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When Collaboration Becomes Ubiquitously Digital
A Review of *Collaborative Society*
(Dariusz Jemielniak, Aleksandra Przegalinska,
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Abstract. In recent years, the majority of studies on new technology-related phenomena have focused either on proving the benefits of innovative solutions or on criticizing social costs. The path chosen in the reviewed book *Collaborative Society* by Dariusz Jemielniak and Aleksandra Przegalinska is to capture a wider cultural shift that is taking place because ICT (Information and Communication Technology) tools allow people to take advantage of their willingness to cooperate. The key thesis is that the collaborative society goes far beyond the sharing economy – or economy in general. New means of digital communication, remix culture and citizen science prove that this shift is transforming social relations and our mutual relations. The authors search for the manifestations of a collaborative society in joint online production and consumption, cooperation of social activists and hacktivism, social production of knowledge, gadgets encouraging cooperation and subversive connection in digital spaces. The future of cooperation is a story about the tension between the new, communal mode of production and its distortion by capitalism. The book is a good summary of the research area and an introduction for anyone looking to explore this topic or participate in a collaborative society.

Keywords: collaborative society; sharing economy; peer production; platform capitalism; citizen science; quantified self; internet of things; hacktivism

In the recent years, the majority of studies on new technology-related phenomena have focused on either proving the benefits of innovative solutions or on criticizing social costs that are levied by these solutions. In contrast, the path chosen by Dariusz Jemielniak and Aleksandra Przegalinska in *Collaborative Society* is to capture a wider cultural shift which occurs as ICT tools allow humans to tap into the intrinsic “powerful drive to cooperate with others” (p. 3). By rejecting the dogmas of *Homo economicus*, a supposed purely rational being constantly calculating cost-benefit ratios, they leave no stone unturned explaining the emerging online behaviors. But do they prove that online collaboration leads to a society-wide transformation?

Collaborative communities or peer production are seen by some scholars as seeds of a different economic system that is governed by the logic of equity or solidarity instead of capitalist profit. However, there is a growing body of evidence that many platforms exploit collaboration to perform surveillance of workers and users and extract the value of their activities. The key thesis put forward by the authors is that collaborative society extends far beyond the sharing economy or economy in general. The concept is far from novel, it has been explored in previous landmark works of, e.g., sociologists (Castells 1996) and business scholars (Tapscott, Williams 2006; Benkler 2006). *Collaborative Society* follows those paths, in an attempt to describe Manuel Castells' network morphology of society by expanding the 'wikinomics' approach to analyze a variety of collaborative trends. The truly collaborative patterns are emergent less in corporate platforms (what is argued for further in Chapter 2 of the book), and more in other collaborative activities, analyzed in subsequent chapters: peer production (Chapter 3), collaborative media production and consumption (Chapter 4), collaborative social activism and hacktivism (Chapter 5), collaborative knowledge creation (Chapter 6), collaborative gadgets (Chapter 7) and being together online (Chapter 8). The final chapter serves as a forecasting exercise in discussing the impact of technologies to come on societal life.

Surely, as the authors note, the utopian ideals of early Internet have been verified over the years. The free/open source movement has achieved remarkable feats, including building a robust operating system Linux, and seemingly every industry could have been transformed into a commons-based like following the lead of Wikipedia. Since the crash of dot-com bubble in 2000, digital companies have redrawn their business models and outmaneuvered many of the open and free initiatives. The example of Google, which free-rode on open-source Android software for smartphones, is a poster story of the failure of this dream.

What "sharing economy" companies like Uber or Airbnb do also undermines the very notion of "sharing". It can be argued that they capitalize on a pre-existent social relation, which "effectively transforms the social context of what used to be a favor and turns it into something to be bought or sold" (p. 24). This commodification leads precisely to real subsumption: a fundamental reshaping of social relations to fit the capitalist business model (Hardt, Negri 2017). The contradictory tension between the claim of sharing and the actual implementation leads Jemielniak and Przegalinska to point to a Hegelian dialectic of simultaneous change from possessing to sharing, accompanied by the triumph of neoliberal hegemony. Thus, they detach "platform capitalism" and "gig economy", with the latter term superseding sharing economy, yet currently surpassing it in popularity, from cooperation *per se*. The interest of the authors focuses on the often overlooked segment of collaborative groups that occur without a dominant financial motive. Whether the interesting cultural impact is enough to claim they are "the primal force behind

many of the changes in modern society” (p. 39) is dubious and any conclusive statement is subject to personal methodological bias as to how those changes can be measured.

The best exemplification of such epistemic collaboration is Wikipedia, labeled by the authors as a leading example of peer production. This method of production, relying on self-organizing groups, is predominant where the collective effort aims to solve “a problem common to those who participate” (p. 41). Individuals involved in the process organize often without intermediaries, turning towards direct interaction and sociality that counters the stark capitalist division between customer segments and labor hierarchies.

Jemielniak and Przegalinska argue that peer production relocates trust, moving it from individuals to procedures and processes, what is consistent with other findings on the key role of administration and policy (Lageard, Paternotte 2018). The example of Jimmy Wales facing opposition prove indeed that authoritarian tendencies give way to collective decision-making. Creation of rules gives volunteers agency, but later the community “may be exposed to bureaucratic dogma” (p. 58). It remains unclear however how that differs from strict corporate governance and the near-anonymous “organization men” it produces (Galbraith 2007).

The transition to participative knowledge creation allowed also for DIY (Do-It-Yourself) scientists to emerge, especially in less conventional fields like biohacking, psychedelic research and smart gadgets. The spread of DIY laboratories as well as online platforms is a clear example of a collaborative shift in science. Citizen science can be seen as “evidence-based academic activism” (p. 121) as its aims are emancipatory as well, even if it sidesteps some limits that the traditional academia still upholds. Especially the “Quantified Self” movement thinks both about self-improvement and a “resistance toward biopower” (p. 138), gained via sharing of biofeedback data. Evoking the memory of Project Cybersyn – the ambitious Chilean road to socialism paved with cybernetic logic and brand-new technologies – shows how once impossible feat might be a blueprint for the “Quantified Self” community if it wishes to present a larger political project. Here the authors could expand on contemporary experiments with platform cooperatives for health data, data commons and data trusts as means of both creating knowledge and empowering the community.

An interesting account of a negative reception of those changes laments the “cult of the amateur” (p. 64). Some kinds of collaboration are actually efforts to build separate anti-institutions when “corporate-sponsored pseudo-academic studies” (p. 110) previously detached from society lead to a decline of trust. In an environment of rising distrust in formal expertise, alternative “sciences” also emerge. Many turn to “Doctor Google” and self-diagnosis where science had no (ready) answer.

Jemielniak and Przegalinska ask then if it is the technology that shapes our collaboration or the other way around. The efforts to build increasingly collaborative technologies might have many dead-ends, such as enclosing of information bubbles or strengthening of cyber-bullying. A discussion over playfulness in Second Life and collaboration on corporate, seemingly single-use platforms suggests a much more complex, interdependent effect. The examples of creative usages of Instagram, Snapchat or Tinder for making friends around the world, staying in touch or even campaigning seem to underline that collaboration seeps into cracks of every interface.

However, the authors rightly fear that networked individualism may prove the most insidious by connecting us, yet stripping of emancipatory, interdependent potential for mobilization. No solidarity is possible if we allow for ‘replacing the need for the collective negotiation of rules and behavior’ (p. 183). By pointing that Facebook users actually have “no power, responsibilities, reciprocal rights or influence over their governance” (p. 183), the authors admit that the threat to sustained collaboration are data relations, that is social/power relations set for the purpose of generating raw data for profit (Couldry, Mejjias 2019).

New cultural patterns indeed accommodate the novel model of production, and as such confirm the authors’ idea that collaboration exceeds economics. At the same time, the economy of peer production cannot be dismissed all that easily. Jemielniak and Przegalinska note how TripAdvisor, Google Guides and Yelp leveraged online communities to peer-produce for the sake of their own business models, creating incentive mechanisms to keep the community engaged. The penetration of “network factory” and playbor in the digital space forces us to consider who actually reaps the benefits of the unpaid information labor (Zygmuntowski 2020).

Whether the interesting cultural impact is enough to claim that online collaboration is ‘the primal force behind many of the changes in modern society’ (p. 39) is dubious and any conclusive statement is subject to methodological conflict over measurement. One could very well argue that societies are not becoming more collaborative in general (what would be reflected in, e.g., a decrease in egoism, rise of trust and increase of collective actions) but that the segment of population that does engage in collaboration grows. Everyone is an amateur before they become professionals, and it’s even more prevailing in creative professions but reported as well on gig economy platforms where workers ask for paths to full proficiency and career growth (Gorbis 2017). The Amateur joins the Scientist in the processes of epistemic collaboration, yet this shift is still largely limited to information-heavy domains where the stakes of cost-benefit ratio changes.

Reading *Collaborative Society* is a venture into the multifaceted reality of today’s digital collaboration. It is an amalgam of vibrant communities that allowed for creation of the greatest encyclopedia of all times and online imageboards for sociopaths. The declared departure from critical theory allowed the authors

to bring nuances of different digital spaces to the light, although the destination seems very much in line with the critics' stance. The future of collaboration is a story of tensions between a new, communal mode of production, and its warping by capitalism. Whether the collaborative society (not only pockets and groups of collaborators) will emerge after today's transitional period is a story of the future I suppose, and one that directs researchers building on Jemielniak and Przegalińska's book towards economic systems and Marxist scholarship. The book is nevertheless a great primer into the field of online communities and digital collaboration, aimed at both university students and specialists from adjacent fields.

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