

WIKIPEDIA AND THE POLITICS OF MASS COLLABORATION

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Abstract: Working together to produce socio-technological objects, based on emergent platforms of economic production, is of great importance in the task of political transformation and the creation of new subjectivities. Increasingly, “collaboration” has become a veritable buzzword used to describe the human associations that create such new media objects. In the language of “Web 2.0”, “participatory culture”, “user-generated content”, “peer production” and the “produser”, first and foremost we are all collaborators. In this paper I investigate recent literature that stresses the collaborative nature of Web 2.0, and in particular, works that address the nascent processes of peer production. I contend that this material positions such projects as what Chantal Mouffe has described as the “post-political”; a fictitious space far divorced from the clamour of the everyday. I analyse one Wikipedia entry to demonstrate the distance between this post-political discourse of collaboration and the realities it describes, and finish by arguing for a more politicised notion of collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

We’re really just at the beginning, still, of collaborative efforts.
- Jimmy Wales (*The Age*, 2008)

Tim O’Reilly’s description of Web 2.0 as “an attitude, not a technology”, squarely situates Web 2.0 as a shift in subjectivity. Attitudes, as ways of thinking and feeling toward something, do not have a one-to-one relation with the thing or process to which the attitude is expressed. For example, it is possible to have a bad attitude and still produce good work, and vice versa. At times, attitudes persist seemingly divorced from their most immediate realities and having little impact, but their presence is felt elsewhere. Resisting for a moment the urge to replace the word “attitude” with “business strategy”, one might ask the question, what kind of attitude characterises Web 2.0? Or more generally, what kind of human relations are heralded as definitive of this ongoing event?

The focus of this paper, collaboration, shares many of the qualities of an attitude.

Indeed, in the world of Web 2.0 collaboration increasingly *is* an attitude. But collaboration also retains its more neutral function as a noun referring merely to people “working jointly”. It is the distance and relation between these dimensions of collaboration that forms the basis of this article. I begin with a general outline of the nascent discourse of collaboration in order to demonstrate its proliferation and identify regularities of use. Using the example of a heated conflict that took place around the Wikipedia entry for Muhammad, I then highlight this distance between discourses of collaboration (and related sentiment) and the actual conditions of projects described as “collaborative”. The article finishes with a consideration of the effect that discourses of collaboration have in relation to the projects they aim to describe.

THE (VACUOUS) DISCOURSE OF COLLABORATION

In the weaker sense of “working jointly”, people, animals and things have been collaborating since the times of so-called hunter-gatherers, if not earlier (Rheingold, 2007). Indeed, a society is not possible without some form of generalised or mass collaboration, the beginning point of which is commonly imagined as a type of social contract. However, around 2006 – roughly the same period in which “user-generated” projects like Wikipedia and YouTube captured the popular imagination - a body of work began to emerge praising the virtues of “collaboration” (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Shirky, 2008; Spehr, 2007; Tapscott and Williams, 2006; von Hippel, 2005), many of which conferred on this notion a more positive value beyond that of simply co-labouring. I begin with an investigation of this new discourse through a consideration of how it functions in recent influential texts¹.

Writing from a legal-economic framework, Yochai Benkler makes the claim that new forms of network production have certain economic, cultural and political potentials beyond those characteristic of industrial models of organisation. He describes this new mode of production as “commons-based peer production”. It has three main qualities that distinguish it from older paradigms: it is “radically decentralized, collaborative, and non proprietary” (2006, p. 60). There are, then, topological and legislative dimensions (radically decentralised and non proprietary), but what to make of the collaborative dimension? What does collaboration describe? Benkler offers an implicit definition through a negation: collaboration is “cooperat[ing] with each other without relying on either market signals or managerial commands” (2006, p. 60). “Market signals” and “managerial commands” is shorthand for working together outside the forces and motivations of capitalist exchange and the hierarchical, authoritarian relationships characteristic of wage labour in large organisations. Somewhat predictably, the prototype he uses for this collaborative production is a highly romanticised model of science:

Science is built by many people contributing incrementally – not operating on market signals, not being handed their research marching orders by a boss – independently deciding what to research, bringing their collaboration together, and creating science (2006, p. 61).

The reality of course is that science is by no means disconnected from market signals (it is often driven by them) or managerial commands. Laboratories also have hierarchies and head honchos who delegate tasks. The example does reflect Benkler’s notion of collaboration, but in a sense unintended by the author: It is in the example’s general descriptive poverty and distance from reality. In *The Wealth of Networks*, collaboration is a murky, slippery notion, held up as an ideal – as one of the three main characteristics of peer production - but rarely addressed in its own right and never in detail.

What is most problematic, however, is the fact that collaboration is defined largely through negation; that is, by what it is not. The two negative qualities of collaboration – “without relying on market signals or managerial commands” – are already accounted for in Benkler’s other two characteristics of peer production: “market signals” is covered by “non proprietary”, and one would presume “managerial commands” refers first and foremost to a hierarchical arrangement and is therefore covered by the characteristic of “radical decentralisation”. Collaboration, then, emerges as a kind of twofold tautology in relation to the other defining characteristics of peer production. The only aspect of Benkler’s definition of collaboration that distinguishes it in any way from the other characteristics of peer production are the words “cooperat[ing] with each other” (2006, p. 60; my emphasis). For Benkler, collaboration is the human dimension of peer production. It is the mode of being in open projects. I will return to this collaborative subjectivity later.

Perhaps no one has channelled the collaborative gusto into the academy like creative industries scholar Axel Bruns. In a recent article that summarises his notion of *produsage*², Bruns writes of “*collaborative content creation*” and of those who “are active in *collaborative online spaces*”. He notes that Web 2.0 describes a “shift from static to dynamic content, from hierarchically managed to *collaboratively* and continuously developed material” and contrasts “the process of content production in traditional encyclopaedias with the *collaborative* processes in *Wikipedia*”. Finally, Bruns’s theory of *produsage* “is based in the first instance on *collaboration* and consensus”, on “the *collaborative* engagement of (ideally, large) communities of participants in a shared project” (2008; my emphasis). For Bruns, the adjective “collaborative” designates a method for creating content and the type of online space where such creation takes place; it is antithetical to hierarchy and tradition and closely related to notions of consensus and community. Like Benkler, Bruns describes collaboration as one component of a new mode of production specific to online, network cultures. But because Bruns focuses more on emergent forms of creativity and the “human dimension” of his model, the discourse of collaboration permeates his work³. Collaboration is literally everywhere and can be attached to almost anything, immediately giving it a positive value.

Collaboration discourse also runs rampant in the world of business-speak and entrepreneurial mumbo jumbo, witnessed in the *Harvard Business Review* articles “Collaboration Rules” (Evans and Wolf, 2005) and “Eight Ways to Build Collaborative Teams” (Gratton and Erickson, 2007), as well as Tapscott and Williams’s influential book *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* (2006). The latter offer this fervent description:

Call them “weapons of mass collaboration”. New low-cost collaborative infrastructures ... allow thousands upon thousands of individuals and small producers to cocreate products, access markets and delight customers in ways that only large corporations could manage in the past. This is giving rise to new collaborative capabilities and business models that will empower the prepared firm and destroy those who fail to adjust (Tapscott and Williams, 2006, p. 11).

Such hyperbole nonetheless does a good job of positioning collaboration in the world of business. Here, collaboration certainly doesn’t operate outside “market signals” - it’s all about “accessing markets” and “delighting customers” - and is instead positioned as a type of business strategy. Almost paradoxically, collaboration promises competitive advantage, the capacity to “empower” a new breed of firm and “destroy” others⁴. The authors’ main concept,

“wikinomics”, is defined as “a new art and science of collaboration” (2006, p. 3), but is more accurately described as an investigation into how to expand methods of value extraction outside industrial business models.

While this emphasis on “market signals” distinguishes Tapscott and Williams from Benkler (Bruns sits somewhere in the middle), their book opens with a familiar gambit:

Throughout history corporations have organized themselves according to strict hierarchical lines of authority ... There was always someone or some company in charge ... While hierarchies are not vanishing, profound changes ... are giving rise to powerful new models of production based on community, collaboration, and self-organization rather than on hierarchy and control (2006, p. 1).

It is clear that the authors considered thus far differ in their use and interpretation of collaboration, but there are also highly significant consistencies in the way collaboration is positioned and the function it serves. Each author begins with a proclamation that “profound changes” have taken place in the realm of production – a new paradigm has emerged⁵. Within this new paradigm – whose characteristics differ, but generally include economic, topologic and legal aspects – collaboration emerges to describe the “social aspect”; it is the mode of being together. Collaboration is defined only by what it is not, ascribed an overwhelming positive value, and then continuously deployed as meaningful while its contents remain a blur. I will return to the notion of collaboration in a moment, but first I want to juxtapose the above discussion with a case study at odds with these descriptions.

“CATERING TO RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IS NOT SOMETHING THAT THE ENCYCLOPEDIA IS ENTITLED TO DO”

Wikipedia is the flagship of peer production and the most celebrated open content project. The collaborative zeitgeist of Wikipedia is made clear in the subtitle of the project’s [English welcome page](#): “the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit”. Moreover, with thousands of volunteer contributors from around the world developing and editing its articles, and its non-commercial nature, both in funding (relying on donations) and output, Wikipedia is constantly referred to as the exemplar *par excellence* of mass collaboration (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Leadbeater, 2008; Shirky, 2008; Tapscott and Williams, 2006). In short, if there is a model for open projects outside of the world of software, it is Wikipedia.

The life of many Wikipedia articles is a harmonious and rather dull affair. The discussion pages of many of these articles are filled with non-controversial suggestions and comments. There is however, another breed of article, filled with heated debate, threats, attacks, edit wars, and pleas for reason and rule-following, the most controversial of which make it to Wikipedia’s [“List of controversial issues”](#). The entry I consider below, Muhammad, is not found on the list, although it is a ripe candidate. It might be argued that this entry is not representative of online mass collaboration and that it is instead a rare exception, part of an extreme minority of instances where the discourse of collaboration doesn’t quite fit. It is, however, not just a matter of taking account of a few entries. It is from this marginal position, where polices, norms and truths are contested, where people say mean things and where one position must be chosen at the expense of the Other, that the utterly political nature of the entire project becomes visible. It is not the exception that proves the rule, but the exception that shows the force of the rule.

The English language Wikipedia entry on Muhammad contains several historical

images of the figure that have caused substantial and continuous conflict. Visual depictions of Muhammad are considered by some as against the tenets of Islam and a form of idolatry. The discussion archive of the entry on Muhammad is staggering, and has a section dedicated to the status of the images. As of August 2010, this archive runs [sixteen hypertext pages deep](#). The following excerpts are taken from the regular discussion page (just before the dedicated image discussion archive was created) and is illustrative of the hundreds of exchanges that have taken place in regard to the image:

C.Logan in response to Basem3wad: 'Additionally, please note that Wikipedia is not censored, and is an objective project- catering to religious beliefs is not something that the encyclopedia is entitled to do. No one is forcing you to look at the picture; not everyone has the same religious obligations as you do. It's akin to asking someone to stop selling alcohol because you are obligated to abstain from it. I, for one, am interested to see the depictions of Muhammad in Persian and Indian art.--C.Logan (talk) 22:35, 26 December 2007 (UTC)'

Basem3wad: 'those who want to give the picture they want about what they want , your way in discussing this article shows that you're NOT neutral , & that you hang on to your mind despite of the thousands of explanations from us , and the thousands of signatures of just who knew about this article , check this petition [Remove it wiki](#) and keep your interest to yourself , you're so far from the scientific honesty. this article will give a bad reputation about wikipedia , and it will make wikipedia just a place where you can find a little information to seek the truth , not the place where you can find the truth , this encyclopedia will fall down , if you do not give attention to a billion Muslim , with many non-muslims , who objects to your policy. --Basem3wad (talk) 18:59, 28 December 2007 (UTC)'

C.Logan: 'Representations are extremely important in the Western concept of learning. Visualization goes far beyond anything which descriptive text could allow. The images are not intended to be accurate; at least, they make no claim to do so. When I see the Pantokrator in church on Sunday, I do not expect it to be an accurate picture of Jesus. It is a representation which facilitates my understand of a particular aspect or act.

... You misunderstand the value of anti-censorship rules and regulations; as it is, I can't appreciate your sentiment in any way.

*Most of the rest of your post makes little sense, I'm sorry to say. I would suggest that you cease wasting time promoting that petition, because it really doesn't make a difference- we already know the objections and *who* objects to it- seeing signatures by Muslims is redundant, because we are aware of the iconoclastic viewpoints of a portion of Muslims.*

... As of this moment, it appears that you are claiming that Wikipedia is not truthful or trustworthy because it does not censor an image that proves to be informative, inoffensive to the vast majority of the world's population, and in truth, created by a Muslim in the first place.'

(source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Muhammad/images/Archive_3#Arbitration_Request_created, 2008)

With over 500 edits, in the broadest sense of the word, the entry for Muhammad is a collaboration. Once we move beyond this general sense though, it is obvious that there is a gap between the writings on collaboration and the projects they describe.

While “market signals” do not play a direct role here⁶ both “hierarchy” and “tradition” are clearly operative, if not in the sense initially conceived by Benkler and Bruns. Hierarchies, of course, are not limited to the arrangement of humans in organisations. What is central to the concept of hierarchy is that things are classified and arranged in a way that gives one group or category force over another. This privileged class or category is seen as more important or more powerful than the others. In the passage above there are at least three (related) hierarchies, or what I prefer to call asymmetries, in play⁷. The most obvious, perhaps, is a language asymmetry. Basem3wad is clearly struggling to articulate his/her position in English and C.Logan is able to dismiss Basem3wad’s concerns based on this inability: “your post makes little sense”. The second relates to a familiarity with the policies of Wikipedia. While C.Logan does not make direct reference to Wikipedia’s policies, it is clear that he (C.Logan is male) has a basic awareness of them and it is this awareness that informs his confident tone: “please note that Wikipedia is not censored, and it is an objective project”. The third asymmetry, and the one driving the others is that of knowledge.

The fundamental clash between C.Logan and Basem3wad is between an Enlightenment-derived Western conception of knowledge and one based around a strand of Islam. In the exchange, C.Logan writes that “religious beliefs” cannot be catered to; that Wikipedia is “objective”; and he aligns himself with the “Western concept of learning”, while Basem3wad notes that Wikipedia is “NOT neutral” and lacks “scientific honesty”. It is clear to Basem3wad that C.Logan holds the favoured ground – the “right knowledge” – and thus his/her appeals are to reputation and showing respect, both of which are unpopular categories in the idealised notion of enlightened knowledge. It should also be clear that while peer production does have novel characteristics, to stress such novelty at the expense of continuity (read “tradition”) misses the way that ongoing debate and conflicts are reframed and played out time and again. Quite simply, it is not possible to make sense of the above conflict without understanding that it originates outside Wikipedia and has an extensive history. Finally, this example shows how unfitting the terms used in association with collaboration are. I would not call this “consensus-based” or a “community”; these people are not “giving” or “sharing”.

What we have instead are two clearly delineated positions – “to keep or not to keep” – debated ad nauseam. The interlocutors assume very different positions: C.Logan has an established profile, monitors several articles and appears to be an active contributor. Basem3wad, on the other hand, appears to be a temporary username (there is no longer a user by that name). It is very likely, although I am speculating, that the person behind Basem3wad has little investment in Wikipedia as a project and instead felt compelled to participate after stumbling across the images of Muhammad. The way Basem3wad invokes an us-versus-you discourse seems telling in this regard. Constitutive of this Wikipedia entry, then, is an irreconcilable difference; a conflict resolved not through negotiation but through choice. This is the moment of the political.

COLLABORATION AND THE POST-POLITICAL

Despite the various differences and contradictions within the new discourse of collaboration,

by pitting collaboration in opposition to undesirable, hierarchical, forced and conflict-ridden realities, the above authors offer little *critical* reflection upon such collaborations themselves. Instead, collaboration becomes the dominant, if not sole term to legitimately describe subject positions and relations in the processes of peer production. The most significant function of this discourse, however, is that it works to erase the political conditions of open projects – conditions glimpsed above – and hinders attempts to develop more politicised readings. In Chantal Mouffe’s terms, the discourse of collaboration is *post-political*. It presents collaboration as an alternative to antagonistic relations, rather than an embodiment of them.

Over a series of books Mouffe (1993, 1999, 2000, 2005) has argued that contemporary democratic thought has failed to think *the political*. This category applies not to institutional politics, but to the irreducible, radical difference that constitutes the social at the level of ontology. This is a difference that cannot be overcome by consensus-based rule or rational deliberation. Drawing on the thought of Carl Schmitt, Mouffe argues that thinking *the political* necessarily begins with a “we/they” distinction. She writes: ‘Properly political questions always involve decisions which require us to make a choice between conflicting alternatives’ (2005, p. 10). The task is to develop a political model that modulates *the political*, preventing the emergence of antagonistic friend/enemy relations and encouraging agonistic processes based on the figure of the adversary – a worthy and respected opponent. Whereas antagonisms can quickly spiral into violent conflict, agonistic relations involve a mutual respect for “the other”, the recognition of and tolerance toward difference, and a perceived legitimacy in processes of mediation. Through highlighting the ontological status of radical difference, Mouffe hopes to transform democratic thought and reinvigorate institutional politics at the level of the everyday.

Mouffe’s political framework provides a good starting point for thinking about the kinds of relations visible on Wikipedia. What is so relevant about Mouffe’s political philosophy, though, is that both her agonistic ontology and her *critique* of contemporary democratic thought can be fruitfully applied: The discourse of collaboration resembles the dominant strain of democratic thought and its attempt to theorise a world beyond politics, where conflict is a thing of the past – the so called “Third Way”. In the language of Mouffe’s ontology, consider once more the Wikipedia Muhammad discussion page mentioned above: The two discussants embody conflicting views about knowledge, each defined by its opposition to the other. To the extent that conflict is limited to the discussion page and is debated in the rhetoric of Enlightenment civility imposed by various policies, the “we/they” relation remains agonistic. However, in this particular scenario it is obvious that Basem3wad does not consider Wikipedia’s political processes to be legitimate. Because of this, Basem3wad comes very close to moving beyond the adversarial model and become an enemy, of both C.Logan and the larger system (who seem somewhat interchangeable). Indeed, [the petition](#) that Basem3wad gestures toward – apparently signed by over 450,000 people – is a clear instance of political overflow; a perceived failure of the mediating institution. The rhetoric is telling here: “this encyclopedia will fall down, if you do not give attention to a billion Muslim, with many non-muslims, who objects to your policy”.

Mouffe’s work successfully highlights the political dimension of open projects and provides insight as to the poverty of collaboration discourse. However, her concerns lie with institutional politics and are thus far removed from the network ecologies of peer production. Institutional politics is a highly formalised operation, with political parties, voting, rules of governance and specific delineation of powers. It is the stuff practised by career politicians and their PR entourage, brought to the citizen masses through the lens of the spectacle. It has its own history and its own conditions of possibility⁸. Such translations must therefore be approached

critically and thought of as an opportunity to develop new concepts in light of new empirical events.

STIGMERGY AND FREE COOPERATION: TOWARD AN AGONISTIC PEER PRODUCTION

So far I have described a generalised failure to think the political dimension of projects described as mass collaborations. The work of Mouffe goes some way in correcting this failure. In what follows I attempt to combine her agonistic ontology with two atypical thinkers who have tackled collaboration directly, Mark Elliott and Christoph Spehr.

Spehr is a German political theorist with a penchant for using sci-fi metaphors to develop his ideas. Most of his work remains untranslated into English apart from his important essay 'Free Cooperation', in Geert Lovink and Trebor Scholz's edited collection *The Art of Free Cooperation* (2007). While Spehr's work is not solely intended for critical internet scholars, I read it here partly through Lovink's work, who has been instrumental in its uptake and has shaped its reception⁹.

Spehr's thought begins with a distinction between "abstract", "forced" and "free" cooperation (and I should note from the start that he mostly uses the term "cooperation", but collaboration appears interchangeably in his work). Spehr notes that we are all constantly entrenched in cooperative environments and thus to speak of collaboration as exceptional – say, by describing Wikipedia as collaborative but not *Encyclopedia Britannica* – is already misleading. The very fact that we can think of cooperation as something peculiar derives from the mass "individualization" of neo-liberal society. Spehr writes:

Individualistic strategies, ways of living, ideas, projects become possible because society has developed in such a way that life is not precarious, that a basic security is established, that we have a certain access to public wealth, strategic commons, to capital, information, communication and so on, and that direct social control weakens because the market allows us to change cooperations, to move, to leave, etc., because we are held together by the bounds of abstract cooperation. You can do enormous things in the net because someone has built it. Because someone is keeping it up. It's this stage of "abstract cooperation" that makes individualisation possible – and not only for very few individuals but as a mass phenomenon. Not only in the cultural sphere but as a productive force itself. From this point on, cooperation looks as if it is something special, voluntarily engaged, as if we were monads that come together to collaborate. While the truth is that we can only act in this monad-like way because we are embedded in very elaborated abstract cooperation, because we have so many resources and structures ready at hand (cited in Lovink, 2008, p. 212).

For Spehr, because we are all necessarily involved in (abstract) cooperation, it is the *type* of collaboration that becomes important, not the mere fact of it. "Free cooperation" emerges as his concept for desirable collaborative relations. Free cooperation has several basic tenets. First, every rule in the collaboration is changeable and negotiable. Absolutely nothing is off limits or beyond question. There is no "higher authority" (Spehr, 2007, p. 92) and every person has "the same power to influence the rules" (Spehr and Windszus, 2004, n.p.). Second, essential to this distribution of power is an *a priori* right to refuse and withdraw from the project or give limits to participation. Echoing Italian Autonomist thought, Spehr's point is that cooperation cannot

be “free” unless it can be left; unless the resources and inputs of members can be withdrawn. This threat of withdrawal must also be significant enough that it can be used as a bargaining chip, to “influence the rules” (2007, p. 92). Third, withdrawal by members must be bearable, though undesirable. In other words, if a member cannot walk away because the loss is too great, the collaboration is no longer free. Bearable withdrawal provides the necessary conditions for genuine negotiation to take place. Finally, ‘free cooperation’ involves what Spehr and Windszus call “taking off the mask” (2004). This process begins with the courage and honesty to embrace conflict, but it also seems to extend beyond this to the constant questioning of members’ ‘expected roles’. It involves taking off “the mask that was designed for you”, questioning “what others think is appropriate for you ... what they want you to do” (2004).

Spehr goes into great detail elaborating these principles as well as mapping the existing “dimensions of domination” or characteristics of Forced Cooperation, that is, the type of cooperation we participate in everyday, to which Free Cooperation intervenes. This taxonomy of domination includes most of the typical dimensions that critical thought has identified throughout history: physical (e.g. war), structural (e.g. economic), social (e.g. race and gender), institutional (e.g. meaning and knowledge) and existential (e.g. the removal of alternatives). These of course need to be understood as overlapping and mutually reinforcing. What Spehr offers is less a meditation on real life collaborative projects than a program for new forms of collaborative action; a list of mechanisms of domination to avoid; a set of principles for which collaborations should strive; and a set of ideal conditions for living together in the world. “Free cooperation” emerges both as a guiding light and a benchmark for making ethical and political claims about real collaborations.

My own concerns are with the distribution and mediation of power and subjectivity within net projects *that get called collaborative*. In this sense I am not as concerned as Spehr with principles or ideals, or ways out of “forced cooperations”, or debating whether or not a project *really* is a collaboration, but rather in new ways of envisioning the political as it relates to the open projects of peer production. Indeed, I am not convinced that Free Cooperation is possible, especially in large projects. The above example from Wikipedia lends itself to this reading. For starters, it can be argued that not all of Wikipedia’s rules can be changed and power over who can change rules is not evenly distributed (regardless of the justification of this asymmetry). While people are free to leave Wikipedia, this is generally of little consequence. Furthermore, there are some people – like Basem3wad – who are clearly compelled to contribute because the price of not contributing (having the images displayed) is too high. Finally, rather than “taking off the mask”, it seems that with Wikipedia it is more important to “put a mask on”: that of the encyclopaedist. It is only through donning this mask that a project like Wikipedia becomes feasible. What all this shows is that real world collaborations cannot be easily separated from their various entanglements and they cannot easily be divorced from their histories (instead, they are constituted by them). The most valuable aspect to take from Spehr’s work might be his taxonomy of dominance, but re-read as an always-present aspect of real collaborations.

The last work to consider is Mark Elliott’s notion of stigmergic collaboration (2006). Elliott is not a critical thinker in the Frankfurt School sense and in many ways his works aligns perfectly with Bruns, Benkler and so on¹⁰. However, Elliott’s work is distinguished by the way it attempts to think the *how* of mass collaboration, its structural elements, rather than merely wondering at its existence. Elliott notes how collaborations have traditionally been thought to implode at around 25 members. This number was thought to be the upper limit of meaningful communication between participants for which goals, rules, roles and so on can reasonably

be negotiated. With mass collaboration, negotiation falls by the wayside and instead becomes “stigmergic” in nature.

Elliott borrows the term stigmergy from myrmecology (the study of ants), which refers to how termites are able to build complex nests and mounds without any overarching blueprint or master engineer, or even without any individual ant able to conceive of the whole (2006). In its anthropomorphic manifestation, stigmergy describes a process whereby environmental conditions (such as poorly written Wikipedia articles) trigger a response in individuals to modify such conditions. This in turn triggers responses in other individuals, and a continuous process of modification and project development is set in motion. Central to stigmergy, and echoing thought on complexity in general, is that complex modes of organisation emerge from (in this case thousands of) individual members simply modifying their immediate environment. Whatever “whole” emerges is not conceived by any individual member.

Elliott’s thoughts go some way in describing the structural conditions of mass collaboration and although he remains highly enthusiastic and even utopian about such processes, perhaps unwittingly he also lays the ground for a politicised counter-reading of mass collaboration. Consider what we might call the dark side of stigmergy as a mode of organising production: participants have little control over the structures that surround them; their action is reduced to simple responses to environmental triggers of which they may have little understanding; and the *negotiation* considered so central to small, traditional collaborations is simply swept aside. Elliott writes:

In freeing up energy that participants would otherwise use in negotiation, more is available for contribution to a workspace’s domain level creative objectives. This has the effect of exploiting the potential inherent in stigmergic systems for globally coordinating localised input, thereby providing the capacity for the integration of a great number of individualistic contributions into that of a collective whole (2007, p. 138).

There are two important aspects of Elliott’s ontology, the first of which relates to negotiation. If the true moment of the political is the decision of one over the other, the “freeing up of energy” used to negotiate can be reread as a technical handing-over of the political as there are almost no opportunities to contest decisions. The second aspect involves a rereading of the basic process of stigmergy in relation to the human condition. Ants cannot perceive a whole mound or nest. However, a minimal amount of information passes from ant to ant in order for one to recognise what the other is doing and respond to it. Everything that emerges is determined by this relational protocol. With Wikipedia it is also the case that no individual can see the whole project and imagine every article. However, the minimal information passed between contributors (through both technical and discursive mediation) contains a high level of information and includes ideas about what knowledge is; what it looks like; how it is organised; how it should be expressed and so on. These “knowledge triggers” are so powerful that they can give shape to a complex process of human stigmergy. And when stigmergic collaboration appears to be working harmoniously, it is not because the mechanisms of control are removed, but rather that they are working particularly well. As Basem3wad makes clear, however, such mechanisms do not necessarily determine every individual contribution. Elliott’s work makes it clear that the distribution of policies and protocols and the drastic reduction of negotiation are central to mass collaboration.

FROM VACUOUS TO AGONISTIC COLLABORATION, VIA WIKIPEDIA

So what kind of understanding and action would this alternative approach to collaboration suggest? It begins with the acknowledgement that collaborations are never outside the political. There is no post-political collaboration. Indeed, when collaborations are working well it is not because everyone is free and there are no rules, norms or pressures, but precisely the opposite. It occurs when these devices are strongest; when there are strong regulatory mechanisms for making decisions between competing alternatives. The fact that the entry on Muhammad is coherent, despite all the challenges and vitriol, is testament to this fact. This doesn't mean that rules are necessarily formalised (though they often are, or become so over time), merely that a majority of collaborators share a common discursive field or worldview, which allows them to function smoothly with each other. The entry on Muhammad is a clear instance of when the type of knowledge privileged on Wikipedia becomes visible and (unsuccessfully) contested. An agonistic collaboration places contest and conflict at the forefront. While it cannot accommodate all positions within its framework – which may lead to antagonistic relations and overflows – it does at least recognise its own political conditions.

A consideration of stigmergic collaboration revealed that mass collaboration minimises the processes of negotiation. As I have shown, Wikipedia does have a space for discussion. However, these spaces are not akin to "negotiation" as typically understood in (small) collaborations where negotiation includes working out the formal rules of the entire project as well as the roles of each member. The discussion pages can more usefully be read as disciplinary spaces which facilitate the stigmergic process of "improving" articles, that is, of aligning them with the type of knowledge formally desired by the project. On top of aligning the entries themselves though, the discussion pages also work to discursively discipline new or dissenting contributors. It is in these spaces that undesirables are "sorted out". Once it is realised that mass collaborations work through stigmergy and not through negotiation, and therefore actually permit less individual agency than smaller collaborations, agonistic collaborations pay close attention to the asymmetries that constitute their different manifestations. For Wikipedia, this includes recognising the type of Enlightenment-derived knowledge it produces (in opposition to some religious, local, non-discursive and perhaps even postmodern forms of knowledge), but also the kind of language and writing style preferred, the desired level of specialisation, the appropriate article length, the rules and guidelines that emerge, and so on.

Finally, a consideration of existing asymmetries needs to proceed in relation to Spehr's dimensions of domination. This would help to connect the way that identifiable asymmetries, in turn, reorganise the bodies and knowledges that produce them and to which they refer, in asymmetrical ways. Basem3wad, for example, did not possess the right kind of knowledge nor was his/her English of the appropriate level. This person did not possess the right level of civility or the required disinterested tone that characterises an "objective" contribution. Perhaps the biggest asymmetry here though, is the fact that Basem3wad is entirely disposable. This person does not hold anything considered valuable by the project. This explains the appeals to a wider community via the petition to remove the images. While these asymmetries do not lead to physical violence against Basem3wad, they certainly resonate with the social and institutional dimensions of domination outlined by Spehr. The end result is Basem3wad's perspective being rejected from Wikipedia and the marginalisation of anyone who is insulted by the depiction of Muhammad. The crucial point is not that these factors make Wikipedia evil or abhorrent, but rather that they are necessary - constitutive of all mass collaborations.

CONCLUSION

In response to the vacuous discourse of collaboration, building a notion of collaboration able to account for the often ugly, conflicted entanglements that constitute their realities has become urgent. In this paper, I have mapped the proliferation of collaboration, a term increasingly (mis)used to describe the relation between people in peer production and related projects. This notion of collaboration is rather devoid of substance and, crucially, works to position the projects it seeks to describe as *post political*. In order to problematise the proliferation of vacuous collaboration, I considered a specific conflict that emerged in the discussion pages of the Wikipedia entry on Muhammad. Mass collaboration is a zone of conflict; it is constituted by asymmetry; it produces winners and losers, sometimes in new and novel ways and other times in ways entirely predictable. If we are to invent concepts better equipped to describe the kinds of political relations that emerge in projects like Wikipedia, it is these realities that must be articulated and faced.

ENDNOTES

- 1 If there is any doubt that the selection of works covered in this section are not indicative of the field in general, I would point the reader to the "[top 20 books on peer production](#)" list found on the P2P Foundation site headed by Michel Bauwens. The works of Benkler, Bruns and Tapscott and Williams make up three of the top five.
- 2 Extending the ideas of Benkler (2006), Raymond (2000), Bauwens (2005) and others, the concept of *produsage* aims to describe emergent forms of creation specific to online, network cultures that are not satisfactorily captured in the strict demarcation of production, distribution and consumption that characterise the industrial paradigm. For a summary, see Bruns' article "The Future Is User-Led: The Path towards Widespread Produsage" (2008).
- 3 Indeed, Bruns uses the word or versions thereof a total of 23 times in this relatively short piece.
- 4 I remain highly sceptical regarding the potential outlined here. While it is obvious that commercial entities have successfully "harnessed" user-generated content to generate value, it also seems just as obvious that the type of collaboration described by Evans and Wolf, and Tapscott and Williams can only ever be strategic and partial. This question, however, is not of direct concern in this paper. It also presupposes an affirmative descriptive value to collaboration, which this paper is trying to problematise.
- 5 Benkler writes, "At the heart of the economic engine, of the world's most advanced economies, we are beginning to notice a persistent and quite amazing phenomenon. A new model of production has taken root; one that should not be there, at least according to our most widely held beliefs about economic behaviour" (2006, p. 59).
- 6 See Matteo Pasquinelli (2009) for a discussion on how free content projects fit within neo-liberal economies of rent.
- 7 I prefer the term "asymmetry" because it captures the effect or result of hierarchy – uneven

distribution of power - without necessarily invoking its precise structure and historical connotations, and without attributing hierarchy as the one and only source of uneven force (which is exactly the claim I am trying to refute). The new forms of asymmetry are what need to be described. For a discussion of asymmetry see Bruno Latour's *Reassembling the Social* (2005, pp. 63-64).

8 Ned Rossiter (2006) has also made use of Mouffe's work in the context of net cultures and offers a critique of her investment in institutional politics.

9 Lovink's chapter "Axioms of Free Cooperation" in *Zero Comments* (2008) is a reflection on Spehr's ideas in relation to net cultures.

10 Although Elliott claims only to describe the how of mass collaboration, he is overwhelmingly enthusiastic about such projects, claiming that "the emergence of mass collaboration ... represents the most well developed and extended collective creative process currently available to humanity" (2007, p. 8).

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