Community and Network in the New Age

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I’d like to begin by complimenting these four authors on a fascinating set of research projects. You have heard their presentations and I can assure you that the papers are even better and well worth obtaining so that you can spend a more time exploring the full implications of each.

These four projects are obviously bound together by their interest in examining the implications of new media for one question or another. Beyond that it may seem that they have little in common: one is concerned with amateur photographers who post their pictures online for free. One examines why people caught up in an unusual and tragic event take to Twitter to share their information, insights and opinions—even emotions. One is concerned with individuals who use the internet to defame others and what to do about them. One is concerned with steps taken by a news aggregator to catalyze or promote discussion online.

The presenters have done a good job of outlining these projects and I will not try to go over ground they have already covered. In fact, one of the joys of being a discussant is that I can talk about what in these papers I think is most impressive. So, I’m not really going to critique the work of these authors, I will leave that critique to your own reading.

Instead, I would like to probe below the surface of these projects and tap an underlying, mostly unstated seam of emerging thought that I think drives all of these papers. Then, right at the end of my remarks I will make a couple of suggestions about the promise for the future that I think these projects hold.

So, let me begin by going back a bit. The philosopher GWF Hegel long ago wrote a powerful book called *The Phenomenology of Spirit* in which he outlined the “dialectic of the will.” This dialectic traced what Hegel believed to be the history of the attempts of human beings and societies to sort out the meaning of the world of appearances—the world as it is manifest to us. The author Peter Kalkavage in his book *The Logic of Desire* suggests that Hegel has written a grand drama of the struggle of human “shapes of consciousness” with each other to create a universal “spirit” of community that can account for the world as we know it. Hegel suggests that this struggle is the yearning of individuals to assert the universal meaning of their particular consciousness of the world. He suggests that individual assertions of their consciousness bring those individuals into constant conflict with other assertions about the meaning of the world. Language is the embodiment of these assertions. The goal is to shape the “spirit” of the community to that individual truth. But, of course, the spirit of the community is in constant conflict with the assertion of the individual.

I want to suggest that these four papers at a fundamental level are all explorations of how this eternal conflict is being manifest today in the emerging world of online media. It is the conflict over the “voice” of the individual and the dynamic of community which is being reshaped by the technological power of new media forms to enable new ways for this individual to contend with others and with the community about the meaning of the world of appearance.

This idea is probably clearest in the two papers on the variations of what has been called “citizen journalism.” Both the Buchner paper and the Holton paper confront this issue directly. Both ask, in essence, why do you post photos or share information about this news event without pay? Both use variations of Uses and Gratifications theories to try to find the answer. Both are particularly concerned with whether these amateurs see themselves as journalists. Both use some mix of interview with other methodologies to search for the answer. Both have extensive reviews of the uses and gratifications literature to suggest possible answers and both come to their own conclusions about which uses or gratifications are at work here. These papers offer an excellent overview of the possible answers and offer specific findings from their own research.

The Bristow paper takes a different tack. It is concerned with how individuals invade the community space using new media forms as weapons to defame and attack others. Defamation is not a new weapon. Individuals for have used it for as long as human beings have been in conflict with each other. What is new is the mediated forms of communication being used. Communities have developed ways to control such behavior. But, as Ms. Bristow demonstrates, those ways in which a community tries to control such behavior no longer work very well in the new online environment. In Hegel’s long struggle of community with individual, the new media forms have empowered individuals.

Finally, Dr. Jones and Mr. Altadonna’s paper is in many ways the most fascinating. They examine the strength of the digital media—direct comment from individuals to the entire community. But they focus at the boundary of individual and community, particular and universal. They study the “badges” of the aggregator Huffington Post. HuffPost argues that these badges are “our newest way to recognize and empower HuffPost readers and users.” After all, Web pages have long used ratings by users as a way to offer feedback from individuals in the community However, these badges recognize individuals who do things that the Huffington Post judges are helpful to the community because they are good for the Huffington Post. Things like reposting to Twitter, which promotes the site itself.

So, here we have four papers that directly confront the eternal conflict among individuals with each other and how that conflict is manifest in community in the digital age. And these papers explore fundamental questions about how the universal spirit of community confronts the new empowerment made possible by digital and wireless media.

Manuel Castells in his books on The Information Age and Communication and Power, suggests that we live in the era of networks and that our social identity and community power is being realigned with these new networks. A wholly new pattern of mediated communication is emerging from these networks. It is a scalable international network of nested local networks. These networks are grounded in direct relationships among individuals. The relationships show clear, repeated patterns of dominant and peripheral nodes, cliques, strong and weak ties and power distributions. Access may be open, but status within these networks is not equal.

The inquiries raised in the Buehner and Holton studies about whether individuals with access to networks are playing a role as “journalist” begs the question about how a community invests the notion of “journalist” with some larger role as the judge for communal values in face of the individual assertions of the values of photographs or tweets. The inquiries in the Bristow research about how community laws of defamation can be applied in the online environment of anonymity and dissimilation beg the question of whether community should intervene and what is an appropriate intervention by community into a network of individual assertions.

And, finally, the Jones and Altadonna research raises the fundamental question of when a social structure, such as the Huffington Post, should use its privileged position as the “facilitator” of individual access to award recognition through badges for individual behavior that it values for promoting the goals of the aggregator.

These are all crucial questions about how we will all sort out the new interplay among individuals in the new media environment. They also reflect a continued fascination among those of us who grew up with mass media and its powerful arbitration of individual voices for the benefit of larger communal values and sometimes more selfishly for the communal values of the news organization itself.

These papers help us begin to sort through questions we have only begun to confront in the era of networked media.