social contexts, and the interrelations among them” (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, pp 67). The openness of Reddit, an element cherished by the userbase, comes to present a canvas for users to engage in their shared practices, and often to discuss and reflect upon them. Much of this thesis will return to the element of meta, particularly as it pertains to user’s self-evaluations of both the platform and of their peers. Ultimately this means that Redditors regularly direct their curiosity inward, seeking to understand how the platform they participate in functions, both culturally and materially. As a result of this thesis forgoes alternative elements of data capture utilized within ethnographic traditions such as interviews or surveys. Due to the platform’s regular inward curiosity, Redditors often openly discuss, reflect, and debate the platform, its users, and their behavior. Such unprompted discussions therefore present ample amounts of material for this project. As a result while pilot interviews were performed at the onset of the data capture period, they were ultimately left out from this thesis¹¹. The argument for their exclusion was since Reddit routinely discusses itself, and

¹¹ Initially this thesis sought five to ten interviews. While two pilot interviews were undertaken in a preparatory stage, they were subsequently left on the cutting room floor. Also during the initial stage of this thesis I partook in a Reddit Meet-Up for the Montréal subreddit, this was also left out of the findings of this thesis. The focus of this thesis is instead drawn from material captured directly on the site.

those dialogues are subsequently voted upon by other users, these dialogues remain the chief means of data capture. Such an approach also allows a greater range of users to be utilized within this thesis, both directly through the material captured, but also indirectly through the impacts of users upvoting said material.

Lastly this thesis advocates an approach that favors a covert means of data capture. Digital ethnography has been particularly noted as unobtrusive in nature due to the anonymity often ensconced within online communities (Murthy, 2008). Seeking to minimize the impact of the researcher in the field, this thesis relies on covertly observing how Redditors engage, allowing conversation and dialogue to flow without being directed or prompted. While in early stages direct questions were posed to the community through posts on subs such as /r/AskReddit, these experiences were not added to the final thesis. While material was not used from these experiences, they remained important learning experiences that supported an increased general understanding of how to engage, converse, and participate with other users.

Ethical Considerations & Subject Positionality:

Reddit exists as a public document as all aspects of the site are open and freely accessible even for those who do not have an account with the site. Furthermore Reddit's own policies against the potential of 'doxing' [e.g. the intended release of a user's personal information] means that the space contains little to no personal information of its users. If said information is leaked it is quickly removed by automated programs or 'bots'. This is not meant to suggest that no personal information is occasionally disclosed by users. Many in fact pepper their comments with certain statements regarding their personal lives. However these disclosures remains vague and are difficult to link to external identities. This design feature of Reddit made it easy to follow the ethical guidelines put forth by the Tri-Council, which state that, where no personal information is collected, consent for data collection is not required¹². Since all Reddit dialogue presented within this thesis is captured from an open and public forum, user account names are presented unchanged

¹² Article 10.3 of the Tri-Council Policy, pertaining to "research observation in natural environments or virtual settings" indicates that "[w]here no personal information is collected, consent is not required"

– since these dialogues are meant to exist as a public document, data captured will remain equally transparent.

The other major ethical consideration is to be aware of the subject positionality of the researcher in regards to the space itself. All researchers engaged with ethnographic research must acknowledge their positions of authority and of power as they enter the site (Murthy, 2008; Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012), yet this becomes an issue magnified within Reddit. Reddit has in the past been described as the ‘man cave of the internet’, one rife with subtle if not overt sexism, racism, homophobia and transphobia. Therefore it is essential to be self-reflexive in order to identify biases that can shape the analysis. As I identify as a white-male, not only does this mean I am part of the majority of Reddit users, but that this also informs my reading of the site, and the reactions drawn from those understandings. Much effort then was directed to remain reflexive and aware of such status when engaging with the platform, particularly to mitigate bias that could arise from my proximity to the site, and its userbase. Ethnography regularly confronts the tension between presenting accounts of individuals on their own terms, while striving to evaluate their behaviors distantly (Hammersley, 2005). While subject positionality is an inescapable aspect of ethnographic research (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012), both an awareness of this and reflexivity to mitigate potential bias remains an integral element of this thesis.

Concluding Remarks

The choice of ethnography while pragmatic in regards to organizing the expansiveness of Reddit, is equally important as it affords an introductory exploration of Reddit. Ethnography has often been valued as a starting point for the development of theory, a result of highlighting the perspectives of actors sometimes misrepresented externally (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). Subsequent methodological decisions are therefore an attempt to present these experiences, and the voices behind them, as accurately and faithfully as possible. Ultimately the strategy behind data capture for this thesis can be described as pursuing a naturalistic account of users, their views, opinions, and conduct within the platform. As ethnographic research seeks to accurately recreate the perspectives of those it observes (Hammersley, 2005), the methodological designs utilized are meant to promote the voices, opinions, and attitudes of Redditors. This is not only to mitigate bias, but to also afford Reddit the chance to explain itself in its own words.

Chapter Three: The Troubling Discussion of Free Speech on Reddit

To punish me for my contempt for authority, fate made me an authority myself

- Albert Einstein

Free speech plays an illusionary, yet integral role within Reddit. As this chapter will explore, its centrality is by no means accidental, but instead the result of its architect's aspirations – initially political, and eventually economic. Reddit suggests at first another link in the chain of technological solutionism. Its creators particularly designing the site through the lens of emancipatory potentials once deemed inevitable by early digital celebrants. Consequently throughout the site's history, free speech has become a rallying cry for user's extoling their autonomy. This attitude becomes informed from the hacker lineage which viewed the internet as a frontier defined by liberty. The pastiche of the hacker ethic within Reddit becomes exemplified in the valorization of free speech, an heir to the hacker belief that information should be free and boundless (McChesney, 2012). The editorial functionality of Reddit, the result of users judging and evaluating content, is believed to be reliant on free speech. In one of the many paradoxes of Reddit, being unfiltered is seen as the surest means to properly filter content. Reddit as this chapter will disclose, evaluates content not objectively, but in line with a communally oriented value system. This not only holds immense implications towards the manner that free speech is enacted and understood, but equally holds issues when evaluating Reddit as a public sphere (discussed in chapter four). Free speech as a result plays an important role in understanding Reddit. Free speech suggests both an avenue towards the emancipatory myths of idyllic digital futures, and equally expressing the real limitations that prevent and undermine such aspirations. Much like how the rings within a tree can discern the broader climate and livelihood of the organism, free speech and its expression over the course of Reddit equally help to infer the broader changes both communally,

and structurally of the platform as whole. The history of Reddit is ultimately understood in the expression of free speech: the encroaching enforcement of regulation towards free speech becomes interpreted as akin to increased commodification of the platform. Tension between users and platforms owners – dialogues concerning the limitations of free speech, and the subsequent interpretations of both parties - become the means towards observing Reddit’s macro-contortions rectifying disparate values: as communal platform and private property. Free speech as a foundational element has defined Reddit’s development, its impacts, while current interpretations continue to describe the function and direction of the platform.

The aim of this chapter is threefold. First it will chart the trajectory of free speech within Reddit. The shifting nature and understanding of free speech plays a vital role towards understanding Reddit’s unruliness, particularly as the shifting nature of free speech is assumed by users to infer a growing preference for corporate profitability over communal vitality. The second objective of this chapter is to situate Reddit’s appreciation of free speech within the contours of myth. The divide between the ideal and the real is a common issue within Reddit, oftentimes most evident in regards to free speech, and its implementation. Far from an open arena for discussion, Reddit exists as a highly editorialized space. Free speech subsequently exists not as an activity present within the platform, but instead reflects an ideal sought by the userbase themselves. Finally this chapter aims to elaborate on the means by which Reddit self-editorializes, specifically addressing how the userbase, the mods, and finally the admins all regularly direct the discourse of Reddit. Free speech plays a vital role in Reddit’s self-evaluation. An exploration of free speech ultimately comes to represent a clash between real concerns, and the ideal aspirations at the root of the platform’s boisterousness.

Reddit wrestles with Free Speech

The internet rarely forgets. Occasionally this is beneficial, yet more often than not the collective memory of the internet comes back to haunt those who break their word. For Reddit’s co-founders Alexis Ohanian and Steve Huffman, this eidetic memory has repeatedly been a thorn in their side, especially as the site’s direction has subtly shifted over the past few years. Reddit’s story, like many tech startups, begins with its creator’s vision of disruption, followed by an eventual contortion of such vision into a marketable good. By describing itself as *the front page of the*

internet, Reddit's ambitions become directly apparent: to arise as a central node for online discussion centering on current events, breaking news, and popular trends. The path towards profitability must however first contend with the platform's userbase. Redditors rightly point out free speech's role in the development of Reddit, particularly as the ideal was integrated into the design and functionality of the platform. Free speech presents a narrative that emphasizes the historical shifts and changes the platform has observed as it seeks to legitimize itself externally, and placate users internally. Once the platform's guiding principle, while now a pariah subject, free speech, and its role within Reddit directly confronts the dynamics between users and admins – and their competing visions for the platform's success. The present status of free speech as a pariah conveys the current interpretation of the platform's success as profit driven, and greater central control over the platform by admins.

Functional Decisions and Cost Effectiveness

The notion to situate users as content evaluators was by no means novel. Reddit itself is a direct successor to the once popular content aggregator *Slashdot* - this legacy becomes revealed within the site's structure and features. Elements such as a front page, a social currency (called *karma*) to encourage pro-social behavior, and its focus on self-described 'nerd culture', together herald this legacy. But it is Reddit's focus on placing users central to locating, evaluating, and uploading content that makes this inheritance apparent. Reddit, like *Slashdot* before it, exemplifies a *gatewatching* approach that relies on users' vigilance to both locate information, and more importantly, to discern its quality (Bruns, 2005). This is a crucial facet in the narrative regarding free speech on Reddit. As users' labor remains essential for the site's prosperity, Redditors frequently argue that they are entitled to a larger say in the site's operation. This stakeholder approach, grounded in user's labor, has often led to expressions of anger and protest when user's opinions and beliefs are not respected. Furthermore users are quite aware of the collective power they draw from this arrangement, with the site wide shutdown initiated by mods in 2015 a pertinent example. Admins as a result remain generally apprehensive in making drastic changes to the site, fearing that users may become alienated and go elsewhere (Masanari, 2017). The demise of

competitor Digg¹³ particularly remains a potent illustration for Reddit, an alarming example of a platform's creator failing to listen to the needs and demands of their user base (Ohanian, 2013). While appeasement rarely works as a long term strategy, Reddit believed it as a solution in the short term in order to preserve its most valuable commodity, its userbase.

In return for populating the site with content, admins permitted users the freedom to oversee themselves. Autonomy was afforded so not to disrupt the information trawling and content sharing, while also presenting a frugal strategy for a fledgling company. From the perspective of administrators, freedom to express and speak one's mind with limited oversight was worth the burden of maintaining the site. Since gatewatching sites are dependent upon user labor, affording autonomy benefited the platform by first minimizing investment (less employees for instance), while also allowing the platform to develop in line with its user expectations (thereby increasing users loyalty as the platform reflected their aspirations and interests). But as Reddit has grown it has tried to clamp down on wayward speech and content. Users however often push back, echoing the belief that Reddit was envisioned as a space defined by free speech, and user's autonomy in regulating these activities. Limiting Redditor's autonomy however presents its own issues, as within public spaces autonomy becomes protected within the structure itself. Post (1993) astutely elucidates that "from the point of view of the designer of the structure, [...], the presence or absence of autonomy functions as an axiomatic and foundational principle" (pp 1130). Autonomy within Reddit, originally drawn from the tenets of its participatory aggregation functionality, and subsequently supported within user's self-organization, comes to valorize their unprompted collective ability to locate, evaluate, and generate content. As the site developed, autonomy for users congealed, first coming to signify a cultural value, while successively acting as an emergent social contract between users and admins.

The primary appeal of a gatewatching strategy is the supposition that collectively working together increases efficiency in evaluating content since labor is diffused amongst a network of users. Gatewatching harkens back to techno-romanticism's aspiration for unification, in this case bridging disparate individuals through a distributed and concerted effort to labor communally.

¹³ Digg initially outweighed its competitor Reddit both in volume of users and traffic. In 2010 after a massive redesign which infuriated many of its loyal users, an exodus of users left the platform to join Reddit. The result of Digg's unpopular site redesign was a threefold increase in users for Reddit in 2010 (Horn, 2011), while signaling the decline of Digg as a rival for Reddit.

Such aspiration highlights an important caveat towards understanding Reddit, the belief that gatewatching reflects a techno-meritocratic system where content (including comments) is evaluated equally and voted upon objectively via a distributed network (Jenkins, 2006; Benkler, 2006). Described sometimes as *equipotentiality*, this represents an essential feature in the philosophy of gatewatching sites. As a result, the site supports a theory of governance reflecting a heterarchical structure; all users have equal chance in adding to the conversation, all share the same chance of making unique contributions (Bruns, 2008). In a post titled *my biggest stumbling blocks as a new redditor* the author highlights their frustrations that their additions had not gained the necessary visibility to become topics of discussions. During the conclusion of the post the author goes on to highlight certain strategies that can boost the chances of one's post becoming popular. While this would at first glance be seen as a helpful resource for new members of the community, the most upvoted response was one of scolding. As long-time user */u/lolmeansilaughed* argues,

I think maybe the difference between you and most redditors is that you seem to view each individual post you make as a special snowflake that deserves attention and curation, whereas most of us just shoot off some bullshit into the void and rarely think about it again (2017)

The proclaimed randomness of what Reddit latches onto, or deems worthy of attention, is unknowable, and therefore presumed to be fair. The flattening presupposed from randomness reflects an equality of opportunities, and by doing so, fosters an equal chance to impact the conversation at large. Yet it would be wrong to assume that Reddit lacks distinctive characteristics which makes certain posts resonate more than others. The illusion that the 'best idea wins' is necessary for the system to continue, allowing the development of an *esprit de corps*, yet it masks patterns, and criteria that favors certain types of material over others.

For Reddit the means of determining what constitutes 'quality' and 'value' is unique to the site, reflecting a powerful ideal central to the site's own mythology. In spaces defined by peer-production this isn't unique, Wikipedia for example holds commitments to a particular style and approach for posting information (Benkler, 2006). The sub */r/hmm* is devoted to what they describe as *pics that make you go hmmm*, the rules governing format demand that all posts must adhere to certain aesthetic criteria as shown in figure 3. The reason for this is twofold. First, the sub as

described by its founders is one focused upon a particular aesthetic, and second content posted must incorporate some idiosyncratic weirdness. An entire page of posts with identical titles

1. All titles must be hmmm
2. No text (except normal logos)

Figure 3 Posting rules for r/hmm, in this instance the focus is on formatting

presents a jarring initial reaction, one which upholds the sub's own logic, while also transforming a piece of Reddit to reflect the type of weirdness its subscribers particularly enjoy. The other reason is that through the obfuscation of content presentation, an attempt at a meritocratic evaluation of the post is given precedence. Users must take the time to engage with material and not simply upvote it, a connection to the site's goal of promoting both meaningful and interesting content. Voting on content presents a means then of comparing material against Reddit's own cultural metrics. In diffusing the task amongst users, not only is a solidarity reached, but also a meritocratic and democratic arrangement is alluded to. In adopting a gatewatching strategy like Slashdot, Reddit has embraced whether they were cognizant of it or not, certain foundational ideologies. Through gatewatching, Reddit innocuously promotes user autonomy, both in finding and engaging with material. Together this implies an egalitarianism amongst its users in doing such activities, while affording a space in order to voice and express their reactions to the material present - a space created and developed through their labor.

Historical Inspirations and Fractured Promises

Upon reflection one wonders, if Reddit's creators knew what it would become, would they have approached its development differently? Drawing inspiration from the lore of the American Revolution, with a noted interest in Jefferson's ideology, Reddit's development had always been intertwined with political aspirations. Reflecting upon the site's success, its co-founder Alexis Ohanian sitting down for an interview with Forbes was pressed on how he believed the founding fathers would evaluate Reddit,

A bastion of free speech on the World Wide Web? I bet they would like it. It's the digital form of political pamphlet, [...] with much wider distribution and without the inky fingers. I would love to imagine that *Common Sense* would have been a self-post on Reddit, by Thomas Paine, or actually a Redditor named T_Paine (Hill, 2012, Feb 2).

Assuming that Reddit not only continues the democratic project of its liberal and revolutionary forbearers, but that it also presents a more effective delivery system, has the hallmarks of internet-centrism. Reddit, arguably has always seen itself as a continuation and expression of American democratic thought. When Ohanian himself lamented “Jefferson’s vision is taking a bit longer than expected to become a reality” (2013, pp 40), one can be certain that Ohanian and the team at Reddit believed the site to be one of the missing puzzle pieces in realizing said vision. Jefferson’s vision relied on protecting the yeoman farmer against corrupting forces. As a result freedom of speech and of the press was deemed paramount. Swap yeoman farmer for internet user, and Reddit comes to reflect the contours of a Jeffersonian democracy. Visualizing the tenets of gatewatching further reflects this; users voting and freely speaking on content, instead of relying on entrenched gatekeeping elites, evokes Jefferson’s own aversion to centralized authority. Reddit from such a vantage becomes a platform for the people, by the people, a publically created good, open to all to engage with, and participate in. Such openness is further reflected by the fact that one doesn’t even require an account to read posts and comments, a class of users affectionately called lurkers.

Overlooked in the evocation of Jefferson and his contemporaries, is the contradictions implicit within their visions: freedom was reserved for only small segments of the population (Barbrook & Cameron, 1995; Taylor, 2014). By drawing inspiration from these inconsistent legacies, the same issues of exclusion and coercion are all but guaranteed to emerge within Reddit’s framework. Yet such reservations were assuaged by its creators, finding inspiration from the digital revolution’s inherent optimism. Reddit like other tech firms relied on the belief that in trusting users more good than harm would emerge (Lainer, 2010). When CEO Yishan Wong was brought in to help scale Reddit a few years later he would come to echo this sentiment of trust, declaring

We uphold the ideal of free speech on Reddit as much as possible not because we are legally bound to, but because we believe that you – the user – has the right to choose between right and wrong, good and evil, and that it is your responsibility to do so (Wong, 2014).

The post titled *Every Man Is Responsible for His Own Soul*¹⁴ was noted for being particularly tone-deaf (Masanari, 2017), and only galvanized the free speech purists located throughout the site. It would only take a few years before that rosy interpretation of Reddit's ideological commitment to free speech would shift.

Returning to Reddit to comment on the expulsion of CEO Ellen Pao, former CEO Yishan Wong engaged in a tumultuous 2015 AMA thread. When asked to reflect on the site and the autonomy bestowed to users, Wong curtly replied, “we let you govern yourselves and you failed, so now the Man is going to set some rules” (/u/Yishan, 2015, July 14). Ironically at the same time enshrined in the description of their site's values, the Reddit team had decreed “be stewards not dictators, this community owns itself” (Reddit, 2015). Coincidentally as of 2017 that statement no longer appears, instead the only ideological values present are focused upon community harmony and avoiding inflammatory content, both qualities being necessary, as I will suggest in chapter five, for profitability. The concept of free speech has since become a pariah topic. In 2015 Steve Huffman directly refuted his partner's statement from three years prior, stating “neither Alexis nor I created Reddit to be a bastion of free speech” (Sottek, 2015). The usage of bastion, a direct evocation of his partner's statement, cemented that Reddit's position of a space defined by free speech was nearing its conclusion. While the site still promotes a techno-utopian project of empowering individuals, the means through which to do so are no longer seen as running parallel to free speech. The shift from what had once been a loosely defined, but agreed upon social-contract, has resulted in clashes between clusters of the users, moderators who enforce communally agreed upon rules, and of the administrators who seek to balance between user trust and more active governance towards inflammatory content.

In understanding that free speech was built into the very underpinnings of the site, first in autonomy bestowed in its gatewatching structure, borrowed from its predecessor Slashdot, second in its initial political descriptions and aspirations, and finally in promoting itself as a public good

¹⁴ The post was the administration's response towards and event on the site known as The Fapping. The event in question was the illegal distribution of a photo cache hacked from the apple cloud service. Initially posted on 4chan the photos which featured nude selfies of female celebrities were later uploaded to Reddit on a specific subreddit called r/thefapping. The sub in question later exploded with subscriptions, with the quantity of user's upvoting the content making some appear on Reddit's front page during the period from August 30th up to September 7th 2014 (Masanari, 2017). The sub would later be banned, however the damage to Reddit's esteem, and the questioning of the delayed enforcement of rules would haunt the site for years to come.

it situates the confusion that now emanates from the concept of free speech, or at least how Reddit understands free speech. Reflecting upon Reddit's history, Ohanian laid praise on the Speakers Corner, arguing it was one of the main sources of inspiration for the site, "it's a place where literally anyone can get a soapbox and talk about what matters to them" (/u/kn0thing, 2015). What remained more striking in the post was one users unanswered question, "hi /u/kn0thing, where is the line going to be drawn before you take away someone's soapbox?" (/u/McFluffTheCrimeCat, 2015). By not answering the question, Reddit once again proved that it avoids direct responses in its stance towards free speech, an attempt at both placating free speech hardliners while not backing themselves into an ideological corner. Yet save from being heralded as an ideal for Reddit, one must wonder, what it truly represented in the minds of its creators and users. Having never been described, nor elaborated upon, free speech always seemed to represent an ideal continually sought, but rarely understood. The shifting nature of free speech as we shall see has been transformed into both a myth, and rallying cry for users seeking to produce their own interpretation of the digital revolutions promises. As the specter of free speech continues to cast a large shadow over the daily activities of Reddit, for better or for worse, it has sown the seeds in cultivating a user base with strong opinions, and entrenched beliefs towards their collective rights within the site, which together makes the community prone to collective protest when these rights are considered under threat. As of 2017 free speech no longer remains a promoted ideal within Reddit's development. Removed from user and content agreements, community guidelines, even within the site's promoted values section, free speech is neither seen nor heard, yet still very much alive. Simply avoiding free speech reflects a failed gambit, especially as the internet has a very long memory.

Reddit's Red Herring: Locating Free Speech in the Crowd

The contradictions and tensions between differing interpretations of free speech within Reddit exist as the result of the myth that free speech portends a space outside of, and beyond regulation; libertarian conceptions of the internet routinely promote complete individual autonomy, unaware of the contradiction that all activity online requires collective effort to make it possible. Nodes in networks cannot work in isolation, neither can individuals. Yet the mythic nature of what free speech evokes remains a powerful incentive for users to promote their own

voices, opinions, and views. The narrative of free speech is useful for individuals of various perspectives to both engage, and understand their own rights within digital spaces, and alternatively the limits of those rights. The narrative of free speech within Reddit, how it comes to be negotiated, promoted, or regulated, all foster an analysis of an emergent political awareness endemic to Reddit. It is from here then that one understands that the myth of free speech while promoting an untenable goal, recursively promotes discussion for an open and decentralized space; the constant clashes and dialogues that seek to inform the boundaries of free speech in fact educate users about their rights – both individually and collectively – within these networks.

The Power of Free Speech: Self-Government through Collective Efforts

Alexander Meiklejohn's work on free speech can best be surmised by a single maxim, "what is essential is not that everyone shall speak, but that everything worth saying shall be said" (1948, pp 25). Within this perspective, necessary information is shared and distributed amongst citizens so that they can inform themselves, thereby making wise decisions towards to their civic duties. Exemplified within this argument is all individuals engaging in dialogue are presented as equals, and through dialogue a consensus amongst equals can be achieved; consensus allows the collective as a whole to move forward. Free speech remains essential for a healthy democracy, it presents the mechanism by which the public becomes informed, and through which they are able to self-govern. Meiklejohn particularly valorized the town hall meeting, suggesting it best expressed the connection between free speech and self-government, as within these spaces, "each has the right and a duty to think his own thoughts, to express them, and to listen to the arguments of others." (1948, pp 22). This alludes to the rough contours of what constitutes free speech within this approach. Discussions, expressions and arguments centered upon the collective benefit of the community reflect the sole category of speech that is protected in such a perspective. Speech acts that promote the collective good, and public freedom demonstrate for Meiklejohn the highest ideal, a promotion of self-government where "each of us, as a citizen, has a part to play in the governing of the nation. In that capacity, we think and speak and plan and act for the general good" (1948, pp. 95). This is contrasted with private speech reflecting personal and individual pursuits, which itself cannot be expected to be protected under the same rights as public speech. Only speech connected to what is considered integral in regards to public policy becomes protected in this

model. It is for this reason that Meiklejohn returns to the town hall meeting as his paragon for self-government; these decisions affecting and impacting the community are engaged and deliberated upon with the aim to reach consensus upon the matters at hand (1948). This republican conception of free speech emphasizes citizens then as both the means of investing power to those who govern, while simultaneously making them gatekeepers in political matters, most observable through voting. This vigilance is the price for what Meiklejohn envisions as the defining principle for liberalism, the promotion of self-government. For Meiklejohn free speech is the surest means towards universal suffrage - political freedom he argues is “not the absence of government. It is self-government” (1961, pp. 254).

The formation of self-government however is by no means an absolute. Meiklejohn highlighted both *education*, and the *maintenance* of upholding the means for communicating as vital, together these activities he suggested promote an informed citizenry (1948). Being informed then is not simply about presenting a wide knowledge base, but also in understanding the means by which to engage. Inspired by the work of John Dewey, Meiklejohn agreed with the assessment that the “ideal aim of education is the creation of self-control” (Dewey, 1938, pp 64). The freedom of observation and of judgement reflect the most direct and impactful means for the public then to be engaged in such activities (Dewey, 1938). In regards to the role of government in such proceedings, maintaining the means for communicating and protecting the spaces for these activities to occur is central. In effect self-government is predicated on its own vigilance, it must constantly be enacted and reenacted, a basic requirement to bring it into existence. Self-government and its relationship with free speech can best be surmised then as a recursive exercise. This requirement is equally expressed in the public who must themselves make strides to stay informed, both through education, and staying up to date with the public dialogue. In doing so the expectation is that through voting, citizens can express their acquired “intelligence, integrity, sensitivity, and generous devotion to the general welfare that, in theory, casting a ballot is assumed to express” (Meiklejohn, 1961, pp 255). More succinctly free speech reflects the means through which a public manages itself. At its core, Meiklejohn’s conception of free speech is collectivist in nature (Post, 1993), relying on the community to cultivate the public good through discourse and deliberation. This sponsorship of public management represents an important value within Reddit, expressed through user’s self-organization, this sentiment will play an important role in chapter four with the emergence of a public sphere, and within chapter five and its argument

towards situating Reddit as a digital commons. Free speech ultimately portends a commitment towards autonomy, and a veneration towards a dissemination of the literacy skills required to uphold such commitments.

The value of applying Meiklejohn's approach to Reddit is that it emphasizes the open, decentralized, and heterarchical values Redditors cherish, and seek to propagate both on the platform, and the wider web. The Meiklejohnian approach in the context of Reddit aptly sums up the importance free speech holds for the wider userbase. The power of free speech upon the collective imagination of Redditors is located in its promise of self-determination, more specifically, the site's direction being guided by user sentiments. What Meiklejohn's approach highlights when applied to Reddit, is what Rose articulates as an understanding of *freedom as autonomy*, more concisely the ability "to fulfill one's potential through one's own endeavors, to determine the course of one's own existence through acts of choice" (1999, pp 84). Redditors evaluation of free speech therefore comes to be understood then as a metric evaluating the degree of autonomy the userbase possesses. Such a conclusion further helps explain the proclivity of Redditors to protest and mobilize against decisions that counter or impede their autonomy. As the ethic of freedom comes to inspire imaginations towards alternatives (Rose, 1999), for Redditors the desire for free speech suggests an aspiration for a communally managed platform – a goal Meiklejohn styles as the promotion of self-government.

What Free Speech Isn't: Myths and Limitations in Online Dialogues

In contrast with a Meiklejohnian approach to free speech is an argument characterized as the *Marketplace of Ideas*, a staunchly libertarian conception that situates free speech as a negative right. The focus for this approach is squarely upon individual autonomy, as a result intervention from external actors that seeks to limit, or contain free speech presents an existential threat. The central claim then in marketplace conceptions is that unfettered speech without restrictions, or censorship, reflects the most direct means for evaluating truths and forming values societally (Nunziato, 2009). For Mills (1978) no prevention or control of expression was to be accepted, opinions that were deemed false would simply wither from the general conversation. As Dewey (1938) notes, this argument springs from the belief that "every restriction upon liberty is *ipso facto* a source of pain and a limitation of a pleasure that might otherwise be enjoyed" (pp 11). This

argument holds particular sway online, especially within libertarian domains, as it highlights individual sovereignty, distrust of central authority, and most importantly an autonomy towards determining the validity of topics discussed.

Yet such an argument of free speech has two major flaws. First, it doesn't truly imply 'free' but instead, unabridged speech, which in turn leads to the second issue, an abject failure to accommodate for lapses or moral failures in locating 'truth' within the information disseminated. For Meiklejohn (1948) the pursuit of locating truth lies in the constant project of education, debating and informing ourselves through free speech only enhances this ability to demonstrate wisdom towards collective concerns. In contrast, within a market approach the evaluation towards what is deemed 'valuable' is determined by its intended audience – this 'consumer sovereignty' implies that people choose what they prefer, and what they wish to avoid (Sunstein, 2017). The latter view remains popular within online domains, particularly as it invokes the hacker belief that the best idea is what should succeed. Yet when taking an engineering idiom and applying it towards knowledge production, such a belief promotes a false equivalency, assuming that popularity asserts validity. Unless altered, the default filter throughout Reddit is sorted by best, a qualifier of a post receiving high upvotes, visibility suggesting a consensus towards the posts quality. Ohanian reflecting such an ideology notes that "the world wide web has created the most competitive marketplace of ideas the world has ever seen; you either make something people want or people move on" (2013, pp 3). The implication that emerges from this standpoint then is that individuals have absolute freedom in the proliferation of information, with the burden of what is said left at the expense of the audience; if one is offended by *what is said, the fault lies with them and not on the speaker*. This reflects a common

6) This is not a politically correct sub. If you get offended by "casual racism" or mean flairs/comments, CringeAnarchy is not for you. Please report any cucks, white knights or social justice faggots you see, and we will flair them accordingly.

Figure 4: Rule 6 for r/CringeAnarchy, the focus is on individuals to not be upset by the subs behavior or antics.

argument throughout Reddit as demonstrated through figure 4, in which the onus is on the audience to not be 'offended' by controversial subject matter. In fact being upset by material makes one a pariah and stigmatized, reflected through being branded – in this case having a flair locked to your username - designating one to be a cuck, white knight, or social justice faggot. What stands out in these labels is that they all connect to conceptions of masculinity that are deemed deviant from the standpoint of hegemonic masculinity endemic to toxic online communities (Massanari, 2017).

While free speech apologists would argue that if one is uncomfortable by such statements one should merely look elsewhere, the truth is that these dialogues are framed with the “intent to harm, silence, and to preemptively suppress deliberation” (Donnelly, 2016, pp 72). This is evident with the three categories discussed as outliers within /r/CringeAnarchy. Each represents a group that would disagree with the material discussed, for example the ‘social justice faggots’ represent dangerous interlocutors whose views present a direct challenge to hegemonic conceptions of masculinity, race, and sexuality. In such an example then we can situate how either conception of free speech would then engage with such material. In the case of Meiklejohn, dialogue that prevents individuals in participating, or silencing them entirely, runs counter to public freedom and the common good, and therefore is not protected as free speech (1948; 1961). A marketplace model, in contrast, such speech is not just permitted by virtue of the two hundred and fifty thousand subscribers attuned to the sub, but it reflects an agreed upon truth due to such consensus, one which negates opinions outside the sub or criticism towards the community itself.

The Salutory Myth of Free Speech on Reddit

The divide between opposing conceptions of free speech presents one of the chief conflicts affecting Reddit. Administrators over time have pivoted from a position of polite deference in regards to what is tolerable throughout the site, towards an active strategy focused on the removal of toxic content and subreddits, either through outright bans, or caching the material. The assumed reason behind such a shift is that Reddit’s pursuit of profitability. Having so many skeletons in the closet poses risks: profit is controversy shy. The other major issue that has prompted such a transition is more practical – the marketplace conception is untenable as a means of managing free speech. The idea that free speech, especially online, exists as an absolute is to quote Cass Sunstien a ‘salutory myth’ (2017). As the user base may understand free speech as an absolute, the administrators on the other hand pursue a more manageable strategy of regulating particular speech acts. Upset with increased regulation users dwell on Reddit’s past, a supposed golden age of free speech. Problematizing this however is that few users agree as to what that past looked like, nor how to return to this primordial iteration (Robertson, 2015). Yet the belief of unfettered speech recursively sustains the dialogue surrounding free speech; itself an informative venture for users understanding their rights online, both individually and collectively. Returning again to Mosco,

myths reflect “a promise unfulfilled and perhaps unfulfillable” (2004, pp 22), the allure being that they represent unbridled potential with no costs attached to their realization. From this understanding, the conception of free speech as unencumbered from regulation reflects an ideal type, one which informs users of the vitality of free speech by comparing it to their current plight. The social experiment that Reddit reflects then can be distilled to this concern. The constant clashes that emerge between users and administrators are manifestations of this divide; the contradiction between these opposing formations of free speech seeking to resolve themselves. Myths in particular have been noted as attempts at overcoming contradiction, the constant retelling of them acting as a means in locating some form of resolution (Levi-Strauss, 1963). The promise of free speech is then best understood as performative; it fosters itself through challenging what it permits and what it implies. The specter of free speech enacts an imagined force upon users. Through constant performance and enactment, users can test various permutations in order to resolve the contradictions within free speech. In fact such an imagined force is required in such endeavors, it calls itself into being, “it gives birth to itself, as a free and independent subject” (Derrida, 1986, pp10). The belief in free speech both sustains its relevance, while equally galvanizes users towards its intended (albeit utopic) aspirations.

Through his deconstruction of the American Declaration of Independence, Derrida aptly observes political pronouncements as atemporal, both in the scope of what they aspire to accomplish, and in the actors they govern (1986). By acknowledging the separation of declarations from their intended audience, their imaginative and performative forces can then be understood as the means through which the political subject emerges (Isin & Ruppert, 2015). For free speech, its mythic quality rests upon this understanding. This promise, in both its ultimate goal and of its implementation, exist only by product of the attestation of those in spaces who wish it to be – it wills itself into being. Free speech can only exist as long as it is sought and preformed. The constant challenges, reorientations, and rebukes discovered through such experimentation maintain its livelihood, and further incense the commitment towards solving its contradictions and limitations. The inherent ambiguity of what is promised does not diminish the power of such mythic thinking, instead galvanizing it; it permits individuals to draw their own conclusions as to what is promised (Mosco, 2004). Perhaps it is fitting then that myths which remain open to individual interpretation, and reflect an elasticity in their goals, remain paramount throughout the internet, which itself is defined through its openness and decentralized structure. The romanticized belief residing within

free speech narratives may make them seem untenable, but they reflect real and legitimate concerns for users online. The myths which perpetuate online, specifically the emergence of free speech, often point to central element for mythic thought, “an intense longing for a promised community, a public democracy” (Mosco, 2004, pp 15). In the case of Reddit, the myth of free speech points to a longing, in this case towards an idealized state for the platform. Free speech ultimately suggests a desire for the site to exist in line with Redditors desires for self-governance, the aspiration supported by the free labor users engage in to maintain the site’s operation. By understanding how Reddit engages with free speech, one can understand the wants and desires of Reddit itself.

An Exercise in Contrast: Understanding Free Speech as Editorialized Speech

In understanding the means of regulation within Reddit, one can discern what is permitted, and what is deemed abhorrent – the boundaries of free speech become apparent through regulation. Regulation arguably exists both within formal (*structural*) and informal (*cultural*) processes. As a result the following section will strive to observe both elements. In doing so the following section will analyze the editorialized nature of Reddit at three levels, *macro*, *meso*, and *micro*. At the macro level, the focus is on the nature of code, and the algorithmic operations administrators utilize to manage visibility on Reddit. For the meso analysis, the focus is on moderators, and the nature of their role in managing the affairs of independent subreddits. Finally for observation at the micro scale, the emphasis is upon individual threads. Here users represent a powerful means of regulating speech through their strict adherence to cultural patterns endemic to Reddit. By understanding the highly regulated nature by which speech is governed, the intent is to demonstrate that speech acts throughout Reddit reside far from an open marketplace of ideas, instead reflects something more nebulous and nuanced.

Managing the macro via design: Administrators, Code, and Algorithms

Admins have a particularly difficult role to navigate – they are both users who hold aspirations reminiscent of hacker culture, while simultaneously managing these same impulses in users. The balancing act between these tendencies largely occurs behind closed doors, therefore results are only gleaned through changes to the site’s overall operation. As noted, Reddit’s

administrators for much of the site's history have remained hands off, an attempt to not offend or turn away users (Massanari, 2017). Yet as Reddit has sought to scale itself, its approach has gradually shifted, with an increase in monitoring content becoming a more regular occurrence. Control from the perspective of admins relies on access to the material qualities of what constitutes Reddit, chiefly access to code that the site is built upon, and the algorithms that govern the rules of visibility. Code within digital spaces functions akin to an ontological barrier, permitting what can and cannot exist, becoming an outward expression of its creators wills and desires (Lessig, 1999). Algorithms meanwhile reflect active expressions of their creator's impulses. The arbiters of information within online spaces, algorithms through calculation enforce the law implicit in code. In terms of volume, the collective voices of users outweigh those of the admins, code which the platform springs from, and the algorithms which actively manage the site, come to represent the primary means through which admins can exert direct control – visibility becomes the manner in which admins can bestow favorability.

Design choices such as the filters for organizing content, sorted either by best (highest number of upvotes), controversial (large amount of both up and down votes), or hot (recent voting activity), fundamentally alter how one interacts with Reddit. By default, the filter is sorted by best. This arguably already presents one attempt at framing Reddit in a particular, and more positive light. This simple design choice presents just one example of how visibility is an asset admins utilize in order to foster certain types of dialogues over others. While equally highlighting a widely shared and shortsighted belief in Silicon Valley, the notion that controlling deviance reveals a specific engineering challenge (Beyer, 2014). In an attempt to curb the narrative of Reddit as male-centric, and phobic towards alternative views, admins promoted the sub */r/TwoXChromosomes* as a default sub for new users. In promoting the sub as one of the defaults for new users, and for those viewing the site without an account, the additional visibility gave the sub a prominence on the platform it would unlikely have fostered on its own. As one admin explained regarding the importance of defaults and their intended impact on the larger Reddit ecosystem, they explain that “we created the notion of the defaults, in which we *cherry picked* a set of subreddits to appear as a default set, which had the effect of editorializing Reddit”

(/u/simbawulf, 2017). Yet such an act rings hollow, not simply due to its overtness¹⁵, but also in its failure in understanding regulation towards sociality online. Spaces defined by the sociability of their users, norms represent more influential means in curbing behavior (van Dijck, 2013). Yet trying to alter the normative boundaries of what is permissible, realistically presents a serious project, requiring both a heavy investment of time and energy. An investment more glaring for a space like Reddit that defines itself by its unruliness.

Within information networks, algorithms have increasingly become relied upon in order to exert control (Pasquale, 2015). Such reliance becomes even more profound when one reflects on how just 300 employees are meant to manage a user base of millions. Admins agency is then derived and expressed by the algorithms that operationalize the site. The most prominent example of this is with the front page, the main information highway on Reddit. Reaching the front page represents an important accomplishment for certain subs, it promotes the subs unique content to new users, who in turn inundate the sub with additional subscriptions. Gaining an increase in subscribers to one's sub intrinsically grants subs a greater chance at reaching the front page. Subs with a larger number of users receive more content, subsequently making a livelier and more engaging environment that in turn invites more users to participate. Together this ensures more votes are received, making content as a result more visible. Early votes are essential, especially as once a story has received enough votes of support dissenting votes hold little impact in curbing a posts popularity (Massanari, 2017). It is for this reason why default subs have an advantage over other subs in appearing on the front page, the volume of user traffic allows more early votes, which in turn makes the content more likely to appear on the front page. Due to the importance that visibility plays in Reddit's dynamics, the algorithm that determines visibility remains the most powerful tool for admins to exert influence over the site, and the discourse which it engages in.

The algorithm which transforms votes into visibility, thereby allowing content to rise to the front page, presents a powerful tool yet one shrouded in mystery due to proprietary concerns. Users are unaware as to how the algorithm which manages the front page works. This lack of transparency appears to be a direct rebuke to the democratic rhetoric espoused by its creators. The only criteria offered for what is capable of appearing on the front page for the default experience,

¹⁵ Known as the *Streisand Effect*, regulation online perceived as heavy handed by users is met with humorous aplomb, reflected in attempts at circumventing such regulation. In particular, users challenge regulation through overt examples of the behavior being performed, or the information continuing to be shared.

are subs with not suitable for work (NSFW) content are not afforded the chance to appear on the default front page, subs which have opted out from appearing on the front page will not appear¹⁶, and finally subs that users consistently filter out of their front pages are also barred (/u/simbawulf, 2017). It is the third criteria that raises the most concern, as at its core it implies that popularity is comparable to agreeableness, an unsettling parallel to the marketplace argument towards free speech. When one user asked for clarification as to what types of subs would be described by this criteria, the response from admins suggested it was of little concern, as only subs that would fall under such criteria were those “that are large and dedicated to specific games are heavily filtered, as well as specific sports, and narrowly focused politically related subreddits, etc.” (/u/simbawulf, 2017). Yet contrary to such statements, the last overhaul to the front page algorithm occurring in early 2017, saw one vocal and large sub that did not meet any of the specified criteria, become blocked from reaching the front page, /r/The_Donald, a sub devoted to the supporting the 45th President of the United States Donald Trump.

While a younger sub, /r/The_Donald had already cast a long shadow onto Reddit. Highly vocal, with a specific degree of vitriol in their rhetoric, the sub represents a thorn in the side of both admins and users alike. Particularly bad with what Reddit calls ‘brigading’, members of /r/The_Donald often ventured in force onto other subs to argue and counter-argue the majority of content, either by posting comments or downvoting material. By mobilizing their collective weight in voting, they manipulated the algorithm to promote or remove content, so that the front page adhered to their views. While such flagrant offenses attack the core functionality of Reddit, they were not illegal in the site’s own user agreements, instead such acts reflect normative violations. Outright banning or removing the sub in question is a non-starter, as co-founder Steve Huffman comments “When something gets banned the mods often attempt to recreate the same communities” (/u/Specz, 2015). Furthermore for online forums such as /r/The_Donald, where the narrative of victimization is central towards the community’s identity, outright bans at best cement such evaluations, while at worse make said users martyrs for the ideological beliefs. In tackling the issue of /r/The_Donald a new strategy was applied. In removing their access to the front page, little changed to Reddit as a whole, in fact regular users had up till then already removed seeing

¹⁶ While visibility is a powerful incentive for some subs, others prefer remain small and exclusive, and therefore eschew being part of the front page. This results form a fear of becoming *normiefied*, the anxiety of becoming mainstream, a topic explored in more detail in chapter six focusing on Digital Literacy.

such content from their curated feeds. Yet for those solely seeing Reddit through its defaults (self-described as an editorialized Reddit) its removal would seem like a proactive step in curbing hate speech. But by being sequestered /r/The_Donald to their own fiefdom outside of prying eyes, the sub has become more transfixed on conspiracy theories, both against their sub, but also against their ideological tenets. It is difficult to separate this from the larger narrative that impacts vocal supporters of Donald Trump, but it does raise an alarming possibility. Removing the chance for these users to be challenged by outsiders, does little to combat the fallacies they spout. One has to wonder if seclusion, especially for groups already fearful of opposing views, makes these communities more likely to devolve into echo chambers, only feeding off of their own elliptical energy. While /r/The_Donald reflects the largest and most overt attempt so far in Reddit's history at curbing the dialogue reflected on the front page, it certainly isn't the first or the last time it shall occur. What this example does question is to the degree of activity admins place in attempting to shift the dialogue on Reddit. By tweaking an algorithm, Reddit's admins were able to cleave a massive and vitriolic segment of users from voicing themselves on the front page.

The Iron Law: Moderators as Creators, Custodians, and Oligarchs

Moderators present the most overt means of regulation throughout Reddit. Derived from volunteer labor, moderators perform additional tasks, and in return are granted additional powers to help maintain the coherence of the platform. The position also reflects in certain cases a frontiersman achievement within Reddit, the highest seniority moderators within a sub is usually the individual credited with initially founding the sub. Moderators then both enforce rules within subs, but by virtue of creating said subs, are also the architects of the regulation that will be enforced within the sub. As the sub continues to grow and develop, eventually additional mods are added, but only at the discretion of the mods themselves. Only mods can create additional mods within a sub, users who wish to join the sub's management must address the current mod team and "justify themselves and their ideas of the work to their would be peers" (Matias, 2016, pp 5). In adding mods with similar outlooks, and opinions, the mod team further creates a solidified front. Strengthening their position, mods rarely are dismissed from their position. Only moderators more senior in a sub's hierarchy can remove a mod more junior. Mods therefore present both the regulatory structure for users, and of their moderating peers.

Rarely do admins intervene or disrupt this arrangement. The reliance on unpaid labor to distribute governance by human agents, forces admins to be non-confrontational towards the activity of mods. So long as mods uphold the Reddit Content Policy¹⁷ subs are unlikely to receive intervention from admins. Far from condoning their behavior the subsection devoted to mods within the content policy explains that while “individual communities on Reddit may have their own rules in addition to ours and their own moderators to enforce them. Reddit provides tools to aid moderators, but does not prescribe their usage” (Content Policy, 2017). While reliant on their labor, Reddit intentionally distances themselves from mods, a hollow attempt at placing sole responsibility for abhorrent activity throughout the site on volunteers. Mods then act as a buffer, both for users upset with regulations within subs, but also from outside criticism towards the site’s behavior. So long as mods perform their duties, and don’t create negative press for Reddit, they remain safe in their position. As a result embedded then in every subs rules is a basic introduction to the content policy to be read at the leisure of the user; mere lip service to retain autonomy and avoid admin intervention. In upholding their contractual obligations towards Reddit’s admins, mods are for the most part left unperturbed, to govern their subs at their discretion.

This unelected and seemingly unending position presents a direct conflict towards Reddit’s touted democratic ideals. Reflecting only a small segment of users, mods are bestowed vast dominion over the site, while receiving little oversight on their activities, save for their moderating peers. This suggests a consolidation of power within a small and elevated class of users. Such an arrangement is far from unique to Reddit, but endemic to peer-production in general, suggesting a *power law* where small groups of users contribute a majority of labor in participatory sites (Shaw & Hill, 2014). Commenting on the nature of volunteer movements, Michels (1959) argued that democratic movements often fall prey to oligarchic behaviors, due to a small delegation of individuals performing certain key administrative tasks. The *Iron Law of Oligarchy* Michels (1959) argued was an unavoidable outcome. Commenting upon the supposed open and leaderless nature of the Arab Spring movement, Tufekci (2011) observed that instead of the open and flat nature of networks becoming reflected in a similar governance structure, the opposite seems to be true. Consolidation occurs, whether for efficiency’s sake or a natural result of communal

¹⁷ Reddit’s official content policy reflects a broad 7 point list of prohibited content. Content that is therefore deemed to be *illegal, is involuntary pornography, encourages or incites violence, if it threatens, harasses, or bullies or encourages others to do so, is personal and confidential information, if it impersonates someone or in some manner, is spam*

organizations. Ultimately “networks which start out as diffuse can and likely will quickly evolve into hierarchies not in spite but because of their open and flat nature” (Tufekci, 2011). Similarly in his assessment of Wikipedia, Reagle jr argued that “structurelessness is organizationally impossible” (2010, pp 74). As the number of contributions increase within online domains, evidence suggests that inevitably a small number of users with increased knowledge come to control the formalized authority positions (Shaw & Hill, 2014). This is not to suggest that mods have initiated some coup throughout Reddit, in fact without the labor undertaken by mods, the site would surely be inundated with spam, riddled with flagrant violations of Reddit’s content policy, while also sparse in subs. However it does suggest that a majority of Reddit’s authority is invested within a small segment of users, neither elected to their position, nor able to be easily ejected without public outcry.

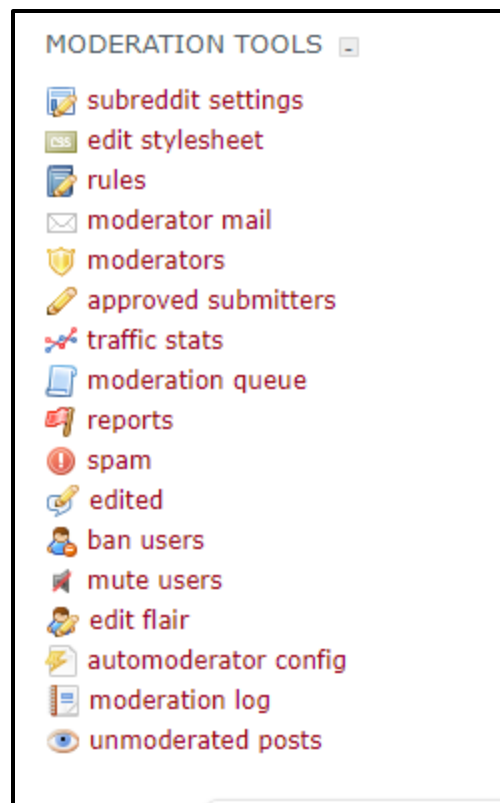


Figure 5: Mod Tools the resources afforded to moderators to fulfill their responsibilities

The primary function of moderators is subreddit focused curation. Acting as both filters and evaluators of content, mods primarily bring coherence and stability to the subs they manage. In order to perform such tasks, upon gaining status as a mod new features and functions emerge within the sub they have agreed to manage. Mods as shown in figure 5 are given the tools to manage user’s behavior, both verify and evaluate content so that it conforms to the content policy, all while being responsible for upholding the functionality of the sub. As a result in many subs these tasks are divvied amongst a team of mods all focused on maintaining the vitality of their sub. While the position requires constant vigilance, mods being volunteer labor can only be present so often. As a result subs often utilize automated scripts (bots) to alleviate the pressures of sub maintenance. The *automoderator* functions exist as an extension of moderators, the variables which inform its decisions are those of its moderation team. Social metrics such as an account’s age, or a downvote threshold being reached on a post, directs the automod in its duties. The automoderator therefore engages in routine, rule based tasks, performing the majority of the banal

responsibilities of curation. Apart from locating spam, automoderator is used in removing content that violates the subs rules, and upholds formatting requirements. In doing the majority of the basic custodial tasks, the automod feature grants small mod teams a better chance at maintaining the vigor of their subs. Mods administrative actions therefore reflect executive decisions and actions, while the automoderators tend more to bureaucratically oriented duties. Mods decisions then can be viewed to impact the sub as a whole.

Whether it is the development of new rules, banning users who violate these rules, or locking threads so no new comments can be added; mods' decisions ultimately uphold the subs consistency. Healthy subs by virtue of this show little disruption in their activity. But this also points to the limitation promoted by open systems, the logic that informs such vitality is context specific, a reason why admins claim no responsibility for a subreddit's activity. By casting such responsibility upon unpaid volunteers, Reddit has had issues when their views don't ally with users. In instances when such disagreements grow more pronounced, mods become the class of users most likely to organize their subs energies in protesting disagreements. This points to an important element of the mod class of users, their role as community operators. Mods are given additional tools of visibility, they can see the traffic numbers for their sub, giving mods insights into when users are more active, both in viewing and posting habits. Mods can also give users greater visibility, both positively and negatively through flairs. Flairs may denote a user's increased knowledge on some subject, their allegiance to some association (sports, professional, or recreational), having performed some task on Reddit, or perhaps the flair acts as a brand signifying some deviant behavior. Flairs are designed to change the way other users evaluated posts, and the individuals authoring them.

While mods are permitted vast power they are not absolute. Mods are unable to tamper with user's posts or content, nor are they able to see which users are subscribed to their sub, or how those users vote on posts. While this prevents abuses of power, it does little to curtail the impact of mods opinions and beliefs on the sub as a whole. As mods are partially responsible to help cultivate their sub's user population, and add to their moderation team, similar beliefs and opinions come to emerge, and become sustained by eventual growing consensus. This only cements the idea that users who disagree with a subs outlook should go elsewhere. Once subs become engrained in their ways, little can be done, as dissenting opinions are more likely to be

downvoted. Being the creators, caretakers, and curators of their subs, mods are both responsible for Reddit's often enigmatic growth, while also representing the decision makers for their subs management. The decisions undertaken by mods unfurls the conflicts within Reddit; the arrangement made with users being responsible for the majority of the labor throughout Reddit, while being granted the ability to be their own oversight. Moderators are the manifestation of Reddit's Faustian bargain, the result of minimizing investment in human capital for maximum growth. They also neatly sum up the issue with free speech, the reality that it is not unregulated, but carefully delivered and continually policed.

Cunningham's Law: Micro Governance through the crowd

Cunningham's Law, an old internet adage, attests that the quickest means in locating a solution online is to post the wrong answer. The law, like many internet colloquialisms affords a humorous summation of the internet's possibility, and of its limitations. The potential of a network comprised of individuals willing to fish through information, flag mistakes, correct, or re-contextualize information if need be, presents a powerful platform for citizen journalism and public engagement. By harnessing the structure of the network, users in ideal settings can utilize individual effort to add towards the collective good; individual users can quickly and easily benefit larger communities – so long as they have the necessary skills (Rheingold, 2012). Cunningham's law infers such promise, suggesting that the interconnection afforded by digital platforms promotes collective, and collaborative efforts in information verification. Such an ideal, in turn, is explicit within aggregation based platforms. Prominent in both voting and commenting on Reddit, is the notion that such behavior exists under the collaborative project of acting as collective judge of the material. Inevitably the collective labor users undertake in performing this task, presents promising potentials, suggesting a transparent and egalitarian approach towards curating the public dialogue. At its worst however such arrangements can devolve into stagnant forms of group think that silence dissenting opinions, and penalize difference. By virtue of the sheer volume of users, the collective labor in curating content reflects a both powerful exercise in crowdsourcing and collaborative journalism, but also a powerful means of censorship towards information deemed unimportant, irrelevant, or not topical by the community at large.

Envisioning the benefits afforded by interconnection online, Pierre Lévy (1997) speculated that such arrangements would usher the development of collective intelligence, the pooling of individual users knowledge to help inform the collective. While one individual cannot know everything, by collectively pooling their expertise and knowledge, networks fill the gaps of individual limitations. As Lévy goes on to explain, collective intelligence promotes the development of a “form of universally distributed intelligence, constantly enhanced, coordinated in real time, and resulting in the effective mobilization of skills” (1997, pp 13). Contrary to fears that such collectively shared and expressed information would diminish individuality, adherents to collective intelligence suggest the opposite (Lévy, 1997; Jenkins, 2006; Rheingold, 2012). Arguing that the emergence of network engagements would usher in new iterations of humanism, Lévy suggests such a reappraisal would situate “collective intelligence [as] a process of growth, differentiation, and the mutual revival of singularities” (1997, pp 17). The intrinsic motivation to participate is that such collaborative work reenergizes our individuality, through adding to the collective good one transforms users into knowledge creators, weaving individual threads into the collective tapestry (Lévy, 1997; Thompson, 2013). The intrinsic motivation to add to the collaborative knowledge production within Reddit is observed in user’s acquisition of karma, a metric meant to represent both validity of the information and conformity towards the stylistic criteria that is both unwritten yet universally understood throughout Reddit. Positive karma suggests a propensity then for positive additions to the site, but also hints at user’s knowledge of how the site itself functions - both in knowing where to accurately post information, and how to deliver it to have the greatest impact. For users then not directly adding content, the usage of voting continues to develop the networks of collective intelligence, as such users become content evaluators, and intelligence filters to the community as a whole (Rheingold, 2012).

In the example of /r/Futurology collective intelligence is a strategy directed at mitigating, and controlling hype surrounding certain content posted on the sub. Focused on discussing content which in their own words is “devoted to the field of Future(s) Studies and evidence-based speculation about the development of humanity, technology, and civilization” (/r/Futurology, 2017), the sub often fears the viability of the content presented. Common in /r/Futurology is that top comments reflect some variation of *please tell me why this isn’t going to happen* which in turn elicits a dialogue where users debate both the veracity of the information, and the practicality of it for society as a whole. Obviously the majority of individuals taking part in these conversations are

not expert in the fields which these stories emerge from. Users however overcome these limitations by both pooling their collective knowledge about the field, coupled with the architecture of the internet that allows quick, and easy means to connect disparate information through hyperlinks. Alternatively such posts where users ask for direct criticism are occasionally responded to by users with expert and in-depth knowledge about the subject. Commonly such posts begin with the user introducing themselves through their expertise, to then explain the issues, problems and concerns with the content in question. Often in an attempt to simplify such exchanges, users with prior expert knowledge message mods with proof, in turn leading to a flair attached to their username so such introductions are no longer required. As moderator /u/mvea explains, the process is used “to distinguish between an educated opinion based on experience and knowledge, and a random comment without a background related to the topic” (2017), the strategy is meant then both highlight, and connect experience and expertise with those who lack it. In doing so the collective knowledge is increased as it becomes proliferated within the network. Distributed networks of expertise become collaborative public projects, premised entirely upon users collectively evaluating, responding to, and debating the merits of information added to the network. In the case of /r/PersonalFinance collective intelligence becomes codified in wiki projects, which centralize information, creating free resources to educate new users, while further proliferating the combined knowledge accrued by the sub. As an ideal, collective intelligence evokes similar aspirations as to what Meiklejohn (1948) suggested within free speech, specifically finding the strength of individualism within the collective, which promotes a rigorous and egalitarian political project of self-government.

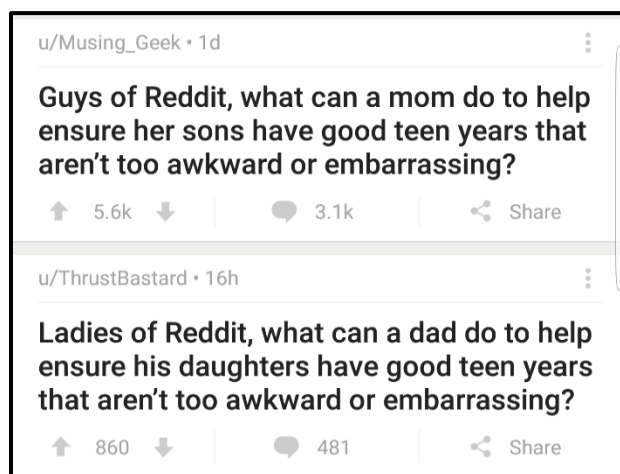


Figure 6: Users attempting to harness trends for karma.

In collaborative and participatory communities the emergence of collective intelligence presents alternative forms of media power, creating spaces communally managed, and thereby informed by their own self-organized logics. This however points to an unnerving tendency equally demonstrated in such communities. The self-organizing logic, recursively used to continue the discussion throughout Reddit act as a coercive force upon

users – compelling them to engage in certain, pre-agreed upon manners. Failure to do so reflected in downvotes and decreased visibility. In understanding the rules of visibility, some users are criticized for using this knowledge to make facsimile posts simply gain karma (see figure 6), an affront to Redditors collective belief that posts should be an authentic attempt to add onto the discussion. Responding to an /r/AskReddit thread discussing what aspect of Reddit culture annoys you most, multiple users vented their displeasure with this repetitiveness, one noted their anger with the “same formulaic, uncreative patterns that get repeated because Redditors remember what gets upvoted in previous threads” (/u/Lemon1412, 2017), with another echoing a similar sentiment, arguing “people know what gets them internet points so post the same things over and over” (/u/FuzzyDunlop91, 2017).

Such frustrations hint at an innocuous yet coercive social pressure present within Reddit’s collective intelligence. Reddit’s ability to filter material is far from neutral, instead it promotes certain ideas and content over others. As a result users cognizant of such patterns, harness this to accrue additional karma. This pressure is characterized within Reddit as the *hive-mind*, which for many users represents a major pitfall within the platform. The hive-mind presents a threat towards Reddit’s idealized view of itself, directly challenging the assumption that it promotes content both novel and authentic. The pressure of conformity implicit within karma is a looming danger for Reddit. The fear that users lack the ability to critically engage with material, instead blindly following trends and patterns simply due to popularity, is far from being a mere theoretical problem. Redditors often argue that the site is prone to *circle-jerks*, described as a pattern where “a group of people with similar beliefs that self-validate each other, suppress opposing opinions, do not consider that alternate opinions exist, or consider themselves, their opinion, or their group exclusive/superior” (/u/i_post_gibberish, 2017). The behavior of a hive-mind presents a dark-reflection to collective intelligences. As the task of evaluating and filtering content is left to individuals, together engaged in a collaborative project with likeminded participants, the risk that content conforms to one worldview – that expressed by the collective – increases.

Whether Reddit evokes the ideals and potentials Lévy outlined, or if it simply descends into the tribalism alluded within fears of the hive-mind, both outlooks suggest one concern when one considers free speech: the active policing of information by users. While collective intelligence is meant to overcome individual bias by networking the process of filtering and evaluating, one

must wonder if a group is not fully informed or educated on the topic, how then is the network meant to adjust or compensate? By virtue of congregating together, Redditors inevitably share certain outlooks and values, either fostered by their time participating in Reddit, or that certain qualities initially drew them to the site in the first place. This entails that certain outlooks, opinions, and beliefs are more likely to gain traction on the site. An issue, entirely recursive, is posed by such a situation. Content that conforms to Reddit's collective tastes is more likely to receive votes which will grant it visibility, in turn this sets a precedent for similar material to receive votes, something Redditors use to inflate their own karma. In constantly sharing similar content it reinforces such patterns, while also warding off individuals to the platform who hold contrarian views. Far from being the wild west of free speech, Reddit is a space of regulated and policed speech, all undertaken by its own users who often seem blind to such practices.

The Enduring Myth of Free Speech

Perhaps the dream of free speech within Reddit was untenable from its onset. Content aggregators are defined by how they filter information. By virtue of their own logic they never objectively parse information, instead evaluating and ranking information by predetermined values. Furthermore the analysis of free speech pointed to the highly editorialized nature of Reddit's operation. Whether by the code and algorithmic processes utilized by a small enclave of admins to oversee a multitude of users, the curating behaviors of mods and their auto-mod support, or the coercive force users impart on their peers through voting, each aspect suggests far from 'free', Reddit is a highly regulated domain. While users espouse the marketplace of ideas, Reddit upon further observation reflects an ordered domain, with predictable outcomes derived from user preferences. Much of this chapter has been premised upon this contradiction, Reddit as a democratic and egalitarian bastion of free speech, and Reddit as a space defined by certain logics, opinions, and statuses that together promote particular narratives over others. The divide between these two 'versions' of Reddit is where the myth of Reddit's possibility resides. Free speech exists then as an essential impulse for Reddit to continue to understand its own direction and limitations, a litmus test for user's autonomy in producing their vision of a digital agora, while also producing a platform for users to host and promote public dialogues. It is in this vein that free speech should

be approached; aiding the development of publically owned, curated, and organized space for the commons.

Ultimately this chapter had three objectives. First to outline a brief history of free speech within Reddit, second to understand free speech as a mythic element spurring aspirations of user autonomy, and to finally demonstrate the editorialized nature of speech within Reddit. By briefly reviewing Reddit's history with free speech, the striking conclusion was how open the concept remained. Such an analysis pointed out that the failure to properly understand free speech remains one of the chief failures of the platform. Yet the various interpretations of free speech within Reddit point towards a similar desire, a continuation of the user's autonomy. The myth that freedom represents the antithesis of control (Rose, 1999) within Reddit spurs aspirations towards self-government, in this case the platform being managed communally by its users. The tension between freedom and control, which users verbalize through free speech, remains at the very heart of Reddit, and is expressed within its editorialized functionality. Users (and by extension mods) regulate their speech, yet remain fine with such an inconsistency so long as it is the userbase directing these decisions. Whereas for admins, as the next chapter will explore in more detail, their activities remain covert, particularly as admin directed alterations to the site are often met with rancor. These differing reactions towards editorializing the site again demonstrate user's suspicion and outward hostility towards actors infringing upon their autonomy. As successive chapters will explore, an understanding of freedom grounded in autonomy, verbalized through free speech disagreements, reflects a major tension within the platform.

Chapter Four: Awareness and Mobilization on Reddit

The Internet is democracy's revenge on democracy

- Molly Haskell

The rhetoric surrounding the potential political impacts promised through the internet primarily rely upon its open and participatory nature (Galloway, 2001; Benkler, 2003; Hindman, 2009). While reductionist in scope, the argument attests that with open access, users can congregate together, share information, debate its merits, and make informed decisions this will become reflected in society as a whole; ultimately the utopian endpoint is the emergence of a new and improved iteration of democracy. The danger in this assumption is one of the chief issues this thesis seeks to address, the belief of *internet-centrism*, that the internet's agency alone will unlock its potential, and by doing so, direct society towards a more idealized state (Curran, 2012). Therefore it is vital to ascertain the patterns and behavior that users engage in participating within online spaces, which often don't neatly fit into preconditioned categories of political behavior (Beyer, 2014). Reddit often falls under such an evaluation even as its front page routinely features discussions focusing on current events and trending topics, with users constantly voicing their reactions, discussing the events, sharing their opinions, while often fact-checking errors. Yet this is often overshadowed by Reddit's more toxic elements and its well documented problems with misogynistic and racist rhetoric (Taylor, 2014; Massanari, 2015; Massanari, 2017). What this masks is an active, vibrant, and emergent public sphere, one where users regularly participate in dialogue and debate about current affairs which directly impact their livelihoods. Understanding Reddit's collective moments of protest is best understood with this in mind. By recognizing Reddit as a Public Sphere, one which incubates these disagreements, one can draw the connections between free speech, political awareness, and mobilization. In suggesting the town hall meeting as

an example of how free speech is tied towards the project of self-government, Meiklejohn (1948) ascribed the importance of space towards free speech, both to exchange information, but to also mobilize through consensus.

The subsequent chapter will as a result focus upon the connection then between free speech and subsequent mobilization. To do so this chapter first commences with an evaluation of Reddit as an emergent public sphere. Much like classical interpretations of the Public Sphere, Reddit falls prey to certain issues, most ironically that it often times promotes the same behaviors of coercion and exclusion that it seeks to mitigate (Dahlberg, 2007). Following this the emphasis is placed upon how collective mobilization occurs within Reddit. Similar to what Meiklejohn (1948) described as the function of free speech, Reddit's instances of collective mobilization seem to hint at the beginning of self-governance – or at least an aspiration for such an arrangement. As discussed, Reddit has often flirted with a belief that it represents a democratic system (Masanari, 2017); particularly by advertising the participatory nature of the platform, and their supposed hands off approach, its creators view the platform as an evocation of American political idealism (Ohanain, 2013). What free speech portends in such arrangement is a proclivity for users to demand that their voices and input be heard, especially when their perceived autonomy is at risk. The goal of this chapter then is to examine how free speech comes to promote collective mobilization, and what collective mobilization means to the larger project of free speech – the promotion of self-government.

The Promise of the Digital Agora – Anonymity and Tyranny in the Public Sphere

Having previously situated Reddit as a massive and perpetual conversation, the question is, does this conversation allude to an increased political awareness and activity amongst users? As a result the following section is focused upon evaluating Reddit as a public sphere, a site where individuals partaking in a collective dialogue come to be galvanized towards protecting their online livelihoods. As Meiklejohn explained the town-hall meeting offered the best expression of the connection between free speech and self-government since it involves an assembly of individuals engaging in dialogue concerning their mutual livelihoods (1948). For Reddit the meeting of users to discuss topics of common interest and concern suggests the appearance of a public sphere, while their fierce commitment towards maintaining the site's ethos with communal interests, comes to

suggest a nascent if unspoken understanding of self-government. Ultimately how Reddit fulfills the role of a public sphere becomes an illustration as to how collective assembly within Reddit forms the basis for subsequent instances of mobilization, often directed at defending user's chief concern, their autonomy, particularly in the face of growing commodification throughout the platform.

Anonymity and Privacy: Normative, Cultural, and Structural concerns

Reddit in its initial development championed anonymity as integral to the site's operation. Anonymity was deemed essential since it afforded a degree of candor that would support honest and open conversation (Reddit, 2015). In practice this has undoubtedly shown mixed results, yet the importance of anonymity within the site is unquestionable. When anonymity is engineered into a site's architecture, it becomes integral for the community as a whole, becoming a cultural value that helps the space make sense of itself¹⁸ (Beyer, 2014); it comes to foster the internal rules and logic of the site. The importance of anonymity is further emphasized when coupled with free speech. For many users, anonymity is significant as it suggests an egalitarian approach to content evaluation; content is assumed to be appraised on its own merits, instead of by who posted it. As one user noted anonymity is integral, affording "a chance to be judged on the strength of their ideas and the quality of their humor rather than because of who they are, it's a really useful tool" (u/RedStarRocket91, 2016). Anonymity as a result is important as it suggests the affordance to freely expressing opinions, especially those which supposedly contest or challenge the norm.

It is not uncommon for users to be in possession of multiple accounts throughout Reddit (see figure 7), with one account serving as a primary with subsequent accounts used sparingly and for specific purposes (Massanari, 2015). For *throwaway accounts*, the usage is attached to instances where users share more personable information, or in instances where the information disclosed is of a particularly embarrassing nature.



Figure 7: A user recounts the need in having multiple accounts for different purposes

¹⁸ This presents a significant barrier for Reddit pursuing profitability, a topic explored in greater detail in chapter five.

Throwaway accounts usually are disclosed as such (ex *Throwaway131376*), while users often introduce their posts under these monikers, addressing that the account is a throwaway (often with a statement along the lines of ‘for obvious reasons’). While throwaway accounts are more likely to be located within certain subs (r/confessions – for obvious reasons), they remain a common sight, especially in threads where users share information they worry would be connected with their identity offline. This alludes to an interesting component of Reddit user’s attitudes throughout the site, the fear that their accounts could become connected to their offline lives. This anxiety manifests within one of the few site-wide rules. Located both formally within each subs governing rules, while also informally in users collective behavior - doxing or the intentional release of other users personal information remains a cardinal sin for Reddit. While informal, the list for *Reddiquette*, the informal norms meant to guide user’s behaviors, the longest entry relates to such instances¹⁹, highlighting the emphasis and care devoted to preventing such occurrences.

As accounts have the history of user’s posts, having ones identity connected to an account can lead to embarrassing reveals. On the sub r/TIFU (Today I Fucked Up) the highest post of all time titled *TIFU by having my Reddit history revealed by Jimmy Kimmel live on TV*, which as the title suggests a user’s account was shown without their knowledge or consent on live television. In being isolated, this user’s post history and behaviors became magnified, and as they later recounted “keep in mind they even named and showed my username - he made it look like there was a lot of filthy stuff going on in my history so this was quite embarrassing for me and I’m getting a lot of crazy messages now” (u/gryff42, 2017). Therefore while anonymity grants supposed candor, it simultaneously and perhaps more importantly promotes comfort by creating distance between one’s post history and one’s self. By giving a means of obfuscation, users are seemingly more likely to express opinions that would otherwise not be permitted offline. Posts are seen then to depict authentic representation of one’s ideas. Anonymity from this perspective denotes a more truthful base from which to express one’s opinions, at least in theory. Authenticity,

¹⁹ Full explanation - **Post someone's personal information**, or post links to personal information. This includes links to public Facebook pages and screenshots of Facebook pages with the names still legible. We all get outraged by the ignorant things people say and do online, but witch hunts and vigilantism hurt innocent people too often, and such posts or comments will be removed. Users posting personal info are subject to an immediate account deletion. If you see a user posting personal info, please contact the admins. Additionally, on pages such as Facebook, where personal information is often displayed, please mask the personal information and personal photographs using a blur function, erase function, or simply block it out with color. When personal information is relevant to the post (i.e. comment wars) please use color blocking for the personal information to indicate whose comment is whose. (Reddiquette, 2017)

the presumed result of anonymity, establishes itself as a cultural signifier towards candor and transparency, content then comes to be equally evaluated by such standards (Massanari, 2015).

If anonymity grants candor, how then does it not equally devolve Reddit into a chaotic mess of toxic behaviors, or more frankly, how does anonymity not undermine the operation of the site? As suggested in the previous chapter, speech acts occurring through Reddit are highly regulated. The collective pressure from the larger community, coupled with the active governance of mods, and occasional interjections of admins, together compel users to conform in regards to the context – what is tolerable is subjective to the sub the act takes place in. These pressures are only conducive to compelling certain behaviors because users hold attachment towards their online handles. Reddit, while valuing anonymity, isn't a space that is purely anonymous. Unlike 4chan, where all users share the same online handle, Reddit requires one to have an account with a unique signifier in order to participate in the conversation. Reddit is thus defined as a space of *pseudo-anonymity*, where users have 'aliased identities' that are separate from their offline lives (Beyer, 2014). For Reddit, users accrue karma for behavior deemed relevant to the conversation at hand; in earning social capital, users become attached to their accounts and the reputations earned through it. The value that karma holds within the community is contestable (see chapter five), but it is designed as a metric for upholding the site's values, or as the site suggests "a reminder of your legacy" (Reddit Basics, 2015). Beyer in her work within other pseudo-anonymous domains noted a similar logic, suggesting that such engagements "can have long-term implications for the community because individuals tend to protect their aliased identities in relation to community and offline norms" (2014, pp 8). This points to an important facet of pseudo-anonymity - its nature as a binding agent within the space. Instead of it removing barriers for civility, it imposes a form of regulation on user's behaviors. This doesn't dispel the argument that anonymity allows negative behaviors online, such as trolling, spamming, or hate speech, but it does suggest that their appearances are contextual and reflect normative institutional arrangements – anonymity doesn't disparage bad behavior, nor does it actively promote it (Beyer, 2014). The audience and their expected, or anticipated reaction, presents a more powerful indicator of the appearance of such behaviors, rather than simply the appearance of anonymity.

Anonymity promotes certain normative and cultural values, invokes promises of collaboration and innovation, while also reflecting a subtle and implicit regulatory feature.

Pseudo-anonymity as in the case of Reddit, instead of preventing discourse, can in fact it can be seen as an ancillary to free speech. Equally important, anonymity has also been noted as a positive indicator towards political mobilization, especially in spaces where it is protected via strong formalized rules (Beyers, 2014). Taken together this implies that anonymity presents an important support structure for free speech, while also remaining an important regulatory feature that compels users to conform to expectations. Anonymity in turn becomes a device that fosters new political developments and awareness's, specifically concerning the right to act without being directly identified (Isin & Ruppert, 2015). This seemingly enforces political agencies separate from individual identities, instead moving towards collective aspirations. As discussed this can promote the dreaded hive-mind mentality that users hold in particular disdain, but it can also promote “competition without the interference of reputation or social capital” (Coleman, 2014, pp 45). Anonymity as a communal value, believed to both cultivate candor, and promote an egalitarian structure through obfuscation, suggests Reddit's own self-evaluation as a platform highlighting democratic tendencies – and of users expectations that they be adhered to.

Understanding Reddit as a Public Sphere

In understanding of Redditors ideological foundations, chiefly their commitment towards freedom of speech and the associated anonymity believed necessary to maximize its impact, certain core values become evident. These values in turn become expressed throughout the site within various discussion threads; there content is posted, and replied to by the community, the focus always concentrated on current events or topics of direct interest to the community at large. Within each thread users congregate together, debating, expressing, and collaborating – freely spreading information as their hacker predecessors envisioned. Discourse occurring within Reddit subsequently can be discerned as an important metric of political activity, particularly as discourse acts as a judge towards society, highlighting issues and concerns which promote increased awareness (Balkin, 2016). Engagements such as these have been theorized to mold individuals into critical and reflexive contributors, a result of participating in rational disputes (Habermas, 1996; Dahlberg, 2007). In Reddit's case the ordered and regulated manner in which speech acts unfold, suggests that users observe such patterns; Redditors appreciation of meta particularly highlights the critical and reflexive tendencies implicit in the day to day discussions within the site. Meta

subs for example exist to highlight the contradictions and lapses in rationality endemic to certain segments of Reddit, the aim is to demonstrate how these attitudes are at odds with the site's core values. While by no means a perfect solution, meta does seek to place toxic behaviors under scrutiny, with the attempt to educate successive dialogues to avoid further lapses through public rebuke. Normative violations ultimately are penalized through collective efforts – primarily through downvoting. Punishment within Reddit is implemented by decreasing visibility. The issue however is that the logic informing penalization is not uniform, instead presenting a reflection of moderators varying interpretations of Reddit's mythos.

Similar to the emergence of free speech, rational discourse within Reddit is by no means absolute, but instead represents a goal continually sought, challenged, and negotiated. What Reddit affords for users ultimately is an arena to pursue that very goal. As an ideal, Reddit comes to reflect what Habermas (1989) articulated as a public sphere: a discursive space focused on debating collective concerns, under the assumption that rationality would promote a mutual exchange, eventually hastening towards a consensus. Reddit's overall functionality seems to promote said connection. Via aggregation, users are directed to dialogues of immediate concern by their presence on the front page. Whereas consensus becomes apparent by what is permitted visibility on the platform, or what is promoted to the top of a conversation thread; voting within Reddit suggests a metric towards locating rough consensus amongst users. Cooperation and deliberation relating to matters of common concern promote the development of a Public Sphere, through which solutions to these stated problems can be attained both through discourse (Habermas, 1989; Habermas, 1996; Fuchs, 2008). Reddit's ideological foundations, historical inspirations, and structural features seem to directly promote the development of such an arrangement.

The Public Sphere is best understood as an “arena of political and social relations, a field where individual and collective identities are both expressed and become integrated” (Gimmler, 2001, pp 22). The public sphere represents a domain where the private becomes transformed into the public by virtue of discourse. Within Habermas's initial drafting of the public sphere, three *institutional criteria* were identified, and therefore are essential features in determining whether Reddit functions akin to a public sphere. First such spaces were defined by a *disregard of status*, second they reflected a *domain of common concern*, and finally they were characterized by *inclusivity* (Habermas, 1989). Such criteria intone that the Public Sphere as not simply a place in

the literal sense, but instead an ideal, continually enacted through rational performance and discursive practices (Gimmler, 2001; Dahlberg, 2007 Fuchs, 2008). Instead of arguing about the connection between the internet and the public sphere, a topic already exhaustively investigated (Gimmler, 2001; Benkler, 2006; Dahlberg, 2007; Fuchs, 2008; Loader & Marcea, 2011; Balkin, 2016), this thesis merely seeks to highlight the overlap in Reddit's operation and ideals with those outlined by Habermas in his description of the public sphere (1989). The following table identifies these comparisons.

Reddit as a Public Sphere			
Institutional Criteria	Description by Habermas (1989, pp 36-37)	Exemplified within Reddit	Issues when applied to Reddit
1) Disregard of Status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parity of Argument • Parity of 'common humanity' • Public and open to all 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anonymity as status leveler • Belief of <i>equipotentiality</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reddit's demographics • Digital divide concerns
2) Domain of Common Concern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Object of public critical attention • Aiming of opinions and agendas for public discussion • Determine importance of such concerns through rational communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aggregation through voting • Promotion of Free Speech • Self-Organization of Reddit • Users belief of Reddit as public good 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reddit focuses on certain topics, at expense of others • Reddit is a business, as such its motive is profit • Attentive economy
3) Inclusivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must not exclude individuals • Topics must be general; both in scope & in ability to engage with • Participants must be educated in order to have the means to engage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anonymity as obfuscation • Ease of account creation • Participatory culture • Fosters digital literacy (supports new users) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital divide concerns • Reddit's homogeneity • Existence of subs that directly contradict inclusivity

Reddit from the perspective of its users comes to reflect the basic tenets of a Public Sphere: it permits mutual exchange, and normative evaluations of content. Akin to the public sphere, Reddit continually self-organizes to permit these exchanges, most visible through the constant

participation of its users in sharing and posting content. By participating in the conversation occurring within Reddit, users are not merely becoming informed about current events, but are also recreating a public sphere. This is not merely limited to users who post, or those who simply feel more comfortable voting – both groups help promote consensus through visibility – but also lurkers who simply read the posts help perpetuate the dialogue. Once again Reddit seems to evoke Meiklejohn and his famous maxim “what is essential is not that everyone shall speak, but that everything worth saying shall be said” (1948, pp 25). Through deliberation and discursive practices the public becomes informed, and it is here that the importance of the public sphere emerges in regards to this project. Dewey suggests a public emerges solely when “indirect, extensive, enduring and serious consequences of conjoined and interacting behavior call a public into existence having a common interest in controlling these consequences” (1927, pp 126). The importance then of highlighting Reddit as a public sphere is to link how free speech connects to political mobilization. As Fraser argues, the strength of the public sphere is that it permits a conceptual resource that situates “a theater in modern societies in [where] political participation is enacted through the medium of talk” (1990, pp 57). Reddit evokes a public sphere by granting individuals a platform where ideas and ideals can incubate. Allowing users to become informed, sometimes galvanizes them to act, most notably in instances where Reddit’s central tenets become challenged.

Tyranny of the Majority – Homogeneity, Exclusion, and Coercion in Reddit

While emblematic of a Public Sphere, Reddit is equally prone to issues argued to reside within Habermas’s original description. Of concern, is that spaces engaged in deliberative democratic processes often paradoxically become prey to the same issues they criticize, chiefly, coercion and exclusion (Dahlberg, 2007). As Fraser (1990) argued the bourgeoisie public sphere outlined by Habermas was premised upon exclusion, specifically along racial and gendered lines. Such practices become particularly damaging for the public sphere as it can only “fulfill its function of perceiving and thematizing encompassing social problems only insofar as it develops out of the communication taking place among those who are potentially affected” (Habermas, 1996, pp 365). In the case of Reddit, the majority of the userbase is male (69%), white (63%), college educated (72%), and present heavy patterns of digital use (Pew, 2016). Homogeneity not only precludes

dialogue that directly challenges users assumptions and biases, but also limits that types of information or content shared. Inevitably this has led some to contend that Reddit's homogeneity in turn promotes content and dialogue that "reify the desires of some groups while ignoring and marginalizing others" (Masanari, 2017, pp 330). This is tough to refute, especially in light of the various subs residing throughout the site promoting vitriolic content premised directly upon exclusion and coercion.

/r/TheRedPill (TRP) remains a noted example of the dangers fostered by homogeneity. The sub ascribes to a doctrine of men's rights, therefore implicit in the very tenets of the sub resides a hostility towards general society, and in particular what is deemed as an emerging feminist culture. The goal of TRP is focused upon "discussion of sexual strategy in a culture increasingly lacking a positive identity for men" (/r/TheRedPill, 2017). While such rhetoric would at first glance position TRP members as contra feminism, the truth is as the saying goes, stranger than fiction. In their own words, TRP is not against equality among genders, instead as one user argues "feminism was inevitable. Equal rights are something I strongly am in support of. For men and women" (u/pk_atheist, 2015). Yet present in such declarations is an implicit anger at what is considered the relinquishment of masculinity attached to the rise of feminism²⁰. The fear that feminism is attached to a devaluation of men, is by no means novel, but for TRP such fears become cemented and granted an internal legitimacy through the usage of evolutionary psychology, Neo-Darwinism, and continental philosophy, all used in an attempt to buttress their claims. In particular, TRP promotes the idea that feminism reflects a sexual strategy, one nested in supposed evolutionary truths, suggesting it helps "to select mates, to determine when they want to switch mates, to locate the best DNA possible, and to garner the most resources they can individually achieve" (u/pk_atheist, 2015). To counter these perceived strategies, TRP members engage with the cultivation of their own gambits and strategies to supposedly level the playing field. At its core TRP involves the development of masculine quality considered as *alpha status*. In TRP's worldview men fall into two general qualities, that of *alpha* and *beta*. The pursuit of becoming an alpha is the central

²⁰ At first glance this may seem a contradictory belief, but it falls directly in line with what Hirschman (1991) labels the perversity rhetoric towards change, which as he explains relies on individuals endorsing such changes "sincerely or otherwise, but then attempt to demonstrate that the action proposed or undertaken is ill conceived [...], that this action will produce [...], the exact contrary of the objective being proclaimed and pursued" (pp 11).

journey these users engage with, and is what is implied when one takes the red pill²¹ – suggesting the path as akin to an awakening for users. Feminism in this perspective reflects a sexual strategy, promoting what TRP fears as the emergence of suspected hypergamy in women. For adherents of TRP the sole means of ‘balancing the playing field’ resides with men adopting new strategies and behaviors (means to enhance their own *sexual market value*). In doing so individuals forge themselves into paragons of alpha. While steeped in misogynistic rhetoric, TRP frames such categorizations as attempts to distract from their message, arguing that society is dominated by a *feminine imperative*, “the tendency of media and culture to put women first, excuse their misdeeds, and criticize any holding of accountability or pointing out of double standards as being ‘anti-women’ (u/bsutansalt, 2015). By virtue of their homogeneity, dominate voices, opinions, and views remain uncontested.

TRP’s dialogue ultimately becomes framed by a perceived victimhood. Commonly strung throughout the sub are claims of being misunderstood from outsiders, resulting in a contempt of outside information. At its core the sub is based upon exclusion and coercion. Users who do not agree are seen as apostates of masculinity. While those who voice disagreements with TRP dogma are banned immediately. While the sub’s rules state that users should mask their gender, specifically so ideas and talking points to be judged on their own merits (r/TheRedPill, 2017), such evocations of public sphere ideals do not mask the reality that the majority of users are male. Furthermore as described within their subs rules “anyone who does not share that goal will be banned the instant we detect them. We are not interested in debating or defending *our* experiences to those who disagree with the red pill, nor do we want to clog up *our* threads defending the morality of *our* choices” (r/TheRedPill, 2015). TRP promotes itself as having located a truth, suggested as the means through which men can be emancipated from their current plight. Yet their doctrine of supposed infallibility is premised on not allowing themselves to have their beliefs challenged or questioned by outsiders. Hiding in their anonymity, protected through their aversion to outside arguments, TRP continues to promote their gospel to those who feel ostracized and marginalized by a world where the nature of masculinity has evolved beyond them.

²¹ TRP proudly boasts that such a metaphor is inspired by the 1999 film *The Matrix*. The red pill infers an “awareness of the dark truths surrounding human sexuality”, while the blue pill refers to “the path of conformity with Society’s expectations” (u/MachiavellianRed, 2015). What is left out of such descriptions is that the writer/director sibling duo The Wachowskis are both proud outspoken members of the LGBTQ community, and whose work directly criticizes such hegemonic conceptions of masculinity – an irony not lost on certain onlookers of TRP.

Massanari characterizes groups such as TRP as *Toxic Technocultures*, whose survival is premised upon and relies “heavily on implicit or explicit harassment of others” (2017, pp 333). With the internal support of their members who collectively share a similar vision and mandate, these behaviors often extend throughout the wider network. An us versus them mentality emboldens members, further pushing them to embrace the core mythos with greater zeal; the greater the pressure applied, the greater the tenacity and ferocity in defending their visions seems to become. While TRP and other men’s rights activists are not solely confined to online domains, their proclivity to congregate online especially within Reddit requires pause. While a full understanding of the causes for this is outside the scope of this thesis, a few reasons can be speculated upon. While its attachment towards free speech and anonymity are certainly important factors, as well as the site’s hands off approach towards policing content, it seems however that major consideration should be focused upon the homogeneity of the site’s users in promoting the development of toxic techno-cultures (Taylor, 2014; Massanari, 2015; Massanari, 2017). In his seminal analysis of American democracy, Tocqueville warned of the potential threat of the tyranny of the majority and its disastrous impacts for fledgling democracies. If a majority of citizens coalesce to singular perspectives and outlooks, this can in turn penalize dissenting opinions and views, and silence those of marginalized minorities; the tyranny of the majority can corrode the very tenets of a democratic system (Tocqueville, 1956). The fear that collectivity online starves individualism is by no means a novel criticism in online dialogues (Gimmler, 2001; Lainer, 2010), the case of Reddit highlights however how this tyranny of the majority can manifest. TRP only reflects a small portion of the general user base, however their existence is the result of a dominant and sometimes oppressive thought process endemic to Reddit – so long as geek masculinity remains unchallenged, toxic technocultures will continue to flourish. The public sphere can only promote empowerment when it is inclusive, highlights plurality, promotes transparency, and is reflexive (Dahlberg, 2007), spaces defined by coercion towards differing views, and exclusionary towards dissenting individuals solely promotes echo chambers where ideas and beliefs remain static and unchallenged.

Free speech purists advocate throughout Reddit that TRP be granted its fiefdom and simply ignored. The truth however is that a public sphere can only be impactful if individuals believe that their participation matters that their voices are heard (Rheingold, 2012). In her account of the limitations of the public sphere Fraser (1990) argued that to rethink the normative ideal Habermas

promotes, specifically that the public sphere exists in the singular, we must begin to explore the emergence of counter-publics as an alternative political project. As Fraser goes on to elaborate “arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promotes the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public” (1990, pp 66). While Reddit arguing that it exists as a platform to host communities seems to suggest a structural basis for the development of counter-publics, with meta communities acting as a sort of proof of concept, the reality is that so far this has yet to be shown as a successful strategy. Reddit has attempted to make the site more inviting to marginalized groups, promoting subs like /r/TwoXChromosomes as a default sub, however such lip service seems to only incense toxic subs while skirting from the major issues that promote the development of such toxicity. While directly banning harmful subs at first glance seems like a plausible means of disrupting such content from appearing on Reddit, the ease through which to build new subs points to the ineffectiveness of such directives as having long term impacts²². Obviously this reflects a glaring issue for Reddit, both as a prospective public good, and as a vehicle for profit. While a solution to such issues is beyond the scope of this thesis, highlighting such issues, most of which emanate from the design of the site itself, highlights one important caveat to understanding Reddit as a public sphere. Much like the idealized public sphere described by Habermas, Reddit presents serious limitations and contradictions that prevent it from fully realizing it’s potential. Upon reflecting on the nature of the public sphere Habermas concluded that it “was not mere ideology” (1991, pp 160), that for all its flaws and eventual surrender towards the logic of consumption, the public sphere did in fact marshal its aspirations into political agency – if only simply for a passing moment before its contradictions tore it asunder.

We did it Reddit! Political Mobilization and Advocacy within Reddit

Redditors are prone to the assumption that their collective opinions and voices hold considerable impact, both online and offline. Yet like everything else discussed within Reddit,

²² Recent admin crackdowns have suggested that the hands-off approach has slowly coming to an end. The removal of /r/Incels in October 2017, a sub connected to the larger men’s rights network located throughout Reddit, suggests that Reddit has adopted a more active governance approach, directly targeting groups that advocate hate speech. This should be of little surprise considering the recent evidence that more active governance of free speech taken by admins have shown success in removing toxic communities.

such assumptions are often debated, criticized, turned into memes, and eventually reacted to with ironic deference. When intrigued, Reddit has shown moments of collective mobilization. Throwing their collective weight to bring about changes and decisions in line with their opinions, Reddit frequently extends their dialogues outside the site to promote these aspirations. Free speech as a platform for users to discuss and debate current events, promotes within Reddit a belief of holding those with power accountable, of acting as a public judge to society (Dahlberg, 2007; Balkin 2014; Massanari, 2015). This falls in line with previous studies on political mobilization within online domains, Beyer (2014) noted that mobilization is likely to occur when a community's ideals and norms are contested or challenged. This suggests that foundational principles within these sites acts akin to a prism for users connections with political activity. Similar to Dewey's (1927) argument that a public manifests in order to alleviate negative sanctions, or mitigate serious concerns, mobilization online seems to adhere to a similar pattern of overcoming perceived threats towards a public's vitality.

Reddit's collectively mobilizing in the pursuit justice has arguably been a mixed bag. Its most glaring misstep occurring in 2013 after the Boston Marathon Bombings. A spell of collective effervescence took hold, with Reddit attempting to harness their collective labor towards locating the perpetrators. The experience as recounted by user /u/DeadDoug understandably didn't work well,

Remember the Boston Marathon bombing? Reddit went into full retard investigation mode and pinned the bombing on a missing college student. The threads were full on circle jerky comments congratulating each other a job well done. "We did it Reddit!" was a common refrain. The problem? That person was NOT the suspect. This persons family was harassed online relentlessly and Reddit's speculation caused the FBI to announce the real suspects before they wanted to publicly. To me "We did it Reddit!" is an ironic celebration cry (2015)

This experience of collective action and mobilization demonstrated both Reddit's potentials, while cementing critic's misgivings about the site. The experience was to become mythologized into Reddit's history, a sardonic reminder that the site even when it aspires to be at its most noble, is easily, and often quickly led astray through infighting, false information, and group thought. Since then, Reddit has routinely reminded itself of its internal limitations. The declaration *We did it*

Reddit, has since become immortalized in memes meant to remind users of their collective folly (see figure 8). While more reticent to engage in collective engagements since the Boston Marathon debacle, users still continue to partake in collective projects, particularly when normative violations towards Reddit’s internal codes of conduct occur. It is the argument of this chapter, that free speech can be understood as a central element in spurring Reddit



Figure 8: A satirical meme evaluating Reddit's collective 'pro-social' efforts

towards collective action – particularly when free speech and its associated ideals come under attack. Free speech not only acts as a cultural value that informs Reddit of its potential as a digital agora, it simultaneously creates that agora through the development of discursive spaces to challenge, and contest dominant ideas - a public sphere. The active usage of free speech as a means to both hold society accountable, but also in it creating a discourse, promotes what Balkin (2016) argues as the path towards self-government suggesting that “public opinion and the public sphere [become] crucial elements, ingredients in supporting and authorizing self-government in modern democracies” (pp 1072).

The following examples of collective mobilization are meant to illustrate this connection, situating free speech as a prism for wider digital rights, and free speech as the means to actively protest against threats to said rights. The first case study, the departure of Ellen Pao, reflects an experience of collective protest directed towards Reddit’s internal operation and direction, while the second example focuses on marshalling user’s collective outcry towards legislation jeopardizing net neutrality. Both case studies, the first an internal disruption and debate on the nature of the platform, the second focused upon an existential threat towards the basic functionality of the internet as a whole, boil down to a singular struggle, the protection of an ideal version of an open network. The prism of free speech thereby becomes the manner of locating such tensions, as both a rights claim for individual users, while also presenting the public platforms to contest when those rights are abridged. While Reddit often bemoans their collective mobilizations, often transforming them into in-jokes, the reality is that the platform due to its sheer size of users, and collective weight of material shared and proliferated, presents massive potentials as a public sphere. The danger is equally present in such potentials, most calamitous, is for Reddit to fail to

comprehend the inherent the impact that their collective decisions hold – the Boston Marathon failure being a prime example.

The Tragedy of Ellen Pao: Labor Disputes and Xenophobic Rhetoric

The turning point for free speech within Reddit seems closely tied with the departure of then CEO Ellen Pao. The event in effect was a crisis precipitated by a lack of understanding surrounding the nature of free speech, coupled with a moderator led labor dispute. Both elements however were to become overshadowed by a vitriolic trolling attack targeting Pao, thereby silencing the community's legitimate concerns. As Pao noted on her departure "balancing free expression with privacy and the protection of participants has always been a challenge for open-content platforms on the Internet. But that balancing act is getting harder. The trolls are winning" (2015). The causes that triggered Ellen Pao's exit ultimately boil down to one issue, who is responsible for Reddit? While many users voiced legitimate concerns within this debate, vocal groups on Reddit hijacked the dialogue, debasing the dispute into a tribalistic affair of us versus them. The appearance of these vocal minorities alludes to what some skeptics argue as the issue with such platforms being too democratic (Jenkins, 2006), allowing any and all the chance to speak without requiring something substantial to be added. This glaring issue within digital platforms, reflects how power is displayed within information networks. As Terranova (2004) points out, power within communication networks is informed by the connection between signal strength and noise – more simply, how well can a message be sent and/or received. Power then can be exerted, either by increasing the signal strength of one's message, or by drowning out a competing message (Terrnova, 2004). In the case of Ellen Pao's departure, the strength of some signals over others, mutated the debate regarding how Reddit should function, into an attack on a perceived interloper trying to ruin the party. What began then as a dispute over the terms and conditions of the site, specifically how mods are supported in their tasks, quickly devolved into what Pao herself labelled as one of "the largest trolling attacks in history" (2015). The question then is not only why this occurred, but more importantly how it so easily spun out of control.

Pao's tenure was focused upon rectifying Reddit's inherent contradiction – an unruly site being transformed into a manageable product. Pao herself argued such a goal was especially difficult, "the board asked me to demonstrate higher user growth in the next six months than I

believe I can deliver while maintaining Reddit's core principles" (/u/ekjp, 2015, July 10). User growth particularly reflects a difficult goal to reach, as one must balance reforms, particularly towards inflammatory dialogue and toxic subs that ward off prospective new users, while not upsetting the open and community oriented approach cherished by the older users, who themselves produce much of the content on the site. Such a goal was always a tightrope act, especially as it shifted the previous administrations approach of little involvement. While brought in to help scale the platform, Pao's time directing Reddit was fraught with hostility, her status as an outsider often at the root of those tensions. Redditors value and require discussions to be authentic, transparent, and humorous exchanges, a requirement both for users and outsiders who engage with the platform (Massanari, 2015). Direct engagement with the community, and on their terms, remains an essential feature then in managing the site as a whole, a lesson Pao failed to take into account. When Pao sat down to engage with the community after the mod strike, this issue particularly vexed many, with one of the top comments a particular scolding,

Thank you for finally apologizing on here, instead of through media interviews. Should've come to your community first, instead of the press. But you also miss the point. You say a majority of Reddit users don't care. But, those of us who create content for the lurkers care. Acting flippant isn't a good way to get us on your side. (/u/ rfbandit, 2015)

The failure to communicate become magnified after massive sections of the site were shut down by moderators in protest towards the lack of concern directed towards their grievances, and lack of transparency with admins regarding the platforms direction. Such a sentiment is integral, as instead of users fleeing in droves from the platform for its competitors, users instead utilized their collective voices and actions. This suggests that they expect the effectiveness of their voice as a strategy towards informing the platforms direction (Hirschman, 1970). Once again this alludes towards Redditors viewing themselves as stakeholders in Reddit's development, perceiving their activities throughout the site as integral towards the site's continued development. When commenting upon the mod strike Pao herself noted this issue "we screwed up. Not just on July 2, but also over the past several years. We haven't communicated well, and we have surprised moderators and the community with big changes" (/u/ekjp, 2015, July 6). The dynamics uncovered by this event suggest that the userbase not only demands accountability and transparency in the

platforms activities, but are willing to impact its functionality when these expectations are not adequately met. Equally present in such conflict is the failure of the site's creators to engage users in the project of Reddit's development, both in the past and in its future.

The resignation of Pao occurred under the auspices of a free speech, the lack of communication regarding what constituted free speech had finally come to roost. The lack of a formal understanding of free speech, coupled with the tendency for admins to turn a blind eye towards toxic subs had littered the platform with enclaves of hate groups. Shifting to an active policy, Reddit banned /r/FatPeopleHate (FPH) a hate sub who trolled overweight individuals, yet who simultaneously rationalized this behavior under the guise that "helping them by mocking them they would be motivated to lose weight" (/u/payne6, 2015). Users however were aghast at the action of admins, claiming that it represented a hypocritical and overzealous response.



Figure 9: The meme format for Chairman Pao, which quickly gained popularity post FPH

Particularly users pointed out to the fact that FPH had not broken the rules of the site as they had not revealed personal information of their targets (/u/ninjapro, 2015), while others suggested that admins should avoid banning communities who's views they simply find disagreeable as it assaults the free and open nature of the platform (/u/Stalked_Like_Corn, 2015). The new approach Reddit dictated was one defined by promoting openness, while removing content that harassed or violated Reddit's new more stringent policy agreement towards content posting. In Reddit's words the new policy was focused on "banning behavior, not ideas" (/u/5Days, /u/ekjp & /u/kn0thing, 2015, June 10). This abrupt shift in policy was not welcomed by users, and resulted in many becoming aggravated with Pao directly, the perceived outsider who was perverting Reddit's direction. Following the ban of FPH the Front Page became littered with posts demeaning Pao, some using racial and misogynistic rhetoric to belittle and bully her, with the meme format Chairman Pao (see figure 9) drawing upon such distinctions to protest the supposed draconian changes (Elgot, 2015, June 11). The vitriol directed towards Pao in result would go on to shock and upset many, forcing many users to directly observe the hateful rhetoric often reserved to the site's periphery. Post FPH Reddit had become a place both suspicious of, and angry towards Pao. Reddit had become powder keg, and was simply waiting for a spark.

Reddit had gained a degree of fame over the years for its noted feature /r/IAMA, a sub in which individuals of note engage in a dialogue with the community at large. In fact Reddit's ascent had been cemented when then sitting President Obama sat down for an AMA, an event which nearly crashed the site from the traffic. As the sub had gained prestige over the years, the additional traffic and logistics required mods to be more reliant on the support of admins. In particular, mods were reliant on Victoria Taylor (/u/cooter), Reddit's Director of Communications and Talent to help organize the sub with the guests for AMA's. In helping to manage and schedule the AMA's coupled with Taylor often transcribing the responses, her efforts were essential to the sub's success, while her status as an admin gave mods a direct line of communication with the head office. During her time Taylor ingratiated herself with the community, and quickly gained support from the community for her efforts gaining "the reputation of being quick, competent and trustworthy"²³(Tsukayama, 2015, July 6). Her sudden termination then was met with both shock and anger. For the mods of /r/IAMA Taylor's firing was a betrayal from the administration, it not only presented the threat of services becoming disrupted, but also signified the admins' complete lack of communication with its users. Explaining why they would shut down their sub, one mod commented on this disconnect, "the admins didn't realize how much we rely on Victoria" (/u/Karmanaut, 2015). In order to gain the attention of the admins, mods on /r/IAMA locked the subreddit, setting the sub to become private, thereby blocking anyone from accessing the sub. In turn other subs followed suite, agreeing with the conceit that Reddit's admins failed to take proper account or appreciate the work performed by volunteer labor (Lynch & Swearingen, 2015) For the mods of /r/IAMA this disconnect had manifested in the dismissal of Taylor, while for other subs it was the lack of proper moderation tools to adequately perform their tasks that led to solidarity in locking their subs (McCormick, 2015; Matias, 2015). Over 200 subs took part in the site wide blackout, by turning their subs to private, mods paralyzed the vast sections of the site. Within hours admins promised to meet the demands set out by mods. Issuing a statement to the New York Times, mods from /r/IAMA described their protest as one rooted in concern, citing the admins' lack of appreciation and indifference as affronts to users' commitment to the platform,

²³ In fact her transcription of celebrity responses specifically drew praise, as she often was able to capture authentic and candid responses from those she communed with – this skill became most evident when she transcribed, to the community's amusement, the idiosyncratic delivery of noted actor and internet favorite Jeff Goldblum.

Our primary concern, and reason for taking the site down temporarily, is that Reddit's management made critical changes to a very popular website without any apparent care for how those changes might affect their biggest resource: the community and the moderators that help tend the subreddits that constitute the site. Moderators commit their time to the site to foster engaging communities. Ms. Taylor's sudden termination is just the most recent example of management's making changes without thinking through what those changes might mean for the people who use the site on a daily basis (Lynch & Swearingen, 2015, July 8)

Over the subsequent weeks order was eventually resorted, new content policies with harsher penalties for hate speech were issued, new tools for moderators were unveiled, while the administration promised increased transparency moving forwards. Yet the price of this new agreement was the termination of Ellen Pao. After her departure it was to come out that she was in fact the sacrificial lamb for Reddit's misdeeds, neither Victoria's sudden termination, nor the changes in policy surrounding free speech had been her positions, she merely paid the price for being their messenger (/u/Yishan, 2015, July 13; /u/Yishan, 2015, July 14). While Reddit had demonstrated an understanding of the strength in its collective voice, one wonders if what it demonstrated about Reddit's character was worth the ordeal.

The tragedy of Ellen Pao is that her tenure and the shameful attacks lobbied against her were the price required for Reddit to reflect upon itself, both on its past, and towards its future (see figure 10). The more active direction towards combating hateful content began under Pao's tenure, placing the site at the forefront of the dialogue concerning the limits of free speech online. Reflecting on her tenure, Pao concluded that "Reddit is the Internet, and it exhibits all the good, the bad and the ugly of the Internet. It has been fighting this harassment in the trenches" (Pao, July 16). If anything the sheer viciousness certain users demonstrated towards Pao cemented the platform's resolve to follow through on one of the site's core maxims, to *remember the human*. Much has been said regarding the power that visibility holds within Reddit. What Pao's ousting

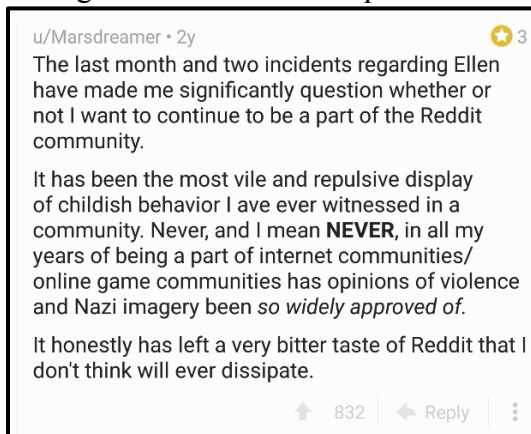


Figure 10: A user's reflections on Pao's Exit

presented was an inversion to that visibility, her tenure forced Reddit to confront its own image, the limitations, and lapses of judgement implicit within that. The tenure of Ellen Pao and her subsequent departure precipitated Reddit's administrators to become more involved, both towards communicating with the community, but also working with the community to support Reddit's prosperity. Sitting down with the community after the dust had settled, co-creator Steve Huffman introduced the concept of quarantining toxic communities, explaining "the purpose of this technique is to give us a way to contain and distance ourselves from communities that we would rather not exist but aren't overtly violating any of our stated rules" (/u/spez, 2015, July 29). Not only was the strategy seen as a means of avoiding another crisis such as the removal of FPH, but also could be seen as the most direct policy attempt at the time towards combatting vitriol within the site. Reflecting upon the changes, Huffman asserted that while "my personal views towards bigotry haven't changed, my opinion of what Reddit should do about it has" (/u/spez, 2015, July 29). A failure to communicate forced Reddit into an honest conversation with its very nature, and the relationships between users, moderators and admins. While this conversation continues, all parties did reach one conclusion, there still remains much work left for Reddit in becoming a platform for all.

The Fight for Net Neutrality: Existential Threats, Memes, and Activism

Reddit has since 2015 been highly focused upon the issue of Net Neutrality, and for good reason. The existential crisis posed by legislation that would dismantle network neutrality presents a conflict binding users, mods, and admins equally into the fray. Net Neutrality refers to the principle that all information should be treated equally within a network and not discriminated, as a result internet service providers (ISP's) would be barred from charging individuals differently for their online activities (Wu, 2003). Network Neutrality advises that the internet be treated similar to other basic utilities, instead of being treated similar to cable packages where individuals are charged differently for the content they pursue. The danger then posed by a more regulated internet represents a concern that harmonizes both the economic and communal concerns Reddit often struggles to reconcile. For admins Net Neutrality presents a direct threat towards their economic interests, since an open net reflects the dogma that less regulation equates to better services that can be offered to the general public (Nunziato, 2009). For users on the other hand, it would place

them at a higher risk for censorship if Net Neutrality was crippled (MacKinnon, 2013), a direct affront towards the free speech values Reddit cherishes. Net Neutrality as a result threatens the ethos of the internet, with its tradition of openness being directly contested (Zittrain, 2008). Legislation endangering the internet's openness presents a threat that harmonizes both the economic and communal drives of Reddit. In fact as Zittrain (2008) elaborates, increased regulation could extinguish the generativity of the internet entirely, as "the gap between prohibited uses and tolerated uses shrinks, creating the prospect that content produced by citizens who cannot easily clear permissions for all its ingredients will be squeezed out" (pp 193). Removing the openness which permits users to scour the web to create digital artifacts, also impedes the ability for the sites like Reddit to coopt, create, and share them. While memes or gifs may seem insignificant to some, they represent small populist additions to the collective conversation. Digital artifacts created through the re-appropriation of culture, are easily spreadable, and created without a monetary intention. Memes therefore represent an arena where individual expression contests larger discourse, allowing the public dialogue to become flatter and more open, a result of the ease to both spread memes, and the low cost in creating, remixing, or refurbishing content to create them (Milner, 2016). Legislation that cripples Network Neutrality puts these ideals at direct risk.

The crusade for Net Neutrality reflects another link in the chain of Reddit collectively combatting legislation that threatens its existence. The 2012 sitewide blackout against Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) another pertinent example of the collaboration between admins and users when both agendas align. What these events hallmark is the activism and information proliferation occurring throughout the platform, which casts Reddit as an important pivot in the larger dialogue surrounding these issues²⁴. SOPA was eventually abandoned, partially due to Reddit's aggressive organizing, something the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) commented upon when sitting down with the community arguing that "perhaps no site was more important in this fight than Reddit. You guys helped organize the protest against GoDaddy, you started forcing members of Congress to come out against SOPA, and you were the first to declare January 18th blackout day" (/u/trevorEFF, 2013). The collective mobilization towards SOPA as a result of its efficacy has informed how Reddit approaches the topic of Network Neutrality; acknowledging its strength as a

²⁴ Users upset with SOPA had their messages and thoughts brought to a Senate hearing when co-creator Alexis Ohanian was brought to Washington to argue against the bill, in fact Ohanian crowdsourced his speech with the support of community at /r/Technology (Ohanian, 2013).

public sphere that can both inform and mobilize its committed user base. As previously noted, in spaces where users are expected to participate, they do so only if they believe their contributions matter (Rheingold, 2012); success against SOPA through collaboration demonstrated this notion to the user base as a whole.

Levying the user base against Net Neutrality is by no means a simple feat. Sitting down with the userbase, CEO Steve Huffman congratulated them for their work in promoting dialogue centered upon the importance of an open internet, remarking

In just one week, you made 50,000 unique posts and over 350,000 comments related to net neutrality, generating over 21 million votes. While Tuesday's news hits close to home, we are grateful that the Reddit community cares just as much about net neutrality as we do at Reddit HQ (/u/spez, 2017, November 27)

Harnessing the connectedness of the platform, Redditors were able to share information about the importance of Net Neutrality, and through that mobilize their collective efforts to combat the legislation. In a show of solidarity, the site on July 12th 2017 organized itself to promote awareness to the threat posed by Net Neutrality. Subs reflecting a variety of political, social, and cultural positions all took part, either through changing the subs banner to include information, posting a sticky thread for users to actively discuss the topic, and in some cases shutting down entirely in protest (/u/nt337, 2017). In a follow up protest on November 21st 2017, the mobilization of individual subs resulted in the front page once again becoming focused entirely upon Net Neutrality, with 70% of the content focused on discussions surrounding Net Neutrality (Gardner & Ashooh, 2017). Yet these activities rarely reside solely online. Equally important is how user's outrage has been delivered towards the proper political channels; many subs utilized sticky posts in order to have information for users to directly communicate with their congressman, senators, and contact information to complain directly to the FCC. While it remains to be seen if this strategy will be successful once more, it does show how Reddit can be an effective platform for political engagement and mobilization. The threat posed by an increasingly regulated internet impacts all activities throughout Reddit, potentially neutering Reddit's creative and innovative impulses. As a result it represents a menace that binds users of various ideological, social, and cultural backgrounds together through their shared commitment to seeing the experiment that Reddit presents continued throughout the internet as a whole.

Reflections of Digital Democracy through Reddit

This chapter sought to understand the connection between free speech and instances of mobilization, concluding that free speech acts as a prism that informs user's political awareness and proclivity towards mobilization. As chapter three explored the project of free speech ultimately is meant to promote and sustain self-government (Meiklejohn, 1948). Rational discourse and debate grant legitimacy to democracy; public sovereignty becomes expressed through freedom of speech (Benkler, 2003; Dahlberg, 2007). Reddit both in its ideological commitments and structural features, at first glance suggests support for this project. Most notably in fostering an arrangement this chapter argues as akin to what Habermas envisioned as a functioning public sphere. Yet certain barriers, both theoretical, and practical, highlight serious concerns about the viability of Reddit in adequately performing such a task. Believing itself a cultural leveler, Reddit is anything but. The toxicity of the platform, evident within the vitriol of /r/TRP, presents a powerful reminder of how incorrect Reddit's self-evaluations can be. Much like the idealized public sphere outlined by Habermas, Reddit disproportionately favors the thoughts, interests, and values of white, college educated, middle class males (Fraser, 1990; Loader & Marcea, 2011; Taylor, 2014; Massanari, 2017). In turn these demographic features further entrench issues inherent within the geek masculinity popular throughout Reddit. The lead up to Ellen Pao's departure is a perfect example of how Reddit's demographics can undermine legitimate issues and concerns within the site. While Reddit seemingly embraces its own ability to mobilize, equally important is that this eagerness be tempered by an awareness of the site's wider impacts – an issue glibly captured in the mantra *Reddit we did it*. Reddit's dangerous propensity to “judge first and ask questions later” (Massanari, 2015, pp 35), has led to instances of groupthink, often supported by nebulous rationalizations for half thought out crusades.

The public sphere created within Reddit through users discourse suggests a powerful model for civic engagement in the digital age, yet its limitations simultaneously demonstrate the fears that the internet only further entrenches inequalities already existent within society. The two examples of mobilization present both outcomes. While the awareness raised towards legislation crippling network neutrality is a potent reminder of Reddit's aptitude towards fostering discourse, whereas the vitriol lobbed at Ellen Pao presenting a stark contrast at how the same ability can be levied towards harassment. The potential platforms like Reddit allude to is a democratization of influence within society, yet it does so without requiring civility. The reality is, that while a potent

platform for mobilizing, and for raising awareness, Reddit's oligarchic tendencies frequently undermine such aspirations. Evaluating the state of political speech online Hindman (2009) noted that far from egalitarian, politics online nurture certain democratic values over others. As it matures, Reddit must contend with this alarming tendency it boastfully demonstrates - favoring autonomy over concepts such as civility - particularly as it fosters much of the toxicity present throughout the platform. Digital literacy, the focus of chapter six, seemingly presents the clearest solution, as the spread of such skills can help remove barriers to participation, and flatten the means of adding onto the collaborative project Reddit represents. As long as the means to access, produce, and express remain reserved to select groups, the toxicity of Reddit will continue to undermine its oftentimes noble aspirations.

Chapter Five: When Hippies and Yuppies Collide

All facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice, [...] the first time as tragedy, the second as farce

- Karl Marx

Reddit like much of the internet resides at a crossroads. Plagued by a singular existential question, Reddit has been forced to contend with its very nature, does it exist as a community²⁵ or business? Reddit ideally is devised to function atop the labor of its users, both in content generation, and site maintenance. As Reddit is structurally supported through a participatory arrangement with users, exemplified in user generated governance via mods, this can be argued as means towards reducing financial investment. Yet this thesis's analysis of free speech argued that this arrangement in turn fosters certain communal values, such as a belief in a meritocratic, and democratic evaluation of content, both supported by user autonomy in determining how the site develops. Self-organization, itself a requirement for such participatory arrangements to continue, also promotes, as the chapter on mobilization attests, a tendency for Reddit to utilize this ability to protect its own interests. The unruliness of Reddit, fanned by structural and engineering decisions, and premised upon a geek value system that preoccupies itself with open access and free information, situates Reddit as a space whose success is located in its open publicness which allows users to participate in – but which equally inhibits profitability. Reddit as a result then invites an exploration of the platform as a site for the development of a digital commons – ownership of the site through the labor, performance, activity, and engagements undertaken without prompt by its users. Reddit's reliance on user's labor suggests the potential then for users to themselves benefit,

²⁵ Community in this instance doesn't imply Redditors are themselves a full-fledged community. Instead the usage of community within this chapter is meant to express whether the platform is directed towards supporting its userbase, or whether the platform is driven by pursuit of capital. Much of the tension subsequently explored is the conflict between users desire for a communally managed platform, versus the platform's intent to monetize.

appropriating private space for public use. In the pursuit of profit with minimal investment, Reddit like much of Silicon Valley has begun in desperation to “address its own needs [by] opening up the possibility of and creating the bases for a social and economic order grounded in the common” (Hardt & Negri, 2009, pp x). This chapter follows such a line of thought, suggesting that the attempt of a novel form of capitalism favored by Silicon Valley in fact undermines its own desires, while also suggesting the means for its own demise.

As political economy has been argued to reflect the organizing principle for the digital revolution (McChesney, 2013) this chapter subsequently argues that many of Reddit’s issues can be traced to its desire for profitability, and the contradictions such developments unfurl. Much of these contradictions emerge as this chapter will explain, from a warped ideological position endemic to Silicon Valley. Seeking to exist both as private property and public good, Reddit like many tech firms pursue a strategy that seeks to hybridize profitability and social responsibility. The central argument of this chapter is that such attempts are inherently unstable, affording opportunities to foster alternative counter-movements, perhaps resulting in an emergent digital commons. In order to explore this line of thought, this chapter begins first with an overview of the aforementioned ideology, known as the Californian Ideology. Following this the focus will turn to how Reddit seeks to monetize itself, particularly highlighting how each strategy remains dependent upon users, and their loyalty to the platform. Finally this chapter envisions how Redditors can themselves sustain the platform communally. While free speech alludes to a desire for self-determination, this chapter will observe how Redditors already present behaviors and activities that suggest sustainable communal alternatives towards the platform’s management. By seeking to present itself as both financially pragmatic while socially progressive, Reddit like many other tech firms has opened itself to the formation of counter-powers. This chapter ultimately aims to chronicle one such instance.

The Californian Ideology: Hubris via Synthesis

The Californian Ideology suggests that the new information economy can synthesize with the utopian outlooks first suggested by McLuhan’s Global Village (Barbrook & Cameron, 1995). Technology ultimately comes to present the missing puzzle piece that rectifies the contradiction between private and public wealth. As a result firms in Silicon Valley typically eschew increased

oversight and regulation, particularly as they are believed to directly impede such developments (MacKinnon, 2013). Such libertarianism centered outlooks form an important ideological arena necessary towards understanding the digital ecology that sites like Reddit operate within. In fact much of the libertarian framework that supports both firms and users understandings of digital emancipation, reside upon a veneration for the work of Jefferson, both in his liberal distrust of strong centralized government, and preference for counter-powers located in the public at large (Barbrook & Cameron, 1995; Morozov, 2011; McChesney, 2013; Ohanian, 2013; Taylor, 2014). For celebrants of the internet's potential, Jefferson's dream may finally become a reality through digital technology and its emancipatory power; a belief Reddit endeavors to realize (Ohanian, 2013). The pervasive belief that resides at the core of firms such as Reddit, is that the internet presents the culmination of liberalism, both in its societal and economic connotations. By adopting a Jeffersonian vantage, much of Silicon Valley conflates economic development with societal progress; the limitations and failures of the past, instead of being contested or challenged, are presumed to be remedied by the solutionism supposed within digital technology (Barbrook & Cameron, 1995; Morozov, 2011; Morozov, 2013; Taylor, 2014). Ultimately the realization of the digital promise for adherents of the Californian Ideology resides on a unification of "the free-wheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies" (Barbrook & Cameron, 1995, pp 1). The progressivist social policies of the left counterculture comes to be supported by the individualistic success idealized by Yuppie culture. Synthesized within Silicon Valley's ideology, this has engineered the blueprint for the future of the internet.

What is of particular interest within the Californian Ideology is the overt manner of its instability – both ideologically and pragmatically. Firms adopting the rhetoric of the left counterculture endemic to the Bay area (where much of the emerging digital revolution was incubating), allowed companies to consider their activities to be promoting the common good. Social media companies particularly show an affinity for framing their properties as emblematic of alternative corporate practices, suggesting that their activities support a more open world; in essence firms view their behavior as occurring under a *benevolent halo* (van Dijck, 2013). In order to support said aspirations, a repurposed form of capitalism was to emerge. This new 'hip' capitalism was seen as the means to generate wealth, express individuality, and counter state control; coupled with the left's social progressive goals, this marriage of opposites was assumed to promote a digitally oriented populism (Curran, 2012). The contradictions that inevitably emerge

from these opposing tendencies and demands rarely come to be criticized, the assumption being that resolution will be located through technology (Barbrook & Cameron, 1995; Curran, 2012; MacKinnon, 2013). Nevertheless the crisis at the heart of Silicon Valley's balancing act is far from novel, but it is integral in understanding the logic that informs platform economies and social media corporations. Attempting to rectify issues at the heart of liberal individualism, Silicon Valley's schizophrenic desire to liberate through economic success, while promoting general social welfare, can be analyzed as a broad attempt to cover the entire spectrum of freedoms under the umbrella of liberalism – both for markets, and individuals. The hacker esprit that resides at the root of the Californian Ideology is confronted by what Coleman highlights as a quandary regarding the nature and relationship between “personhood, the meaning of freedom, markets and property, [while] asserting that not every object of knowledge falls under a neoliberal property regime” (Coleman, 2013, pp 202). The schizophrenic impulse to both empower users, while parasitically benefiting from their labor, places firms such as Reddit at the heart of dialogues for which they lack both the skill and maturity to solve, yet a steadfast belief in technological determinism instils a misplaced confidence that solutions can be located in code.

The digital economy presents a radical shift from the industrial economy that came before it, most evident by the decentralized and diffused nature which organizes labor, affording possibilities for individuals to organize their own counter-power (Benkler, 2003; Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Fuchs, 2008). The material relations between platform owners and volunteer labor is fundamentally novel, unstable, and most importantly untested. Whether or not the emancipatory rhetoric social media corporations extol is sincere, the result is that users do in fact become empowered through their engagements within these platforms. Reddit, in presenting itself as a platform for supporting communities, coupled with its history of allowing users autonomy in determining what these communities will come to signify, presents the hallmarks of self-determination, a powerful political, and cultural position for users to inhabit. The rest of this chapter then will focus on how the emancipatory rhetoric, coupled with laissez-le faire economics established throughout Silicon Valley can promote, although indirectly, the emergence of publically owned, communally managed commons – a development both in line with what the Californian Ideology advocates socially, which simultaneously undermines its economic aspirations. Reddit's development, especially its reliance on user labor, and governance, already demonstrates the emergence of self-determination, while also suggesting how users economically,

socially, and politically can manage a digital commons. To track such a development, this chapter will present a quick overview of how Reddit is understood as a commodity, how value is derived, and followed by an overview of the limitations that impede these activities. In fact much of the following section will be devoted to the paradoxical and legal difficulty that lie at the heart of cultivating value within digital platforms; trying to commodify knowledge and culture already present inherent difficulties, and become further magnified within network environments (Taylor, 2014). In locating this instability, an argument as to how users can coopt these spaces for their own gain will be discussed. Firms are rapidly adapting to the novelty of the network environment (Fuchs, 2008), yet what Reddit suggests is that the hubris that underscores the cost reducing strategies for digital firms, affords users the opportunities to manifest the ultimate promise of free speech, the dream of self-government – what this chapter envisions as a mobilized and self-managed digital commons.

Reddit as Firm: Digital Serfdom, Value, and Paradox in Cyberspace

Capitalism's constant gambit of seeking to reterritorialize itself often puts in precarious positions; the constant hunger for growth, and the instability this overextension fosters, often generates externalities which in turn can threaten capitalism as a whole. Schumpeter (1944) noted in his analysis of capitalism that it must never be approached as a static entity; Capitalism's very nature determines it must constantly adapt to novel potentials. Capitalism in effect is constantly evolving. Yet when confronted by the amorphousness of cyberspace, one wonders whether this presents an opportunity to overextend capital, a theory at the core of certain strands of accelerationism²⁶. Arguably his most well-known addition to economic theory, Schumpeter noted that capitalist expansion occurs through cannibalizing itself, the mutation of capital is one "that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism" (1944, pp 83). The colonization of the internet by capital suggests certain overtures for disruption by virtue of its own consumption practices; particularly as the digital revolution empowers both consumers, and platform operators (Loader & Mercia, 2011; Balkin, 2016). The evolution of

²⁶ Accelerationism presents an umbrella term for a variety of different theories directed towards harnessing the 'creative destruction' of capitalism in an effort to repurpose this drive towards crippling the entire system (Noys, 2008).

network dynamics from web 1.0, represented as a top down broadcaster styled approach to information consumption, towards the advent of web 2.0 instead supported by user generated content (Hunsinger, 2014), represents an environment where users become both the consumers and producers of their own digital content and social environments. Such reliance seemingly affords users greater collective rights within these domains, their voices carry more weight. Reddit's public protest and subsequent shutdown against the site's direction as laid out by Ellen Pao, highlights such potentials afforded towards users in the web 2.0 era. While Reddit represents a unique arrangement of cultural and structural qualities that distinguish it from other web 2.0 platforms, the requirement of all social media sites remains the same, stabilizing an intangible asset, in a quickly shifting environment. For Reddit, the challenge lies within actively taming and monetizing an unruly userbase.

The treatise of Reddit is simple. Redditors are bequeathed space with which to do as they generally please, and in return what is harvested becomes the proprietary content of Reddit. More succinctly this arrangement can be seen as one in which free access is paid for by granting all information, and content, generated through these engagements to the corporation itself, as a result "profits are seen as a form of tax" (Gerstenzang, 2015, July 5). Reddit's own user agreements directly speaks to this arrangement, an issue raised in greater detail in the subsequent sections. Taylor (2014) aptly characterizes this relationship between users and platform owners as Digital Serfdom, where digital peasant's labor is harvested by platform owners for their own profit. In the case of Reddit, the sociability of users becomes harvested, their participation being the engine through which profit is derived. Ultimately this can only result from the dual encroaching tendencies of digitalization and datafication within the internet, both evoking the romanticism of unification underlying the digital promise. For datafication, the process refers to transformation of activities into quantifiable data (van Dijck, 2014), whereas digitization purports the "transformation of communication, including words, images, motion pictures, and sounds into a common language" (Mosco, 2004, pp 155). Together these two process allow the transformation of Reddit's sociability into viable products. Commonly social media firms routinely utilize the vast amounts of personal information freely shared, in doing so they are able to paint accurate pictures of their users behaviors, attitudes, preferences, and opinions; taken together social media firms exploit and harness consumer surveillance (Andrejevic, 2010; Andrejevic, 2011). In fact certain subs such as /r/HailCorporate flourish as direct responses to this trend, suggesting that

Reddit exists solely as a vehicle “for viral and native marketing [while also highlighting] the fact that regular people are doing the work of advertisers” (/u/zcc0nonA, 2017). When directly asked if user data was itself being sold to third parties, co-founder Steve Huffman bluntly responded “Lord knows I’m trying” (/u/spez, 2017, Nov 1).

What complicates monetizing Reddit is the dearth of personal information gleaned from users, who themselves are not required to give an email when setting up an account, let alone any of their personal details. Further frustrating matters is that Redditors on average show higher levels of technical understanding of privacy concerns online (the sub devoted to these issues /r/Privacy boasts over 150k in users). Users therefore are more likely to use both ad-blockers, and obfuscation practices to conceal their identity, while also promoting practices that generally consternate attempts at identifying themselves, as one user notes “Reddit doesn't have any useful information to sell. It's one of the reasons it has trouble making money” (/u/sweateraficionado, 2015). Changes on the horizon however suggest that Reddit has begun to alter its structure in order to better capture personal information, and by extension more precise data. Most recently the site has sought to replicate the structure of Facebook with customized and individual profiles. The implication in this development seems to be easier and more individual means of data mining, personal profiles grant clearer windows into individual opinions, attitudes, and preferences. Users however seem overall

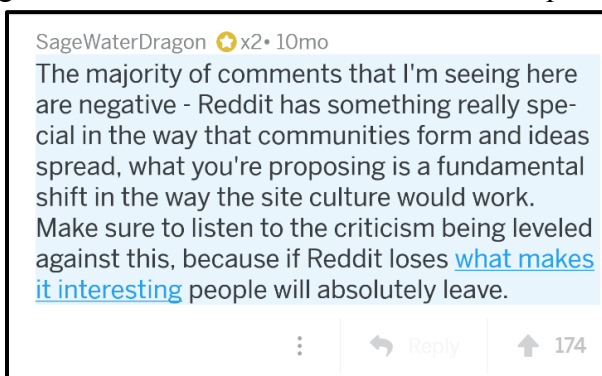


Figure 11: Redditors are generally reluctant to see changes to site, fearing it will degrade the overall quality of the experience of participating on Reddit.

reluctant to the general shift such developments would usher as expressed in figure 11. The chorus of negative responses denouncing these changes present further examples of Redditors as anything but passive actors. Responding to these changes one user succinctly argued, “It basically goes against what I like about Reddit, to be honest” (/u/HouseDownTheStreet, 2017, March 23), while another user noted “this is a watershed moment really. This is basically where Reddit formally crosses the line from ‘internet forum’ to ‘social media website’” (/u/cool_but_not_cool, 2017, March 23). Changes once again to the site’s overall functionality are met with distrust, disapproval, and threats of a mass exodus. While the arrangement of serfdom intrinsically suggests a relationship of exploitation, it also indirectly advocates a personal connection between space,

behavior, and identity. Conflicts resulting from alterations to the site's functionality stress this connection. Redditors consternation in the face of changes to the site's operation are borne from disagreements with the commodification of the space – seen as antithetical to the site's founding ideology. As space is directly connected to the vitality of the community at large - Reddit's ethos in fact emanates from this connection - alterations to the arrangement could usher the demise of Reddit as it currently exists.

Growth through Attention, and Value through Interconnection

The primacy that attention occupies within digital ecosystem forces firms to remain fluid, and open in order to be able to capture the instant – speed remains the dominant logic, both as a placeholder for efficiency, but also towards efficacy. Google does not simply locate your desired result, but does so quickly, and with apparent ease. The ultimate drive for firms in the information marketplace is to have their brand evolve into a verb (van Dijck, 2013), a signifier that their users are inexplicably linked to their product, their attention completely subsumed within the experience, itself now a commodity. The means through which to alter behavior – does one search for information, or simply google it? – suggests that the ultimate goal for firms as centrality, dominance within users online livelihood; Reddit's assertion of being the front page of the internet echoes this drive. Vying for monopolies on online behavior, social media firms reside in a perpetual contest with rivals, failure to meet the demands, expectations, or desires of their audience presents overtures for collapse and ruin. Attention and the speed required to satiate it, becomes the new gold rush. Digital capitalism and the frontiers it seeks to capitulate, introduce prospectors 2.0, now seeking to mine wealth through capturing attention – mouse clicks become the new tickers denoting value accrued. Attention for Reddit remains central, its product, the cultural niche it has fostered through a decentralized network of subs, is only supported by having a userbase - who constantly view and engage with the content, while also creating and adding to it.

Reddit by design is never static. Powered primarily by its user's labor, the platform's operational stability, and the content generation that captures attention, both primarily reside under the purview of users. Reddit's brand consequentially becomes synonymous with its userbase. Such dependence on user activity, as discussed has led to a hands-off approach from admins (Massanari, 2017); as long as content is produced, and the site's operation remains stable, users have

historically been left unperturbed. Digital serfdom suggests at face value an exchange of sorts. Social media platforms, while giving users spaces for sociability, in return demand access to one's cognitive, and affective landscapes. The odiousness becomes masked by the familiarity through which social media firms latch onto the means of sociability, the verbiage of liking posts (or upvoting in Reddit's case) is one that draws an emotional connection to a labor activity. The reward and validation implied by accruing karma cannot be understated within Reddit's ecosystem. While users are prone to bouts of casual flippancy towards the role that karma plays in the site, this belies the drive users hold towards the benefiting the site through their additions. In her own analysis of the site, Massanari (2015) concluded that while users are prone to cynical reproaches to karma, the existence of subs such as /r/KarmaConspiracy which offers comical accusations and explorations of posts claims of legitimacy, suggest that while contradictory in their evaluations of karma, nevertheless its holds importance to the community in general. Furthermore Redditors routinely chastise those whose posts are seen as simple karma grabs (called karma whoring), a connection towards Reddit's fascination with the concepts of authenticity and originality. When observing Slashdot, Bruns (2005) observed similar importance for social currency's within participatory platforms, especially in that it promotes competition for locating novelty – higher karma scores equate to positive additions to the larger community. Ultimately karma superficially can be seen as a means of promoting helpful behavior (which is seemingly does), it equally presents a means of holding captive users attention on the site; karma scores present means of validating Redditors, creating and consolidating an affective connection to the platform. The stability of the platform requires consistency in its functionality, the issue for Reddit is that this relies on mercurial users who remain quite vocal about the nature of the site. The fondness features such as karma infer between users and the platform, on one hand can be seen as a strategy towards fostering return customers, but can also be seen as a means through which users invest in the platform – karma builds connections between users, their labor, and their rapport with the larger community.

The value of networks as discerned by Metcalfe's Law resides within their level of interconnection. The value of a network thereby increases by the sheer number of users engaged within it, resulting in more connections throughout the network. More formally, the law advises that "the value of a network goes up as the square of the number of users"²⁷ (Shapiro & Varian,

²⁷ "Metcalfe's law is more a rule of thumb than a law, but it does arise in a relatively natural way. If there are n people in a network, and the value of the network to each of them is proportional to the number of other users, then the total

1998, pp 184). In a twist of irony, the digital ecosystem far from preventing monopolies and consolidation from occurring (Benkler, 2003), can only guarantee profitability by doing so (Taylor, 2014). Continuing the growth of the network is essential, the larger the network, the greater the centrality it secures in the larger internet ecosystem; in a sense sites like Reddit impose gravitational force on the surrounding environment, the larger the network, the greater the weight they have towards impacting larger online trends. Following the metaphor of gravitational strength, Reddit as it grows comes to draw other sites into its orbit, themselves keen to benefit from Reddit's voluminous userbase. Case in point imgur, a popular image hosting site created out of the necessity of having a reliable, and easy to use space for hosting the images that Redditors sought to share and discuss. As its creator explained in his introduction of the platform to Reddit "I got fed up with all the other image hosts out there so I made my own. It doesn't force you to compress your images, and it has neat things like crop, resize, rotate, and compression from 10-100. It's my gift to you. Let's not see anymore imageshack/photobucket around here" (/u/MrGrim, 2009). Today imgur represents a massive success, evident with an Alexa ranking of 6 (2018, May 25) while also boasting a unique community endemic to the platform. Redditors however find this development confusing, and as one user notes "I find it weird that people browse imgur the way we browse reddit. It has it's own voting system, comments, etc." (/u/jsz, 2014), this in turn has led to a founding of /r/IgnorantImgur created to poke fun at how Imgur users are themselves unaware of Reddit's existence, connection, or relation to their platform.

Ultimately the more traffic Reddit can draw, the more users it houses, the more content developed through the platform, the more valuable Reddit – and its userbase – becomes. This becomes best illustrated by the Reddit Hug-of-Death, the experience of smaller websites when linked to Reddit crashing due to the traffic afforded by visibility on Reddit. The popularity that can be ushered by visibility gained through Reddit is itself a powerful asset. As co-creator Alexis Ohanian aptly points out, Reddit and its role as a cultural curator makes the site similar to a water cooler, one which can equally shape opinions and draw attention (Primack, 2016, April 28). The old adage in real estate of location, location, location may not hold the same gravitas within cyberspace where interconnection reigns supreme, but it suggest a means at how to appraise

value of the network (to all the users) is proportional to $n \times (n - 1) = n^2 - n$. If the value of a network to a single user is \$1 for each other user on the network, then a network of size 10 has a total value of roughly \$100. In contrast, a network of size 100 has a total value of roughly \$10,000. A tenfold increase in the size of a network leads to a hundredfold increase in its value" (Shapiro & Varian, 1998, pp 184)

Reddit's value. The location of Reddit, not in the physical sense of its servers, or offices, but in regards to its connection within the larger network presents clues to where its value lies²⁸. Equally important is the central role it plays in the lives of its users, case in point nearly 8 out of 10 Redditors use the site as their primary news source (Pew, 2016). But reliance on Redditors, their activity, their tastes and opinions also poses the gravest threat towards the site's development. The bind Reddit finds itself in, placating older users, while keeping the site accessible for new users, not only helps to explain Reddit's overall approach to governance, but also to the difficulty in balancing community vitality with profitability.

What Metcalfe's Law alludes to is that ultimately value generation on Reddit necessitates publicness. Social media firms such as Reddit require users to freely perform their activities, which as discussed, the resulting profits come to be viewed as taxes affording future opportunities. The participatory arrangement that Reddit utilizes requires these activities to occur in public as they themselves create externalities, which become the enticement for other users to themselves participate (Rose, 1986). The example of Imgur's founding presents a direct example of how participating within a network can encourage emergence through unplanned externalities. The value derived through networks remains in their level of interconnection, itself buttressed by the publicness of the platform. As such Reddit remains free to access. Unlike other social media platforms where an account is necessary for access, Reddit allows what the community call 'lurkers' to freely explore the site, they simply aren't allowed to engage with the activities at hand. Such users while not disclosing their own information still add value to Reddit, their web traffic and activities run through the site, further amassing Reddit's position as an influencing node within the larger network – it directs traffic, and attention of both users and non-users. Openness is valued within tech firms as it's seen as the path to innovation (Lainer, 2010; Taylor, 2014), open access to the platform comes to be seen as a means of promoting that aspiration.

Paradox in Cyberspace: The Uncontrollable Nature of Information

Reddit's value is directly tied to their userbase. Expressed both with the content generated and linked to the platform, Redditors through their collective aggregating behavior cultivate a valuable

²⁸ The most recent evaluation of the site puts its total value at 1.8 billion dollars as of 2017 (Wagner, 2017, July 31)

filter, that itself becomes emblematic of Reddit's brand. Yet even with the popularity of the site²⁹ it has yet to reach profitability during its entire existence (Wagner, 2017, July 31). While strides have been made to support the platform through advertising, this in itself poses significant issues. First as one user aptly points out "you, like most people on Reddit, probably are using an ad-blocker. That's the problem with running a website for tech-savvy people" (/u/mughent, 2017). Reddit equally must balance the usage of advertising with its own brand, chiefly its vision of authenticity and originality (Primack, 2016, April 28). Advertising arguably presents a dangerous gambit, one that can easily alienate users, particularly as advertising is often seen as a cardinal sin online, a throwback to the old media empires (Lainer, 2010). Equally precarious is that advertisers prefer to engage with spaces that are more docile (Taylor, 2014), something Reddit is anything but. Arguably advertising has pitfalls to account for, but it does beg another question, how is this the sole means by which Reddit can derive a profit? While no means exhaustive, the following section will briefly examine the difficulty in 'owning' the information and cultural artifacts that Redditors create, and how this aids in positioning Reddit as a commons more than as a business.

As discussed, users for the most part enjoy a high degree of autonomy in their actions, overall admins rarely interject. Yet this relationship is based upon users adhering to the various agreements with the site, the *user agreement*, *content policy*, *privacy policy*, and *healthy community guidelines* together form a constitutional arrangement binding users and admins in a shared vision of the site. Of specific interest for understanding Reddit's difficulty in accruing profit from user-generated content resides within the user agreement. The largest of all the policy documents, the user agreement represents the crux of Reddit's vision and conflict, seeking to bridge concepts of community support with business and legal acumen. Of note is the agreement towards the ownership of materials produced, or distributed on the platform, it reads as follows,

By submitting user content to Reddit, you grant us a royalty-free, perpetual, irrevocable, non-exclusive, unrestricted, worldwide license to reproduce, prepare derivative works, distribute copies, perform, or publicly display your

²⁹ Currently it is estimate to have 300 million unique visitors monthly (Wagner, 2017, July 31), while also reporting to have 270 million users (Reader, 2017, March 30). Yet this becomes difficult to verify as Reddit no longer publicly discloses such information.

user content in any medium and for any purpose, including commercial purposes, and to authorize others to do so. (Content Policy, 2017)

This sort of arrangement is standard within social media firms, suggests serfdom is alive and well within digital environments. What it fails to account for or acknowledge is the nature in which the content on Reddit comes to be. Intellectual property rights, such as those Reddit seeks to place upon user generated content, fail to take into account that such content is created from what came before it (Litman, 1990). The assortment of subs focused purely on crafting memes and gifs are direct evidence of this contradiction, they require the raw cultural materials to transform into new cultural artifacts. The result is firms like Reddit seeking to harmonize opposing tendencies, validating user's desires for unencumbered consumption and creation, but structuring these engagements in a manner that can later be capitalized on (Balkin, 2014). Once again this highlights the importance in understanding the value of free speech within domains such as Reddit, particularly as it deconstructs the conflicts between user's values and corporation's desires. The commodification of spaces such as Reddit rely on locating a solution to this, but what this demonstrates is the recurring difficulty that capital has towards media products, specifically their non-exclusionary qualities (Foster & McChesney, 2011; Taylor, 2014; Balkin 2016).

Writing almost a century ago Benjamin (1935) noted a shift in art when mass produced, arguing that what was lost its noted aura of authenticity, the mass reproduction of art allowed these expressions to themselves become politicized in a way previous eras where unable to. While memes for many reside outside of what is considered art, they remain expressions of individual commentary devised for public consumption (Milner, 2016). Simultaneously they exist as politicized expression, eschewing copyright and intellectual property concerns by freely remixing the raw cultural materials they are constructed by. In the case of /r/PrequelMemes, the sub is premised on using material from the unpopular prequel trilogy of Star Wars films, and focuses on self-described *shitposting* through memes. In theory, such a subs content becomes the exclusive property of Reddit, yet the reality is that the raw materials in question remain the property of Lucasfilms, now a subsidiary of Disney. Much like how free speech is appropriative, in that it builds upon previous discourse (Balkin, 2014), so does content generation through Reddit. As a result questions of authorship and by extension ownership become muddled. The proliferation of memes and gifs as popular expression online makes concepts such as authenticity and originality

more porous and therefore more difficult to distinguish. The nebulosity of authorship surrounding cultural artifacts such as memes or gifs presents another dimension of the difficulty in monetizing Reddit.

Further complicating efforts to profit from user generated content is the ease through which distribution can itself occur. As Benkler succinctly points out the internet “is the first modern communication medium that extends its reach by decentralizing its distribution function” (2003, pp 1250). The ease through which users can share and connect information makes policing the distribution of content difficult, while the sheer amount of content distributed only further complicates such issues. The paradox of value, first described by Adam Smith suggests that value is directly tied towards scarcity of the commodity in question (2000). In the case of Reddit’s self-generated content, the reality is that it’s endless, but also crippled by a short lifespan. The attentive elements of the digital economy highlight this – trends both impact and disperse quickly. The public consumption of cultural content, coupled with the ease of distribution means that ownership and authorship become difficult to distinguish, but as Reddit’s cofounder Alexis Ohanian ironically states “everyone who creates something online has lost control of their message but in the process has gained access to a global audience” (2013, pp 30). The mutagenic character of internet culture exemplified by Reddit is premised upon constant turnover. Cultural materials are continually introduced, consumed, debated, and eventually recycled into new authentic and original expressions directed at the current moment, simply put “cyberspace means producing culture as you consume it” (Poster, 2001, pp. 48). Reddit’s pursuit of profitability remains tethered to previous understandings of consumption, production, and ownership, but trying to replicate those understandings in a novel environment has so far proven ineffective.

Sharing is Caring: Customary Rights, Reddit Gold and the Digital Commons

Much has been said about Redditors reverence for their autonomy. As a result, this chapter up until now has been focused then upon how a firm who relies on such a group for their own profitability can actually manage such a feat. The answer for the most part is poorly. This obviously can be traced to the question of whether Reddit is first, a business seeking profit, or a community seeking self-direction and expression. The difficulty in locating a sustainable and inoffensive means to monetize the site has forced Reddit, like much of the internet, to quietly transform a domain

constructed as anti-commercial into a valuable commodity (Foster & McChesney, 2011). While this chapter has so far been devoted to the woes associated with monetizing Reddit, the reality is that these difficulties are symptomatic of a more pressing issue, a failed categorization/understanding of what Reddit is, both in its current iteration, and future potential. Reddit as one commentator argued “is a shrine to the internet we wanted and that’s the problem” (Warzel, 2015, June 19), the implication, that by seeking to embody the precepts of the digital promise, the toxicity on the platform manifests as a natural outgrowth. The reality is that the toxicity which emerges throughout Reddit resides as the result of economic directives, a fear in losing market share by alienating its community, rather than an underlying tendency of a digital agora.

As has been suggested so far, Redditors see themselves as stakeholders within Reddit’s operation, their labor and commitment within the platform perceived to denote such status. By addressing how content is produced then, coupled with the communally directed nature of its consumption, Reddit is more akin to a cultural commons than a business – this denial seemingly manifests in clashes premised upon the nature of free speech throughout Reddit. Free speech as an avenue to understand these clashes unearths what Fuchs notes as “an antagonism between cooperation and competition, between the informational gift economy and the informational commodity economy” (2008, pp 209). The ideological commitment the userbase locates within free speech propagates patterns of behavior that seem to support the development of Reddit as a commons, conflict directed towards the site’s commercial direction highlights this. In situating Reddit as a space functioning in contrast to proprietary concerns, informed instead upon cooperation, new avenues for political, economic, and social freedoms emerge (Hardt & Negri, 2001). By understanding Reddit as a digital commons, the inherent promise residing within free speech comes to be fulfilled, the emergence of self-government becomes realized via common property (Meiklejohn, 1948). Ultimately this represents a hypothetical, albeit important line of thought that once again positions Reddit as a microcosm for larger discussions within online politics. Sequestering communal spaces for proprietary gain remains the present objective of firms online. What Reddit represents is an instance where communal mobilization, located within the narrative of free speech presents an alternative, and promising development.

The concept of the commons is by no means novel. Roman law for instance determined waterways as a commons due to their necessity for trade and commerce (Butler, 1982); the logic supporting a commons traditionally has been rooted in attempts to maintain open access to promote collective gains. Ultimately a commons presents a model that situates open access as an essential feature to guarantee the livelihood of all members of a society. When applied to digital domains the nature of a commons suggests a logical continuation of the guiding philosophies of the internet, most particularly in the hacker strands of thought. The insulated world from which the internet was first devised, was informed by the scientific and academic community, who would come to imprint their cultural beliefs and values upon the emerging network (Hafner & Lyon, 1996; Glister, 1997; Barbrook, 2007). These initial progenitors were not interested in accruing profit or status, their goals were not economically driven. Instead they were spurred by scientific virtues, promoting the free exchange of information, ease of access, and promoting collaboration as the best means for problem solving. The commitment to freedom of information championed subsequently by hackers and eventually Reddit, can be traced back to the scientific and academic communities that first colonized the digital world. As a result, far from a novel concept, the internet initially was designed to function akin to a commons, a domain where open access supported collective gains. Innovation and creativity ideally were to be supported through architectural and cultural openness online, subsequently the resources to create were meant to remain freely accessible and required no permission to use (Lessig, 1999). As Coleman reasons “the commons is often articulated as a pool of shared resources that then acts as the fertilizer for further vibrant cultural productions and at times a healthy democracy” (2013, pp 196). In recursive fashion a digital commons presents a sustainable source for further content generation, one which favors communal management, and that eschews profit oriented logic.

Embedded within Reddit’s vaunted appreciation of free speech are similarities to an ideal of a digital commons. Championing an openness to engage and participate presents a reminder that Reddit is reliant upon reducing barriers, a necessity to produce externalities that draw attention and successive participation. Reddit’s self-organization, the process by which the site continuously reproduces itself through its own internal logic (Fuchs, 2008), further emphasizes the connection to openness online and generativity. The recursive nature of Reddit remains reliant upon open access, a necessity highlighted in protests against legislation aimed at dismantling network neutrality. Reddit’s function as a content aggregator relies on freely accessing content and

information, which once introduced to Reddit becomes the raw materials, either to fashion new content, or to foster new discussion, either way, free access to material creates the foundation for Reddit's functionality and ethos. This belief is one of the chief features that distinguishes Reddit from other social media platforms in regards to developing into a commons. Whereas Facebook represents a vigil towards the project of individualism, Reddit remains focused upon collaboration. The collectivist nature of Reddit, suggested within its pseudo-anonymity – users create distances, sometimes intentionally, between their Reddit handles and their offline lives – promotes a supposed meritocratic evaluation towards content; the criteria for evaluating content an expression of a common culture. The collaborative nature of Redditors activities suggests the site's intended benefit resides within communal gains, not individual validation. The autonomy that informs these actions, the self-organization which supports them, and the belief in openness, itself manifested in free speech, all point towards self-determination for the community as a whole. The connection then between these behaviors, and the structures that reinforces them, suggests Reddit already demonstrates basic requirements for existing as a commons – a designation suggesting common ownership, a result of the collectivist labor intoned by the site. Once again we are reminded of the directives Reddit once gave to its userbase, “be stewards not dictators, this community owns itself” (Reddit, 2015).

Equally important when considering Reddit as a commons resides addressing its status as a public space, which in turn fosters the development of a public sphere. Firms investing in, or interested in directing the public sphere, do so only to promote their own interests (McChesney, 2013; Taylor, 2014). The constant pursuit of competitive edge that drives firms, undermines the supposed objectivity meant to be observed within a public sphere. In fact one purported potential of the platform is through Coolhunting, which seeks to utilize the diffuse decision making ability demonstrated within the platform to locate emerging trends that will later be popular (Gloor & Cooper, 2007). The usage of free speech to act as judge of society, instead of being directed towards manifesting the project of self-government, comes to be subsumed by capital, perverted into acting much like a bloodhound towards predictive analysis. So long as private interests are capable of interfering with the ability of the platform to freely operate, the mandate of an emergent public sphere, a result of free speech, can never be properly utilized for its supposed end. Social media firms engaged within the public debate particularly present a critical danger in that they fail to question the validity of their own myths (MacKinnon, 2012). Instead, firms assume that their

products lay the groundwork for the imagined utopic digital world, an issue at the heart of Morozov's critique, which as he explains in regards to Facebook, such products and the companies promoting them are "hardly ideal for promoting democracy; [their] own logic, driven by profits or ignorance of the increasingly global context in which it operates, is, at times, extremely antidemocratic" (2011, pp 213).

The reality is that the myopic attitudes of social media corporations, shrouded under the rubric of empowerment, fail to notice the contradictions within their activities and behaviors. The ideological underpinnings of social media firms suggest that profit and social progress exist as parallel aspirations, yet the reality is that they represent antithetical goals that ultimately undermine each other; pursuit of one occurs at the expense of the other. The commons ideally is meant to present an alternative source of power, one grounded in communal concerns, and resolved through public debate. As MacKinnon elaborates it represents an extension of Tocqueville's civil society in that "citizens can carve out the necessary spaces to speak and organize, and thus defend their rights and interests" (2012, pp 17). The counterweight suggested within the nature of the commons arguably suggests that it is unable to exist, let alone thrive, when operating under the guidance of a corporation. Such an incompatibility suggests not only the necessity for such spaces to be appropriated as commons, but that their survival both ideological, and culturally relies on such action. The premise of private property is that of exclusion (Rose, 1986), yet Reddit's survival is tied towards its accessibility, its functionality reliant upon the publicness of the experience. Returning once again to Meiklejohn (1948), the preferred example of free speech's impact was the town hall meeting, the *publicness* of such an arena a product of *open access*, both elements were seen as essential towards the fulfillment of free speech's teleological objective. As such the importance that free speech plays within governing society as a whole necessitates protections to safeguard such activities, which as Rose goes on to explain "should be stated as a public trust concept: this property is needed for the public's political communication, thus governments hold the property in 'trust' for this communication, and have only limited abilities to divest the public of its trust rights" (1986, pp 778). Ultimately the uniqueness of Reddit's userbase is directly connected to the domain they inhabits, while its role as a public sphere depends on trusting those who own the site to adhere to a policy of good faith.

Comedy of the Commons: Reddit Gold and Sustainable Communities

Often deemed an endemic fault of the commons as a concept, *the tragedy of the commons* specifies that through open access, individuals are more prone to exploit shared resources, in turn depleting them (Hardin, 1968). Such a hypothesis infers that openness forfeits sustainability, the lack of oversight coupled with communal resource-management does little to dissuade self-preservation. In applying a similar thought process towards the sustainability of Reddit as a commons then, such








	Translator	Foreign language translations
	Open Sorcerer	Contribute code to reddit
	White Hat	RESPONSIBLY probe and report any holes in the reddit code. More details here.
	CSS Animal	Mysterious
	Artisan	Artistic contributions
	Beta Team	Participate in a reddit beta.
	reddit Gold	reddit supporter. More details here.

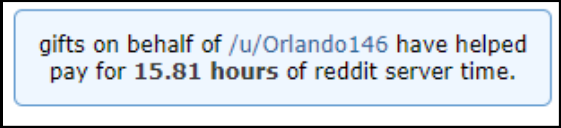
Figure 12: Trophies Redditors are rewarded upon completing tasks relating to site maintenance

communicated through the aforementioned layers. When designating Reddit as a commons, the question which takes precedence, is if users can support it, not simply at a content level, but more importantly at the code and physical layers. Arguably this presents a theoretical and speculative line of inquiry, but certain evidence suggests a proclivity for Redditors to perform such feats throughout the site. As figure 12 illustrates Redditors routinely take part in activities that support the upkeep of the platform, whether by locating and reporting errors in the code, testing out new features in beta, or contributing an artistic designs to the site. This suggests that Redditors currently demonstrate a partiality to benefiting the platform through their labor, not simply at the content layer, but also at the coding layer as well. This is not to suggest that such activities are distributed evenly among the community at large, and much like Wikipedia's editorial community, this work is done by a small handful of highly dedicated users (Reagle Jr, 2012). But user directed activities

a question requires an appreciation for the varying elements both cultural and structural that support the platform's existence. As Taylor (2014) contends platforms are the result of a series of layers, all dependent on the former to support the later. These include the physical layer, servers and cables presenting tangible components of the larger internet, following this exists the layer of protocols and code which divine such digital spaces, with the final layer being content itself

such as coding, or locating bugs signify that users already show a tendency towards operational maintenance, and while similar to the unevenness of moderation duties, such unprompted behavior once again suggest that users are likely to support the platform with their labor, if only to maintain access by safeguarding the site's operation.

Arguably the major difficulty in supporting a platform from a communal standpoint is the required capital to maintain operation, most notably in sustaining the servers, the tangible framework where code, and information reside. Once again however, Reddit has come to already rely on users to help shoulder the costs related to hosting the site on servers. Over the course of its development, Reddit as discussed has had a difficulty securing a reliable and steady source of revenue, save for one means, Reddit Gold. The program is described as a membership program that unlocks certain features reserved only for members willing to pay either 3.99/per month or 29.99/per year (Reddit Gold, 2017). While the majority of features unlocked are simply aesthetic, such as customizable themes for the platform, or personalized versions of Reddit's mascot Snoo, the most integral aspect of Reddit gold lies within the option of gilding. When comments or threads are rewarded with gold, a small token appears above the comment highlighting that it received such a distinction, which as one user explains "acts as a way to highlight particularly good comments for people who are just scrolling by, not reading every single comment thread" (/u/inconspicuous_male, 2017, September 26). Gilding a comment or thread grants additional visibility, directly rewarding these additions, and positioning them an example for other users to follow. Yet Reddit gold apart from representing a communal means of rewarding especially good content, also presents the most stable revenue stream



gifts on behalf of /u/Orlando146 have helped pay for 15.81 hours of reddit server time.

Figure 13: Attached to gold user's profiles, these counters highlight users who directly support the platform

for Reddit throughout its existence. As figure 13 shows, users who take part in the gold program have attached to their profile a widget which demonstrates how many hours of server time users have directly paid for. Explaining a few years back, then CEO Yishan Wang expanded on the importance of Reddit gold, presenting a communally focused argument for golds importance,

Roughly speaking at the moment, a month of Reddit gold pays for about 276 minutes (about 4.6 hours) of server time. By buying a month of gold, you're helping to pay for one of our many hundreds of servers to run for 4.6 hours. Each

server generates thousands of pageviews per hour (massive oversimplification), so by buying Reddit gold you are helping to fund not just your own Reddit experience, but Reddit for many others. (/u/yishan, 2013, October, 22)

The investment of the community towards server time highlights yet again the integral nature user's play within managing and supporting the platform as a whole. In fact over the past five years, the rate of investment Redditors relay via gold has increased, within 2017 alone, over a million dollars was garnered through the program (Reed, 2018). Equally important in accounting for Reddit's server costs is that they themselves host a fraction of the content exchanged throughout the platform, an issue highlighted in *The Fapping*, where admins were unable to remove content as they themselves were not hosting it (see chapter four). Therefore while the site is itself massive, much of the server costs are offset onto third parties. Arguably the success of Reddit Gold as a program to support the platform can be discerned from the scrapped plans to introduce a Reddit centric cryptocurrency, which as explained would have been "exchangeable (backed) by those shares of Reddit, and then distributing the currency to the community. The investors have explicitly agreed to this in their investment terms" (/u/yishan, 2014, September 30). While the program remains dormant it does highlight the interconnectedness of users to the platform's financial success, while it would have also cemented users as shareholders, thereby legitimizing the belief that users already represent stakeholders. Ultimately Reddit Gold represents once again the importance user's play both in Reddit's success, and very existence. Underscoring yet again how the platform presents opportunities to be sustainable, and fully supported independently by users.

Lauderdale's Paradox

Highlighting the inherent instability within the economic arrangement displayed in Reddit, this chapter sought to demonstrate that the reliance on user's labor – more plainly, their sociability – presents a precarious situation for firms. Such instability this chapter argues affords opportunities that can be exploited for the benefit of users. What much of this chapter has sought to highlight is that value in Reddit is directly tied to the vitality of the userbase itself. Once again begging the question, does one approach Reddit first as a business that cannot turn a profit, or a community seeking to locate a means of self-sufficiency? Much of the difficulty has been that Reddit strives

to do both, the platform existing as a proxy of the Californian Ideology. Arguably this presents an untenable arrangement, and highlights the paradoxical logic which ultimately undermines such aspirations. The contradiction between profit and public goods, known as the Lauderdale Paradox suggests that there “[is] an inverse correlation between public wealth and private riches, such that an increase in the latter served to diminish the former” (Foster & McChesney, 2013, pp 10). The exploitative practices of capitalism remain in stark contrast to the production of public wealth; for Reddit this conflicting reality threatens to undermine the site as a whole. As this chapter demonstrated, Reddit’s pursuit of profitability is hampered by three major concerns. First while the *community represents the primary value of the site*, in fact being synonymous with the brand, the difficulty is that this group of digitally literate users typically eschew traditional means of commodification. This points to the second difficulty, *chiefly that typical advertising strategies are either ineffective*, or represent antithetical oeuvres that run contrary to the supposed cultural values Redditors tout. Finally the major export of Reddit’s activities, the cultural artifacts created collaboratively such as *gifs or memes themselves hold little value due to the nature of copyright and intellectual property concerns*. As Reddit grows, both in the number of users, but also swells in its impact within the larger digital ecosystem, this issues will only become more pronounced.

Yet the gravest threat posed from Reddit’s reliance on user labor is in demonstrating a more community-centric strategy towards securing Reddit’s future development. In exploring the different means through which the userbase currently supports the platform, this chapter sought to draw the conclusion that such tendencies present means for the userbase to support the platform themselves. What this chapter has argued, is that the natural conclusions of such as thought process is within the concept of the commons. Such a strategy not only safeguards Reddit’s functions as an originator of digital content, enriching the larger digital culture the site resides in, but also protects the platform as an emergent public sphere integral towards informing users of the events that shape their lives. The difficulty obviously that lies within such a line of thought is that Reddit exists as private property, tended to by its users. Yet as Rose (1986) points out, the historical precedence for claiming a property as that of the commons is twofold, *first that by residing in private hands the capability of monopolization exists*, and *secondly that the public’s claim was superior to that of the private claim of ownership*. Expanding on the second aspect of this argument, Rose goes on to suggest that the public’s claim should reside within the publicness of the space itself, arguing that “because the properties themselves were most valuable when used by

indefinite and unlimited numbers of persons – by the public at large” (1986, pp 774). Such an argument presents a fertile ground for commons right claims towards public spaces such as Reddit, which from its recent behavior seems to elicit a fear of encroaching monopolization of a public good³⁰.

The dissolution of private property lies at the very heart of what Marx envisioned when contemplating how a world post-capital would function. What is implicit within the Californian Ideology, is a mutation of capital that seeks to hijack the emancipatory potentials believed to exist within internet technologies, to overcome the disenchantment individuals have towards late-stage capitalism. What it belies however is an opportunity for what Benjamin (1936) argues is the rights of the masses to change property relations. The return of a feudal arrangement (i.e. digital serfdom) suggests that placing users directly at the heart of these platforms production, the diffused and collaborative nature of labor increases productivity, while also offsetting costs. What is overlooked in such arrangements becomes what Reddit is emblematic of, producing a literate and energized collective, that affords “the possibility of directing technologies and production toward its own joy and its own increase of power” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, pp 396). At the core of digital serfdom lies a connection between labor and space, for Reddit this has evolved into a robust endemic userbase; neither aspect it seems can exist without the other. The timeline of Reddit’s development has been used so far as an ad-hoc means for examining larger developments online, in this case the growing commodification of digital space. Arguably the internet has been commodified (McChesney, 2013), a trend Reddit seems eager to follow. But as Marx famously declared, capitalism fuels its own demise (Benjamin, 1936; McChesney, 2013); perhaps the reliance upon users to direct the site’s development presents such a window. The re-appropriation of space lies at the heart of what Hardt & Negri (2001) considered to be the revolutionary potential of the multitude, the difficulty resides in anchoring such an abstract demand into practice. Perhaps by evaluating digital spaces like Reddit to be better suited as commons, rather than private property, the first step in such a

³⁰ Already changes in the operation of Reddit indicate that the site is veering from its original open access and communal approach towards one more in line with the closed off policies of rival social media firms. Having been open sourced for nearly ten years³⁰, in September 2017 Reddit announced its code was now closed sourced, which as one user aptly commented the shift seemed to indicate “We needed you guys back then. We don’t now” (/u/varal_k, 2017, September 1st). Coupled with its shift to creating features such as unique profiles, a change believed to usher in more personalized data capture, the future of the platform seems to suggest one reminiscent of rival social media firms, where the divide between users and platform operators is more pronounced.

process is initiated. Whether such an event occurs, is doubtful, but through increasing user's digital literacy's, perhaps the fostering of a collective consciousness can emerge, one that both informs and galvanizes users to protect the public spaces which they both collectively labor within and benefit from.

Chapter Six: Residency at Reddit

Literacy is a platform for democratization

- Kofi Annan

The threat posed by internet-centrism resides in masking the impacts of human actors. In effect, the decisions, actions, and choices which guide the internet's development become divorced from their authors, resulting in the narrative that the internet has a direction all on its own. Arguably this tendency is no more dangerous than when applied to emancipatory connotations residing within these technologies. The reliance on the internet to reveal its own path towards the emancipatory future its celebrant's herald, ultimately deters the drive, desire, and commitment towards "more intellectually stimulating, but also more demanding reform projects" (Morozov, 2013, pp 9). The detachment of technology from human activity, the central element of internet-centrism, inevitably promotes ignorance, both masking the activity of firms, while preventing internet users from understanding how to unlock the potentials promised by these technologies. Relieving the burden of responsibility, internet-centrism rewards compliance as a proxy for blind faith in the teleology of the internet. While enthusiasts staunchly believe "technology, unregulated and unencumbered, will allow everyone to compete in a truly open digital marketplace, resulting in a richer culture and more egalitarian society" (Taylor 2014, pp 27), fair competition can only exist when the skills to participate are freely available. Yet far from egalitarian, the gap in the ability to participate is only becoming more entrenched (Hindman, 2009). This presents a grave issue, especially apparent when taken in the context of web 2.0, an environment characterized by an increasing integration with mainstream culture, and premised upon human interaction (Fuchs, 2008; Taylor, 2014). Openness within this era, far from nurturing a supposed egalitarian society, becomes the placeholder for more open sharing of information, resulting in more data to be gleaned and profited

from; openness seemingly benefits the machines these technologies are predicated upon, rather than the society they were meant to assist (Lainer, 2010). Internet-centrism therefore results both in uncritical audiences, especially in the face of increasing commodification, while also inhibiting both the desire and aptitude to take actions countering such developments. As Zittrain forewarned, the increasing popularity of the internet, does not reflect the growing understanding of how these technologies function, since “rank-and-file internet users enjoy its benefits while seeing its operation as a mystery, something they could not possibly hope to affect” (2008, pp 245). Internet-centrism ultimately fosters ignorance, while equally reliant on said ignorance in order to perpetuate.

Combating internet-centrism this chapter argues resides then in supporting environments, behaviors, expertise, and knowledge that grant individuals the ability to partake in activities online. Recursively this continues the process of being better informed and more literate digital actors. Social media platforms, often vilified as exploitative, in fact present domains for transformative potential; the participatory impulses implicit within these domains invite users to explore, create, and engage with their peers – in effect developing the aptitudes required to take part in the larger discussions that impact their lives. The vision of web 2.0, and the collective forms of expression it advocates, suggest the manner through which to properly realize the internet’s inherent promise: a democratization of influence, most notably by amplifying the voice of regular individuals (Hindman, 2009). In order to do so, individuals must first acquire and develop the skills necessary to harness web 2.0’s potential, to be able to engage with “the new culture of learning [which] gives us the freedom to make the general personal and then share our personal experience in a way that, in turn, adds to the general flow of knowledge” (Thomas & Brown, 2011, pp 31). This chapter ultimately aims to present Reddit as a particularly fertile domain for the accrual of digital literacy skills, by speaking to three facets of digital literacy, each affording users the ability to express, participate, and become empowered users within digital domains. Digital literacy suggests an antidote towards internet-centrism by transforming users from passive consumers to active participants, a development this chapter aims to observe within the context of Reddit.

Digital Literacy 101

Digital literacy refers to a series of practices, aptitudes, knowledges, and awareness that together allow individuals the competence to both *consume* and *produce* material within digital environments. The development of digital literacies promotes critical audiences, new authors of digital content, and more informed communities, together these practices foster active participants within digital domains (Hobbs, 2010; Thomas & Brown, 2011; Rheingold, 2012). The reason that this project suggests web 2.0, as a fertile ground for fostering such behaviors is that the performance of them relies on the nature of play³¹. The importance of addressing play is that it provides a powerful conduit for the development of digital literacy skills. First it presents an innocuous means through which to experiment and engage in these behaviors, while also fostering

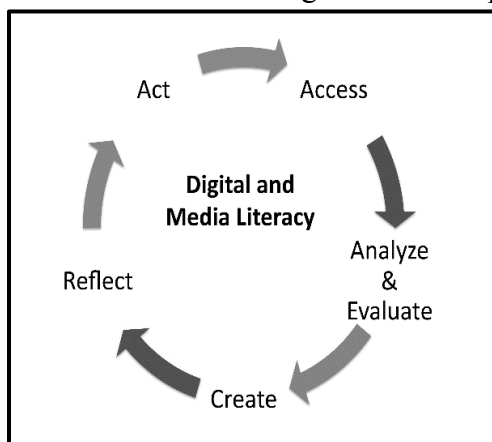


Figure 14: Circular Reinforcement of Digital Literacy (Hobbs, 2010, pp 18)

agency by “engaging in complicated negotiations of meaning, interaction, and competition, not only for entertainment, but also for creative meaning” (Thomas & Brown, 2011, pp 97). The seeming frivolity of activities occurring throughout Reddit, far from superficial exercises, provides the means to observe the development at a communal level of a variety of literacy skills. Taken together, these skills can be utilized to support mobilization, or to develop the original content through which Redditors derive their cultural associations.

Successive participation further develops and solidifies their acquisition. As figure 14 visualizes, the skills that permit participation, act as the foundation for further fostering, reinforcing, and extending literacy skills; digital literacy is a recursive exercise, one which reinforces and supports its own development.

The importance of digital literacy within Reddit cannot be overstated. While up to this point the focus has been on the importance of free speech within Reddit, it must be clearly stated that this only exists by virtue of the literacy skills supporting its practice throughout the site. Free speech entails both *interactive* features, as it requires engaging and participating with others, and *appropriative* aspects in that it draws from previous materials and dialogues to inform itself

³¹ While not a major component of this project, the connection between Reddit and the nature of play is well documented in the work by Massanari (2015).

(Balkin, 2016). Ultimately digital literacy supports avenues to express these rights claims, while also informing users how these behaviors are sustained; digital literacy comes to inform users both of the cultural and material elements required for their digital livelihoods. As a result the following chapter will be devoted to three distinct, but overlapping forms of digital literacy. Beginning with critical reading skills, then turning towards the unique content generation on the site, and concluding with group engagement and participation. This chapter will situate Reddit as an incubator for skills that come to support Reddit's overarching ability to be disruptive. The resilience of networks is their *equipotentiality*, each participating node has the same potential to impact the whole - by virtue of their structure they invoke democratic sentiments (Galloway, 2001; Bruns, 2006). Similarly equipotentiality must be reflected if the potentials of the network are to be unlocked – increasing the diffusion of digital literacy affords more egalitarian participation, with the emergent plurality of opinions resulting in a richer media environment since “diverse networks are collectively smarter” (Rheingold, 2012, pp 251).

Arguably when approaching Reddit a chief difficulty is that while the site does promote the development of digital literacy, the homogeneity of the site's population undermines the argument that digital literacy purports egalitarianism; these skills seem reserved to privileged groups, paving a path towards what Innis lamented as knowledge monopolies³² (1950). The value of these observations is that these groups are early adopters, as such they present the best window through which to see how these process unfurl in online communities, while also reflecting the target demographic most sought by advertisers (Jenkins, 2006) Redditors are likely the individuals who spread content to others in their network, their influence remains particularly important for marketers (Higham, 2009). Consequently platforms owners are more responsive to these groups. The behaviors, attitudes, and preferences of early adapters infer a primary evaluation of digital literacy's impacts. Simultaneously by being at the forefront of these discussions, these groups often lay the foundations for successive adapters - their input often directs subsequent developments within platforms. While not perfect, the population present within Reddit, the early adopters and proponents of digital literacies, present examples of how these skills develop, and how they can crystalize into content and knowledge production communities. As web 2.0 presents an

³² Harold Innis in his works *Empire and Communication* (1950) and *Communication and Bias* (1951) warned of the dangers existent societally when knowledge becomes a reserved commodity, and not freely accessible. Reserved to specialized castes, knowledge monopolies promote certain information over others, thereby reinforcing power-dynamics, while muting dissenting alternatives.

environment where digital spaces enter mainstream dialogue, thereby impacting the wider culture these spaces reside in, the participation gap must be averted, lest the outcomes of these technologies be moot. The participation gap already present within Reddit, expressed through toxic technocultures and vitriolic rhetoric, is rarely challenged enough. The emergence of counter-publics that support alternative views and voices can only emerge by extending the skills necessary for participation. Understanding the means through which to support such development is only possible in exploring communities which already present such behaviors. The following segments present these behaviors, and the assorted subs devoted to publicizing and rewarding their appearance. While no means complete, the aim is to observe and briefly locate what supports these behaviors, both individually and collectively, and to use them as an introduction to the possibilities inferred by more digitally literate world

Net Smart: Navigating and Reading the Web through Content Aggregation

Reddit's primary function as a content aggregator presupposes a filtering process. Continuously trawling, then ranking material in accordance with an internal metric, which ultimately rewards content with visibility the more it reflects values Reddit esteems. Reddit as explored in chapter three reflects an editorialized space, one contrived by strict adherence to core cultural filters. Redditors in their progression from lurkers to full participants come to learn the rules, both formal and informal that bestow visibility upon content. As discussed in chapter one these cultural filters can be described as favoring material exemplifying authenticity, originality, and meta. Most notably these qualities are best observed in the wake of reposting material, evidenced in figure 15, as users are quick to point out the disingenuous nature of false posts. The post titled *Reddit, Meet Mashed Potato*, was posted to /r/aww, a sub devoted to pictures that elicit the subs title. This particular post however was insincere, with users quickly noting that it was a repost of a previous popular thread. The affront posed by reposting is one that assaults the core qualities Reddit cherishes. Reposting particularly rebukes the sentiment that content should reflect authentic experiences and expressions. While refurbishing old content for new karma only compounds criticisms against authenticity, while highlighting that the content isn't fresh, and thereby not original. Informed by these qualities, and diffused throughout Reddit, this comes to foster a

decentralized (albeit editorialized) watchdog function (Benkler, 2003). What an example of reposting highlights, is Redditors speed in flagging information or content that is inauthentic or disingenuous. Such expedience, the result of the distributed watchdog function central to Reddit's functionality as a content aggregator, is informed by the collective intelligence (as discussed in chapter three) of the userbase. In functioning as a content aggregator, Reddit implicitly demands its users to evaluate content, particularly by analyzing its credibility, veracity, and intent (Bruns, 2005; Benkler, 2006; Hobbs, 2010). Flagging reposted material highlights how Redditors quickly assess content, and how the wider userbase musters their combined weight to have this information visible through voting. Far from passively consuming information, Reddit's functionality requires users to act as gatewatchers, critical readers of the information they consume, judging what content should subsequently be rewarded with visibility.

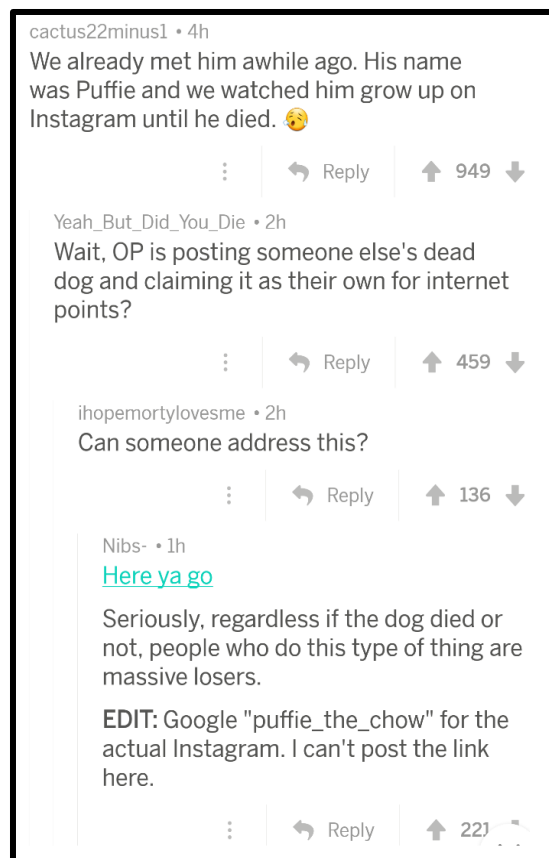


Figure 15: Reactions and disgust towards reposted content

By organizing, analyzing, and evaluating content, Reddit by acting as a content filter and aggregator, constructs new information and connections; in a certain sense, Reddit creates an internet in its own image, its filtering acting as an overlay. Internet luminary Ted Nelson in his cyber-manifesto *Computer Lib/Dream Machines* coined the term *Intertwingularity* to denote the novel interconnected nature of information online. Far from separate and static, information online becomes defined by *Intertwingularity*, "since the cross-connections among the myriad topics of this world simply cannot be divided up neatly" (Nelson, 1974, pp DM45). No longer is information a series of independent islands. By virtue of hypertext, information becomes a rich mosaic of interconnected ideas, thoughts, and reflections. Information online therefore becomes three dimensional by virtue of its connections to other related information (Gilster, 1997). Literate users understanding such potential are rewarded with new means to construct and disseminate information throughout cyberspace. This *metadata*, the emergence of information about

information, arises through practices of tagging, linking, and browsing information (Bruns, 2008). Similar to a virus, Reddit hijacks the internet's architecture to create dialogues it believes are either interesting or important. Marshaling their collective weight, Reddit occasionally mobilizes to amend search-engines so that they come to reflect Reddit's opinion. Arguably Redditors can be seen as hacking the architecture of the internet for their own benefit. Being aware of the weight Reddit has in directing search engine results, users often devise their own connections in what search engines display as results. Case in point, a post titled *Venal. If you upvote this picture it will show up when you google "Venal" A politician whose influence is literally for sale* appeared on the sub /r/LateStageCapitalism, the content of the post was simple and direct, an image of current FCC chair Ajit Singh (/u/AutoKillSwitch, November 21 2017). This post, an example of users collectively seeking to direct their dialogue outside of Reddit, alludes to an understanding of how to tweak the material conditions of the internet for their own benefit. Understanding the nature of how information and content comes to be connected through metadata, Redditors organize the larger userbase to construct links between information. By engineering new pathways between information, Reddit devises new meanings, and reaches new audiences – the wider dialogue online slowly comes to reflect Reddit and its sentiments.

Market Value and Virality: Evaluating original content on Reddit

Reddit has a voracious appetite for novelty. Valorizing original content, this hunger occasionally fosters communities devoted specifically to satiate their respective audiences. Creating content becomes both individual expressions of their creators, and collective activities that come to support communities. Drawing from the hacker tradition of using computers as a source of entertainment (Himanen, 2001), the creation of memes and gifs throughout Reddit echoes the hacker belief that “essential lessons can be learned about the systems – about the world – from taking things apart, seeing how they work, and using this knowledge to create new and even more interesting things” (Levy, 2010, pp 28). Historically the hacker ethic has been associated with code, or rather the material conditions that support online activity. But as this thesis has reiterated, web 2.0 opens up new avenues for expression, as a result the hacker ethic finds a continuation through content

generation. In crafting memes³³ one must be aware not just of the source material, such as the meaning intoned, but also be cognizant of what the specific meme format implies. Memes like other online content are social expressions, they are rooted in larger histories and narratives. The creation of new content therefore highlights such awareness, as it is vital in order to properly convey one's message.

Reddit is home to a large swath of communities tailored to specifically creating memes. Communities such as /r/DankMemes, /r/SurrealMemes, or /r/WholesomeMemes all create distinct memes that connect to each subs internal mission statement, and the cultural expectations which spring forth from those agreements. In each of these communities, content must ascribe to an agreed upon feature. What is desired on /r/WholesomeMemes is unlikely to be rewarded with karma on /r/SurrealMemes, as the expectations of format and content are radically different. Memes, like other forms of original content rely on their audience being able to digest the information, to be aware of the in-jokes, references, and assumptions implicit within these digital artifacts (Milner, 2016). As a result, crafting original content within Reddit isn't solely about devising something new, but crafting something that will resonate with an intended audience. Content generation therefore reflects the necessity of rhetoric, both in how the content is presented, and in its delivery (Gilster, 1997); content generation for users muddles the roles of artist and carnival barker, the delivery remains as important as the content itself. Creating content reflects only one side of the coin, finding a receptive audience the other, both qualities being requirements to make an impact within the broader discourse.

Perhaps no community appreciates the impact that memes hold towards online discourse more than /r/MemeEconomy. Self-described meme traders, the sub evaluates meme's much like stockbrokers evaluate stocks. For individuals engaged in /r/MemeEconomy the goal is to locate valuable content, appraise its quality, and if deemed valuable to subsequently invest in it. Instead of posting fully formed memes, users post, and discuss meme templates (the base image sans text). Meme templates evoke the potential of a new trend, which the community collectively weighs to

³³ The term meme is derived from the work of Richard Dawkins, who created memes as a parallel to genes, in that memes reflect a building block for successive cultural sharing (Milner, 2016). Much like code being the building blocks of digital domains, memes can be evinced to be building blocks of cultural sharing, with those crafting memes seemingly 'hacking' cultural artifacts to make something new.

determine if investment is a prudent course of action³⁴. Memes for the community come to be judged then by three broad criteria, the format's versatility, the quality of the meme, and the risk of normification. Of the three qualities observed, the most integral for /r/MemeEconomy is the risk of normification, the moment a meme loses its cultural cachet and becomes mainstream. For

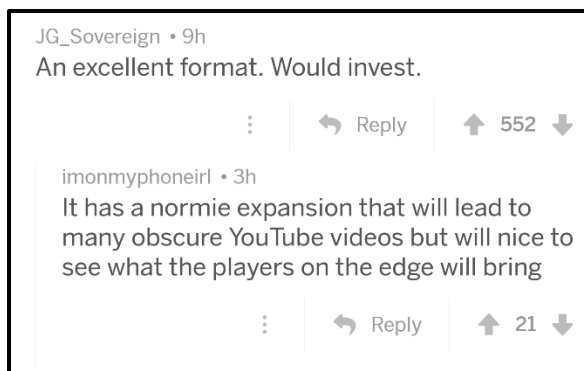


Figure 16: Assessing a potential new investment

traders the risk of overuse remains the argument against normies adoption of said memes. Yet one must also wonder if this is equally the result of this invested group being upset with the disposability mainstream audiences display towards these meme formats. The community as a whole entered a state of crisis in October 2017 when Reddit's Facebook account shared content from the sub. The community fretted about the subs exposure, fearful of becoming normie. The thread titled '/r/MemeEconomy made it to Normiebook. SELL THE ENTIRE FUCKING SUBREDDIT' dovetailed into a meta dialogue of the state of the sub, the community, and their mission statement. Reflecting on the ordeal one user lamented in jest that the event was to be "forever recognized as the Great Meme Depression of 2017" (/u/nomopo, 2017, October 7). While appraising memes for their versatility and quality remain important, the community is arguably more fearful of their collective stock being diluted by oversaturation, which can ruin even the most well respected and regarded memes. By engaging in /r/MemeEconomy users come to appreciate the longevity of content online, and the manner that these messages mutate once released. In adopting the stock market as a metaphor, users integrate play with cultural evaluation, as one user elaborates the sub is "basically just one big role playing game" (/u/Kranes_memetrader, 2017, January 2). By taking part in /r/MemeEconomy, users come to understand and predict the virality of online content³⁵. In playing the role of stock brokers, users on /r/MemeEconomy become

³⁴ The community in adopting the stock market as inspiration regularly use concepts such as buying and selling to organize their evaluation of a memes value. While memes are not exchanged for currency, their value within Reddit is weighed by the karma they can accumulate. When memes are deemed fresh and valuable, users buy into them through upvotes, when the meme has passed a point of profitability users sell. As one user goes on to explain, "Buying memes would be to have them saved somewhere that you can easily access, but not actually posting them somewhere. This would increase the "value" of the meme because it's not anywhere. Selling it would be to post it, and the value is regained by likes, upvotes, etc." (/u/NGPNate, 2017, January 2).

³⁵ If users are unable to keep up with the major trends, then they are more than welcome to grab an issue of Meme Insider, an online magazine self-published by a group of committed /r/MemeEconomy users. The magazine was created when user /u/DigitizedOrange (2016, November 17) created a mock cover of the magazine, which the

informed, both of the larger trends occurring online, and how these events in turn present the fodder for new content. /r/MemeEconomy and the community indentured to its practices, together foster a collective apprenticeship in critically reading and assessing content and the cultural practices which foster and inform its value. Meme traders on /r/MemeEconomy under the rubric of play develop into critical judges of cultural content online, and savvy readers of cultural trends offline.

The Spirit of Collaboration and Cooperation during April Fools

The participatory nature of Reddit fosters externalities, which in turn promotes successive user engagement within the platform. The result is that Reddit exists in perpetual motion. The reliance on users to create, innovate, and expand the platform suggests that it can scale then in an almost unlimited manner (Thomas & Brown, 2011). The obvious caveat, expansion becomes reliant on user commitment. The self-organization implicit within Reddit's operation revolves on users collective belief that their participation holds value – both to themselves, and to a larger audience. So far this thesis has addressed this through the lens of political economy. Free speech, a totem of Reddit's unruliness, acts as signal post for control over Reddit's development, opposing visions manifest through clashes and subsequent mobilization. What becomes overlooked within this perspective is an appreciation for the level of collaboration and cooperation necessary for such activities to take place, and at such a scale. The mosaic of subreddits that together form Reddit, each present a single example of unprompted, undirected development, guided solely by the participation of its users. The recursive exercise of Reddit's operation resides in the continual effort of users to populate the site: their activities, and subsequent discussions become the fertile material to foster the next iteration of Reddit's perpetual dialogue.

The acquisition of competence for participation presents the foundation for all subsequent literacy skills. In understanding the rules of the game, one is able to make impacts. Failure to understand how to engage with the userbase resigns one to isolation, reduced visibility, and ultimately little chance at impacting the larger discussion. The cultivation of skills directed towards 'learning to be' within a space is the byproduct of gaining social experience both with the location,

community subsequently praised. Since its founding, the project has grown to now boast a team of writers and editors, with articles discussing how the market functions, good meme developing practices, even discussions pertaining to the ethics of the meme market itself. Modeled after publications such as Forbes, The Atlantic, and The New Yorker, Meme Insider continues to blur the line between inspiration and parody, a recurring feature in /r/MemeEconomy.

but equally with the larger community (Thomas & Brown, 2011). This process of *indwelling*, the interiorizing of rules and norms, comes to fruition when we “identify ourselves with the teachings in question, by making them function as the proximal term of a tacit moral knowledge, as applied in practice” (Polanyi, 2009, pp 17). Understanding the editorialized nature of Reddit innocuously occurs for users by simply spending time within the site. The filtering process of Reddit comes to educate prospective users as to what is permissible, thereby gaining visibility, and what is abhorrent, which comes to be downvoted. Further support for user acquisition of participatory confidence resides within the myriad of displayed rules and wikis that populate each sub. Users over time become more familiar with the both the spoken and unspoken rules that govern Reddit’s appraisal of content through trial and error – more attempts, equate to a greater sense of understanding.

The metric for appraisal within Reddit is karma. The more karma a user has acquired, suggests a higher propensity to follow the rules. Karma crudely can be seen to exist as both carrot and whip, prompting positive additions, while admonishing negative ones. Karma being the social currency of Reddit, is the foundation for a reputational economy that supports Reddit’s overall functionality. Karma not only reminds users of the parameters of tolerable behavior on Reddit, but equally affords users a metric to deduce the credibility of their peers; user karma represents an accrument then of pro-social behavior. The underlying assumption therein is that trolls, or disruptive individuals, become marked by negative karma and are subsequently ignored. Karma as a good faith system pays forward positive additions to the platform, granting further clout for users in subsequent communications. Karma equally validates content, becoming the means of bestowing visibility on the post. Subs like the aforementioned /r/MemeEconomy find creative means of harnessing these metrics to denote sub specific iterations of value, as upvotes within /r/MemeEconomy reflect greater investment into a format. Collaboration and cooperation are expressed in karma, both rewarding and promoting subsequent positive behavior. Of note however is that such an arrangement does not directly equate to the veracity of material. Karma simply bestows visibility, as within each sub the allocation of karma is specific to their own mission statement. What karma equally demonstrates is an educative instrument to inform users of the rules of both conduct and content. A strong pressure is exerted via karma. The rule reminder it suggests, comes to promote, support, and extend collaboration and cooperation, while reminding users

through visibility of what content and behavior is valued within each sub, and the wider site as a whole.

Reddit's propensity for unruliness finds a kindred spirit in April Fools. The holiday has gained focus throughout the years on the platform, regularly spurring site-wide events that seek to capture and highlight the participatory facets of the site's ethos. The site-wide events that dominate Reddit during the April Fools period reflect vast social experiments, harnessing Reddit's propensity for collaboration, cooperation, and participation – but only so long as these activities are viewed as being part of the niche unruliness and openness Redditors valorize. Experiences such as 2015's sitewide event known as /r/Button became a massive social game capturing user's attention. The rules were simple, "the timer will count down from 60 seconds. If the button is pressed the timer will reset to 60 seconds and continue counting down" (Reddit Blog, 2015, April 1st), the caveat being that users can only press the button once, if the timer reached zero the game for everyone was over. Depending on how much time remained on the timer when pressed, a colored flair was added to one's profile indefinitely. The game continued unabated until June 8th 2015, with over a million users having taken part (Reddit Blog, 2015, June 8th). While the game itself was never given a fixed meaning, or ultimate purpose – users had no idea what would occur once it was over – the userbase's commitment and collaboration to sustain the game for over three months came to foster unique experiences that continue to regale users years later. Flairs which signified when a user pressed the button, came to be the basis for the development of factions, each competing for new members and further glory in sustaining the game (Reddit Blog, 2015, June 8th). /r/Button also led to the development of 185 new subs each developing lore, opinion, or history to the game afoot (/u/alzirriza, 2016). While more industrious users came to develop apps or browser extensions to aid others in their pursuit of glory in /r/Button (Bleiberg & West, 2015). All unprompted, the activity derived from /r/Button highlighted the commitment users derive when such collaborative activities are anchored in notions of play – with some arguing that such examples elucidate means for organizations to mobilize civically in the digital age (Bleiberg & West, 2015). While Reddit never explained the purpose behind /r/Button, the success of the game, both as a proof of concept towards engagement, and as a social game entrenching community integration, together suggest the program as a success, with successive Aprils Fools social experiments acting as further proof.

Most recently in 2017 Reddit unveiled the newest collaborative experiment for the platform, the equally enigmatic /r/Place. Following in a similar vein as /r/Button, /r/Place once again introduced users to a socially oriented game, that its creators believed would map out and “[explore] the way that humans interact at large scales” (Simpson, Lee, Ellis, 2017, April 13th). When unveiled the directions of /r/Place were simple, bequeathed an empty canvas, users were allowed to add a single color pixel every five minutes. Over the subsequent three days, Redditors placed 16.5 million tiles collectively “[transforming] a simple, white, 1000×1000-pixel canvas into a surprisingly beautiful clash of communities, nations, ideologies, and fandoms” (Wardle & Bassett, 2017, April 18th). Much like its predecessors, /r/Place came with few instructions, presenting once again a social experiment hinged upon unprompted collaborative problem-solving



Figure 17: The final version of /r/Place. Similar to a page from the popular book series Where's Waldo, a brief overview shows national flags, popular cultural figures, memes, brands such as Linux, or internet centric jokes such as the Tragedy of Darth Pelagius. /r/Place reflects a tapestry of the variation and uniqueness of Reddit.

and content generation. The blank canvas /r/Place began as sought to capture what one astute user claimed as “an amazing cultural snapshot of the internet in 2017” (/u/_Eltanin_, 2017, April 3rd).

The unprecedented success of /r/Place was evident in the final image unfurled over the ravenous 72 hour period of activity that had captured Reddit's imagination. The final image, a cornucopia of competing ideas, tastes, and communities together created a brief snapshot of Reddit in 2017. As space was limited, and users were only able to add a single pixel every five minutes, the game required users to mobilize, cooperate, and collaborate if they sought to design complex images. The European Union flag for example (located below the American Flag) was the result of /r/Germany and /r/France agreeing to forgo their own flags and instead amass their collective user base to paint a flag together. Their common and directed labor gave a better chance at making a substantial addition to the canvas, than either community could muster independently. Much like in /r/Button, the game of /r/Place once again fostered development of factions and teams each seeking to make their mark on the larger canvas. One contingent calling themselves the Black Void actively sought to disrupt completed images believing destruction equally important to creation (Wardle & Bassett, 2017, April 18th). As one user noted this group, far from disruptive, were in fact supported the project, since "the inherent nature of Place that it is always moving" (/u/Noltonn, 2017, April 3rd). Once again the unprompted and open nature of /r/Place allowed users to form and develop their own connections, attitudes, and evaluations towards the game, and the larger community taking part in it.

Basing these social experiments on the notion of play allowed them to scale in manners unimaginable by their creators. While the openness of these events allowed users to experiment endlessly, constructing new communities, new identities, and new materials to supplement the experience. These tendencies, promoted by the self-organization endemic to Reddit's activities promote novelty, as self-organization stresses both agency and creativity in order to continue to sustain itself (Fuchs, 2008). Both April Fools centric sitewide events discussed, seem to encapsulate a nascent proficiency of Redditors to collaborate and cooperate; both /r/Button and /r/Place highlight these tendencies on a macro scale, and in a public fashion. The longevity of commitment to sustaining /r/Button, and the negotiations occurring between users in constructing complex images in /r/place, both reflect examples of participatory literacy as the bedrock for subsequent digital literacy skills. These examples equally present probes into how Reddit comes to be. Both r/place and /r/button highlighted the importance of user labor in supporting the platform, and the murky explanations from head office as to what is permitted/expected. What can be discerned from these events is that cooperation plays a vital role in participatory systems like

Reddit. What /r/Button and /r/Place both suggest are the benefits existent to users who possess the tools to engage, and the freedoms afforded through such proficiency.

The Digital Literacy Superorganism

Reddit as both platform, and the wider community existing upon it, is reliant on user's participatory behavior, which encourages individual additions to larger communal dialogues. The three categories of digital literacy introduced in this chapter, the *ability to evaluate*, the *ability to create*, and the *ability to participate*, are all mutual-dependent behaviors. The sociality of Reddit requires digital literacy for users to participate. In doing so, individual users are able to "aggregate individual efforts to create useful public goods" (Rheingold, 2012, pp 11). Reddit is consequently more than the sum of its individual parts. Individual users must act in concert with their peers, or else face chastisement from the communal sense of quality and value. Ideally individual users upload or create content on Reddit in reference to the wider userbase's opinions. While Redditors often decry a hive mind mentality that often grips the site, the reality is that the synergy required between users to form the site, suggests at least implicitly that a similar mandate is shared for such collaborations to occur. Reddit as a result can only exist by virtue of users collaborating and participating. In addition to championing individual contributions, Reddit should be understood as fostering/enculturing the benefits of collaborative teamwork. What events such as /r/Button and /r/Place exemplify is that Reddit is the byproduct of concerted participation and collaboration between a myriad of individual users. The distribution of digital literacy skills throughout Reddit thereby permits such complex activities to emerge, ones that would either be impossible or arduous independently to construct.

This chapter began with a brief introduction to the burgeoning participation gap, one which undermines the potential implicit within web 2.0. Reddit presents a space online where digital literacy seems to take root. Rooted in play, the proliferation of literacy skills within Reddit is grounded in the amusement and association that Redditors derive through their time participating. The sociality that underscores all of Reddit presents an avenue for the innocuous accumulation of digital literacy skills. Under the guise of play, digital literacy throughout Reddit instead of being a grueling ordeal, becomes an avenue for expression, engagement, and enjoyment; Redditors become connected to the site by virtue of their skills to participate. Each literacy skill discussed

within this chapter comes to support and enhance the other, digital literacy reinforces successive developments of digital literacy. The existence of the site is the result of users sharing these skills, cultivating them both independently, and expressing them publically for the benefit of others. Digital literacy skills don't exist in a vacuum, but manifest through the collective efforts of those participating. What the participation gap ultimately denotes is isolation. Digital literacy empowers individuals with the skills to participate, and bestows the means to connect and collaborate with others globally. Digital literacy as a result bestows the tools and aptitudes to connect with others; through such connection individual Redditors are able to express, engage, and enjoy the company of their peers. Reddit for that reason exists as an incubator that masks the cultivation of digital literacy skills under the guise of play. Much to the chagrin of its operators, the platform innocuously arms its users with the skills necessary to present their claim that the site exists as a testament to their labor. What an exploration of digital literacy within Reddit suggests, is that such a claim holds immeasurable merit.

Conclusion: Remember the Human

Myths are made for the imagination to breathe life into them.

- Albert Camus

Reddit's central conceit, that efficiency is encouraged by distributing the filtering process of content through a network of participants (Ohanian, 2013), implies a reliance on users, designed into the very framework of the site. In doing so, Reddit positions its users as the central feature of the site, as such, they play overlapping roles of editors, custodians, creators, and conversationalists. Together these roles form the very brand of Reddit; the platform becomes synonymous with the wider community it hosts. As the platform seeks to monetize, the goal is in locating a tolerable means of commodifying this resource, if too overt, backlash from the community will inevitably result. These apprehensions are not baseless, but rooted in experience. Leveraging the platform, users have imposed their will at times onto admins; the same skills that make the user base valuable, equally make them a headache in ventures towards profitability. Digital literacy, a series of skills and aptitudes well represented on the platform, are expressed both in the content that draws interest to the site, while equally evident in the instances of mobilization, and protest which often disrupt the platform. In broad strokes, Reddit's development is indicative of the larger history of the internet, mirroring the trend of transforming disruptive ideas into marketable goods. Reddit as a result is equally guilty and prone to lapses of romanticism, mythic aspirations, and contradictory impulses. What this thesis has advocated, is that these various strands, far from independent, are observed as mutual, dependent phenomena connected to the platform's veneration of free speech.

Free speech when understood in the context of Reddit is equal parts illuminating and puzzling. The platform's history is warped by the impacts that free speech has wrought, while its future from the perspective of many users is dominated by the ideal's absence. The exploration of

free speech, the very heart of this thesis, has in fact been a pointed analysis of what the platform represents, a conflux of contradictions, misunderstandings, and perhaps most tragically, a misguided and flawed endeavor focused on manifesting liberal idealism. Supported both in the material and cultural elements that constitute the site, free speech plays a central role in Reddit's ethos and self-evaluation, which makes the lack of consensus on what free speech constitutes all the more puzzling. Reddit's development situates the platform as the largest online experiment focused upon the nature, value, and impacts of free speech in the era of web 2.0. The platform's successes and failures in negotiating and navigating the contours of this debate are of vital importance moving forward, both for the platform's own success, but equally towards larger dialogues concerning free speech, harassment, mobilization, and sociality in general within online domains. At the root of Reddit's debate concerning free speech, has been a repeated failure to understand the concept in firm detail – an issue this thesis suggests actually benefits the site's dialogue with the concept. Free speech's mythos however is rooted in real concerns, anxieties, and apprehensions, while its expression is seen as vital to support content both authentic and original on the platform. As a result, free speech suggests a communal anxiety towards autonomy being wrestled away, ushering with it a new platform, one less unruly and less contentious, in effect more accessible; the fears of *normification*, a proxy for less original and authentic content becomes manifest in the demise of free speech. Reddit's entanglement with free speech ultimately is one rooted in a singular question, who owns Reddit? The less Redditors perceive their cherished ideal upheld, the more the platforms shift from communal, to corporate pursuits becomes apparent, and the more Reddit comes to reflect the rest of the internet.

Ultimately an exploration of free speech within Reddit both commences and concludes with the users who propagate these dialogues. These discussions don't exist within a vacuum, but are informed by the beliefs, ideals, histories, and values of the users taking part in them. Understanding Reddit therefore implies understanding the wider community participating within the platform. Ultimately free speech's importance does not reside in a literal sense, but in a mythic quality, one informed, negotiated, and navigated by user's expectations, values, and ideals. Much like the editorial function directed towards evaluating content, the same rings true for the values and ideals that come to animate Reddit. Free speech and it's the subsequent interpretations are far from neutral, but defined, constructed, and manifested through user activities. In a twist of irony, Reddit fails to recall one of its mission statements, to remember the human. When applied to free

speech on Reddit, the adage remembering the human seems particularly marred; often users fail to both acknowledge the human element that informs the meaning behind free speech, but equally failing to account for those who impacted by these behaviors. Free speech remains a nebulous concept within Reddit, but it is one often treated by users as existing in a vacuum. As we turn to the major conclusions drawn from this thesis, the hope is that the forces, actors, and structures that channel and give rise to free speech on Reddit will come into focus. Free speech frames Reddit both at its best and at its worst. Locating the forces that animate and inform these dialogues, not only aids in pinpointing the fault lines that give rise to the most toxic elements of Reddit, but also present strategies to promote and support the noble intentions often muddled and overshadowed by the site's most rancorous qualities.

Lessons from Reddit: Major Conclusions

This project began with three humble questions. First how do users assess and enact the ideal of free speech, second how does the operation of the site, reflected in the labor of the moderators (unpaid volunteer users) enable or constrain such activities, and finally how does the site administration as represented by head office enable and constrain these occurrences? Over the course of this project the answers to these three overlapping and interconnected question have pointed to free speech as an active, and ever-changing matrix that informs Reddit of its aims, desires, intentions, and aspirations. Equally important is that free speech acts as a mirror, one that often magnifies user's biases, preferences, and most often their limitations. An exploration of free speech within Reddit begs the question, does the platform reflect a throwback, or does it instead suggest lessons to enrich our future digital experiences. Like much of this thesis the answer is a contradiction: Reddit is both throwback and an example of the future potentials.

This thesis commenced in chapter one with a brief overview of the platform, with the major focus being on how users participate and engage within Reddit. The importance of such an overview was in highlighting the centrality that users play within Reddit's operation, a recurring element of this thesis. The site's functionality is dependent on user activity, which this thesis articulated as self-organization, a concept that stresses user agency and cooperation (Fuchs, 2008). This becomes expressed by users in a stakeholder relationship to the platform. Reasoning that their labor should afford an increased say towards the platforms operation, users argue that the site's

development should consider the vitality of the community before pursuing profitability – a central element in the dialogue concerning free speech. By observing how reliant Reddit is on their users labor, chapter one began this thesis by highlighting how users engage with the platform, connect with their peers, and evaluate the content they encounter. The reliance on users for Reddit's operation informed the methodological decisions of this thesis, the focus of chapter two. The usage of an ethnographic methodology not only emphasized user centrality, but also allowed a more intimate and nuanced exploration of free speech within Reddit.

The root of Reddit's struggle with free speech has always been categorical, an outgrowth of its designers valorizing a concept while doing little to explain it. The contestations over free speech, the focus of chapter three, hinges upon the fuzziness of the ideal's parameters, and the broadness it supposes. While users express a desire for free speech within the platform, the irony is that the site isn't home to free speech, nor has it ever been. Reddit as chapter three established is an editorialized space, one informed by values that have germinated over time from the users engaged within it. No conclusion is more important in this thesis than the understanding that Reddit is not a neutral site, subsequently neither are its interpretations of free speech. Yet what connects these disparate iterations and interpretations of free speech is that they collectively point in a particular direction. As this thesis has repeatedly indicated, free speech is an active element in the platform, a canvas onto which users direct their aspirations. Drawn from the romance and zeal of the internet's earliest celebrants, Reddit has mythologized free speech as a proxy for its ideals; the broadness of free speech's tenets provide a canvas wide enough to support the myriad of user interpretations within Reddit. In this sense the site is a throwback, its ideological commitments being aligned with the idyllic futures first envisioned by the hacker tradition. Free speech within Reddit is a permutation of the hacker position that "any system could benefit from that easy flow of information" (Levy, 2010, pp 29). When applied to Reddit, such logic signifies for users an optimum manner for Reddit to function: when it is most open, it is at its most effective. Free speech equates then to fewer barriers. For users this indicates greater candor in discourse, while also suggesting that the platform remains committed to its user's vision of an open and autonomous electronic agora. This points to the final aspect of free speech, as a yardstick, one which measures the site's deviation from its original user centric mandate towards an increasingly commodified space. As the site has matured, and sought to monetize, the reverence from admins towards free speech has waned. This demise for many users signifies the end of what once made the platform

unique. Free speech arguably holds a special place for Redditors. It is the myth that often animates their desires for a self-governed space, where curiosities are the sole barriers, and openness reigns supreme. Free speech ultimately is an ideal type, an articulation for many users of an ideal Reddit – and of an ideal internet.

The focus of chapter four was mapping how free speech tensions manifest as collective mobilizations. The conclusion being that Reddit coagulates discourse into action through the emergence of an arrangement reminiscent of the public sphere as articulated by Habermas (1969; 1992). Reddit as an open platform affords users the autonomy to build and house dialogues that are important to them. The aggregating function of Reddit from the outset invites users to become cognizant of the trends and events that impact their lives. Aggregation equally implores users to act as critical evaluators of these events. By voting, users appraise and discern what content is important, ultimately what is deserving of visibility. The participatory culture expressed in Reddit, coupled with the userbase's documented self-organization together give rise to these unprompted activities. The openness of the platform, an invitation for users to participate and self-organize, equally comes to support their penchant for unruliness, often expressed through collective action. Beyer (2014) evaluating four distinct online forums, concluded that strong regulation suffocates political behaviors; Reddit's openness seems then to support, and in many cases incubate such activities. The ability to mobilize within Reddit seems dependent on the open framework of the site, one that stresses user autonomy in populating and maintaining the platform (often a means of reducing cost). In recursive fashion the skills required to engage and participate in such activity, are for users learned through their time on the site: Reddit educates its users through its own desire to remain cost efficient. As free speech suggests a proxy for user's desire for the platform to remain communally managed, mobilization suggests means to contest those fears. This is perhaps why the largest examples of mobilization on the site are focused upon preserving the material and cultural elements required for the site's survival. The site's openness and user centric functions stimulate user agency, when this arrangement is upended, Redditors leverage the site's operation to make their opinions and voices heard.

Furthermore chapter four outlined that Reddit as a political project is arguably narrow. Free speech reflects a nebulous concept, yet one with a clear direction: Reddit's legacy has been premised upon openness, oftentimes at the expense of basic civility. As this thesis has sought to

demonstrate, the platform is far from a monolith – the varying interpretations towards free speech attest that. Free speech presents within Reddit an umbrella concept, one that connects disparate interpretations of autonomy, agency, anti-capital beliefs, and democratic ideals that together seek to legitimize users as stakeholders, instead of simply consumers/laborers. This understanding of free speech within Reddit aligns with similar conclusions to Hindman (2009), who specified that internet politics promote certain values over others. Reddit’s adherence towards free speech, and the allotted independence this infers, is far from neutral, apolitical, or ahistorical. The contradiction in free speech’s narrowness is best expressed in the patron saint of the digital revolution, Thomas Jefferson, a fierce proponent of independence, but also a slave owner. Free speech on Reddit therefore suggests a contorted narrative of privilege, independence, status, and liberal thought. Therefore an exploration of free speech within Reddit inevitably must contend with the homogeneity of the platform’s userbase – Redditors privilege offline, comes to filter their understandings of free speech online. Geek masculinity which greatly factors in the zeal behind the evaluation of content, is itself drawn from a privileged early access to these technologies, which in turn extends privilege offline to online domains. Redditors often contest the idea that privilege exists on the site, trusting that aggregation coupled with pseudo-anonymity present a meritocratic arrangement; the ideas are important, not the person who speaks them, this view is common throughout the platform. The reality is that Reddit is as an open platform, with closed discourse (Massanari, 2015), it favors certain narratives, ideas, perspectives, and opinions over others – sometimes dismissing alternative views with hostility. The site is at its worst then when it remains uncritical – the opposite being true as well. The quality of meta, and the assorted subs emblematic of it, present intriguing instances of counter-publics and critical discourse contesting the nature of Reddit itself. While Reddit remains its most toxic when the both platform and its users remain uncritical; the emergence of the echo chambers, and the dreaded hive mentality result from the security of homogeneity. While free speech suggests a political project, in the context of Reddit it is arguably both narrow in scope, and assumed to exist in a vacuum. So long as openness fails to reflect plurality, in content, opinion, and also in users, the site will continue to remain steeped in controversy, and stunted by immaturity.

The contradictions of Reddit becomes most apparent when approached from the perspective of political economy, the focus of chapter five. The synthesis of the digital agora and marketplace, the principle pursuit of the Californian Ideology, is on full display within Reddit.

While ideological in nature, the Californian ideology is likewise a pragmatic attempt at playing both sides – for Reddit this involves placating users while seducing advertisers. Commodification's foil seemingly resides in user mobilization. The reliance on unpaid labor has been argued to represent a central element supporting the toxicity on the platform, compounded by the hands off approach of admins to interfere with Reddit's operation (Massanari, 2017). Yet this remittance of responsibility while undermining the profitability of the platform, equally promotes a means of situating ownership of the platform within the community itself. Free speech, and the openness that it infers therefore presents a double edged sword for admins. On one hand, the openness of the platform invites users to innovate and create content that promotes successive activity. On the other hand the same openness forms the basis of Reddit as an autonomous, and often unruly community, seeking to legitimize its self-determination. The pressure directing users to act in opposition to the platforms development, is rooted within the commodification of the site, and the growing divide between the founding ideals and the current reality. The Lauderdale Paradox confirms the anxieties that characterize much of Reddit's public grumblings, as the pursuit of private wealth is drawn from the public's prosperity.

While the future of Reddit is unknowable, its current direction as gauged by the action of its admins, is to transform Reddit into a platform similar to Facebook. What seemingly prevents this from being realized – at least currently – resides in the general digital literacy of users. The overview of digital literacy within chapter six suggested that digital literacy elliptically supports further development of digital literacy skills. In fact Reddit boasting a participatory culture – helpful in offsetting financial investment – innocuously supports the development of digital literacy. Ultimately while digital literacy makes individual users more capable laborers and content generators within Reddit, it equally educates users with the skills to mobilize and contest changes to the site seen as running counter to Reddit's initial mandate. Digital literacy therefore indicates an awareness and familiarity for both the material and cultural elements that support user's online activities; a conclusion that further supports the conceptual framework for developing Reddit into a digital commons as outlined in chapter five. It is this aspect of the platform that offers lessons for future directions. While Reddit has much to learn, it does highlight the importance of digital literacy, and its transformative potential in allowing users to develop from passive consumers into active agents, critical readers, and powerful voices in digital domains.

Limitations and Potential Directions

The maxim remember the human is not reserved simply for critiques towards how Reddit comprehends free speech, but is one equally warranted in reflections towards this thesis. Ethnography as a method of investigation implies choices, decisions that come to impact the very nature of the research and the directions it subsequently takes. Thomas Kent put this more bluntly suggesting that “an ethnography cannot give us a glimpse of reality that resides beyond the story told within the ethnography: the story is all” (1993, pp 67). For this thesis the central story is that of free speech and its importance for Reddit. The idealism that springs from this ideal, the aspirations it suggests, and the issues it unfurls, are all important aspects for this story. Arguably this has positioned Reddit, and the actors that populate it, within certain frameworks that directly impact the conclusions drawn in this research. Free speech invites an exploration of Reddit as a political space, the phenomena investigated as a result becomes colored from such a vantage. This is by no means a suggestion that the events, dialogues, and actors portrayed in this thesis are misrepresented, merely that their participation on Reddit is understood within the context of this thesis as political. This choice is a result of the belief that the promise of the digital revolution has chiefly been political, both in tone and vision (Hindman, 2009). The choice of free speech as the spine for this thesis presents this projects greatest limitations – it in effect editorializes the site, positioning Reddit within a particular framework. Yet it equally makes the site more manageable from the perspective of research. Reddit as an open platform suggests an infinite scale. By anchoring this project within free speech, the ethnographic approach is able to ground the complexity of the platform into behaviors, actors and structures, which taken together inform the “cultural elements [that] emerge in relational ways as we act. They are often habitual, routine, mundane, and repeated, scaffolding the structures of everyday living” (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce & Taylor, 2012, pp 31). The narrative of free speech explored through an ethnographic method grounds the abstract concerns and struggles of the platform into observable behaviors, albeit ones that situate Reddit’s discourse primarily as political both in tone and effect.

Positionality plays a central role, both in Reddit, but equally towards this project in general. Reddit’s documented toxicity is drawn along racial, gendered, and sexual divisions. While access to digital platforms often remains stratified by age, race, and sex, the same unfortunately often

remains true of those researching such spaces (Murphy, 2008). Far from the optimistic assessments surrounding the internet empowering previously marginalized groups (Poster, 2001), both internet forums and the subsequent research of them remain defined by privilege. As representation and diversity remain chief issues within Reddit, this thesis has sought to critically analyze these issues, and avoid marginalizing the voices of those often muted within such platforms. This has primarily been done by underscoring the limitations of Reddit's understanding of free speech practices, but arguably this only presents a first step in a much larger exploration. Subsequently the choice of research question further highlights the position of the researcher, as it favors an understanding of digital spaces as suggesting emancipatory potentials. This presupposes both access, and the subsequent knowledge to manifest such aspirations. As the participation gap demonstrates, structural advantages are afforded to some over others. Therefore the emancipatory rhetoric of this thesis may unintentionally marginalizes the voices of those lacking both the means and skills to participate within such discourse. Subsequent research on Reddit would do well to analyze the platform from the vantage of those who remain outside the privileged groups whose narratives and opinions frequently dominate the platform.

Ultimately Reddit represents a rich field site for research, and one that requires further exploration. The dearth of material focused on the site as discussed is often rooted in the community, with its litany of references, in-jokes, situated narratives, and opinions which together present a daunting hurdle to those unfamiliar with the site. The toxicity of certain segments of the platform wards off critical examinations and explorations of the site, much of the commentary regarding Reddit remains both shallow and narrow in scope. In order to counter this tendency this thesis has sought to act as an introductory work to the site. As such it has chosen to present a general picture of the site's internal machinations, locating them particularly in free speech practices and policy. Certainly this leaves many avenues for future research, whether focused on individual subs, certain networks of users, or perhaps focusing on singular issues that plague Reddit. What remains most pressing however is in locating means and strategies that promote diversity, plurality, and inclusiveness on the platform. While Reddit positions itself as democratic, the basis of a democratic culture only exists when "previously excluded populations are given the material means to fully engage" (Taylor, 2014, pp 231). Meta presents the most striking example of a potential means of promoting such a project. While some may believe that Reddit is inherently hostile to such changes, the reality is its voracious appetite for novelty can be utilized to promote

increased diversity. As new opinions breed new conversations, while diversity supports new content, Reddit seems particularly disposed – at least ideally – towards greater plurality.

Reveries of Tomorrow: The importance of Myth & Reddit as Janus

The greatest myth surrounding the internet has been that a particular golden age existed – power and conflict have been persistent elements from the internet’s inception (Isin & Ruppert, 2015). Golden ages arguably exist as an exercise in contrast. They allude to a decline of what once was. Veracity towards a golden age isn’t important, they are not logical constructs, but emotional expressions – yearnings for something lost that perhaps with effort, can be regained. McLuhan’s vision of the global village speaks to such a paradigm. Embedded within the rhetoric of Silicon Valley has been an outlook and “culture [that] looks back to a golden age but is always projecting forward” (Coyne, 1999, pp 10). This is the very root of mythic thought online. These myths centered upon utopic prophecies, at first suggest rosy interpretations of both these technologies, and their human actors. But upon further inspection, they simply suggest benchmarks for what these technologies may promote if we collectively labor to materialize their potentials. The hallmark of utopic thought is that it excites collective imagination, often “leading it to the distant expanses which would never be reached if it were held down by the extractions of the political game” (Bauman, 2009, pp 13). The aspirations located within the digital revolution have always flirted with emancipatory discourse. Instead of admonishing these tendencies, we owe it to ourselves to ascertain why they emerge, and to what concerns they relay. Myths are expressions of the anxieties of those who adhere to their narratives, they soothe and placate fears of the unknown, while inspire directions to overcome present concerns. These utopic endpoints Astrid Taylor explain are not the issue, instead “the problem is that we have not confronted the obstacles that have impeded them, particularly the economic ones” (2014, pp 232). Myths point to potential goals, but the romance that color them often cloak the red flags, as the rose tinted glasses romance bestows make obstacles seem neutral and natural. As these myths of the internet’s direction and role within society come to mature (Benkler, 2006), we owe it to ourselves to come to terms with the limitations and obstacles which often undermine the often noble aspirations residing in our collective imaginations.

Ultimately the reality is that Reddit is a platform at odds with itself. The perspective afforded through an exploration of free speech suggests the site as faulted by a contradiction implicit within much of the digital revolution: a failure to differentiate between the real and the ideal (Lainer, 2014). In Reddit's case, this is expressed in its self-assessment as a democratic space, a belief anchored within its valorization of free speech. Reddit's adoration of free speech presents the most naked example of its contradictory impulses; at its surface free speech purports to be egalitarian, but its interpretation is informed by privilege. Meta however presents a fascinating antidote – a realization of limitation through reflexivity. While difficult to surmise the future of Reddit, its success as a platform, whether communally governed or commercially driven, resides in a self-awareness to what the platform can and cannot do. Much like the Roman deity Janus, Reddit is constantly looking both to the past and to the future. Arguably this often blinds it to its present condition, a limitation that has run the platform into considerable controversy throughout its history. What Reddit does exhibit is an importance in remembering what was once promised in the digital revolution, and the importance of fighting to bring those potentials to fruition in the future. The singularity of Reddit has often been suggested to be its community, but what has always stood out is not their idiosyncrasy, but their collective commitment to an open and free internet for the benefit of all. Hopefully as the site, and its users mature, they will be able to equally realize that project on the platform itself.

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