

Constitutional Experimentation in Online Social Spaces

Thesis: Online social spaces have given us a giant, distributed laboratory for novel forms of political organization, because they span geographic borders, allow asynchronous group communication, and engage our emotional attachment to groups differently.

However, there are three key elements underpinning online communities -- social cohesion (the groups norms and behaviors), economic support (how the coordinating infrastructure is paid for, and by whom), and technological capability (what the software the group uses is capable of.)

Most research on online groups has focused on the social category, without considering the economic or technological ones. This talk outlines a brief thought experiment in brining those other two areas into a groups purview.

- I. Background: Groups are first class entities
 - a. They exhibit behaviors which cannot be predicted by observing the individual behaviors of the members in isolation
 - b. The group's behaviors are in part the result of the tension between a desire for individual autonomy and group membership
 - c. This tension is inevitable and irresolvable, even in principle
 - d. As a result, group structure is the outline of a bargain between individuals and the group
- II. Online social systems suffer from these tensions as well, with caveats
 - a. Online interaction strengthens individual action, and weakens group membership, relative to real-world interaction
 - b. Online social systems weaken mechanisms of identity
 - c. Online systems have low switching costs, compared to real-world community
- III. These tensions manifest themselves in a never-ending series of crises.
 - a. Communities that stop having crises stop being communities
 - b. The crisis happens when some tension between individual desires and overall structure boils over (e.g. private conferences in social communities, PK in bulletin boards.)
 - c. The first argument has the fewest fixed points of reference
 - d. Crises 2-N build on the structure left after the first crisis
 - e. The result of such crises is a reaffirmation or reconstruction of the group structure, in light of the crisis
- IV. Managing this crisis thus becomes a key predictor of group success
 - a. In computing terms, this is the bootstrap moment, where a group defines itself
 - b. In political terms, it is a constitutional crisis, where a group takes on responsibility for its own existence
- V. This makes online community a giant political laboratory

- a. However, it is one where the division of power into three spheres -- social, technological, economic -- prevents the experiments from full exploration of the problem space
 - b. It also keeps the experimentation in online spaces from being relevant to real world political systems
 - c. This may be a good thing
- VI. We can think of a "political signature" for online spaces, by asking what domains they operate in.
- a. All groups have social effects, always informal, sometimes formal as well. Almost all the work on online groups has concentrated on these aspects.
 - b. Some groups control their own economic environment, either by paying for their access or, more rarely, actually incorporating, or, most rarely of all, incorporating and then raising and distributing funds among their members
 - c. Very few groups can control the mechanics of their technological environment. Technological control is usually extended by proxying the services of programmers or system administrators, and can usually be unilaterally revoked.
- VII. Thought Experiment: Nomic Groups
- a. Nomic is a game in which changing the rules is part of the game.
 - b. Nomic works by detailing as many of the ur-rules as possible (e.g. "Players must abide by the rules"), and by making "deep" and "shallow" rules, which are harder and easier to change, respectively.
 - c. Online groups operate in an implicitly Nomic-like environment, with everything from social enforcement of acceptable behavior (a shallow rule, which often changes over time) to the mechanics enforced by the software (a deep rule, which rarely changes)
 - d. Though investigation of social rules is important, we could also imagine communities that have control of their own economic and technological functions
 - e. These groups would exhibit a wider and potentially more important range of dynamics than groups whose self-governance is primarily social
- VIII. Conclusion: What it would take to build a Nomic community