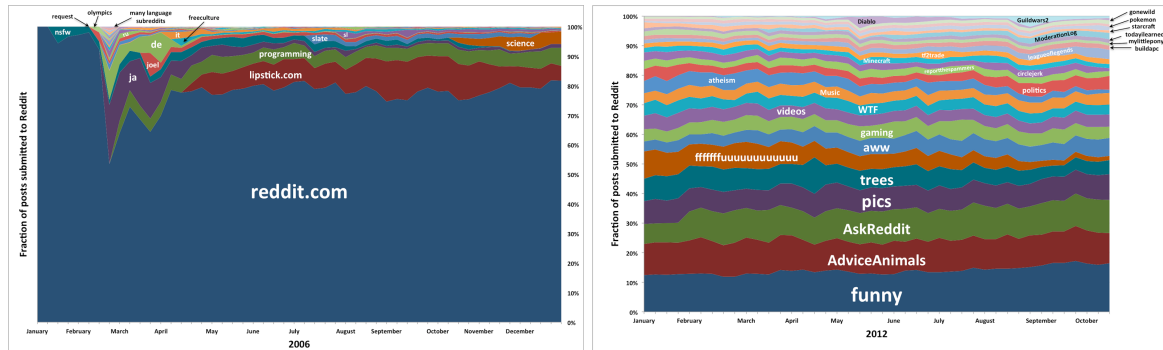


The Division of Labor in Virtual Society:  
*A Case Study of Durkheimian Analysis on Reddit*

In this paper, I bring Émile Durkheim and his book *The Division of Labor in Society* to 21<sup>st</sup> century and apply his understanding of solidarity to the new contemporary form of society: the virtual community. More specifically, I examine Reddit, the 4<sup>th</sup> most popular virtual community in United States and the self-proclaimed “the Front Page of the Internet”, to investigate its health via the Durkheimian concept of solidarity. I chose Reddit as a subject of case study because of its pseudonymity, which, unlike complete anonymity, allows users to maintain individuality while, unlike complete true identity, letting users to form virtual relationships, not the virtual version of real social relationships. To find out the level of solidarity of Reddit, I explored its degree of division of labor, its degree of social segmentation, and finally, the State’s relationship with the collective consciousness. With these metrics, I argue that Reddit is a virtual community with mature organic solidarity.

First, the level of division of labor is very advanced in Reddit. While Reddit currently boasts around 234 millions of unique monthly visitors, Reddit started with only a handful number of users back in 2005. Then, as the site got more popular, the moral density started to increase, which in turn led to the specializations of the users as more users formed new “subreddits” that specific to their interests. These subreddits have become the segments of the virtual community in which the users interact with other users that share similar interests and common values. For example, /r/datascience is a subreddit for data science aficionados, and any discussion that does not pertain to data science is subject to removal. In the beginning, there was

only one subreddit called /r/reddit.com. Now, there are over 800,000 subreddits that serve the specific interests of users. The graphs below shows how much specialized Reddit has become from 2006 to 2012, illustrating the advancement of division of labor occurring in Reddit.



Furthermore, the collective consciousness of Reddit is localized. Depending on the subreddit, certain users might hold vastly different collective consciousness than users of other subreddits. From /r/conservatives to /r/liberals, from /r/berkeley to /r/nyc, and from /r/science to /r/technology, Reddit offers various and unique topics that users can engage in. Thus, it is almost impossible to pinpoint *the* collective consciousness of Reddit. Each subreddit has its own distinctive localized values that may not be shared by other types of subreddits.

Moreover, the redditors conform to “the cult of the individual,” a characteristic of organic solidarity. Some redditors gain huge followings and really do become “the object of a sort of religion” (122 Durkheim). For instance, when a redditor Victoria Taylor, who is also an employee of Reddit and a coordinator of the subreddit /r/IAmA, was fired for non-obvious reasons, the moderators of /r/IAmA and many other subreddits decided to shut-down in protest to her unjust firing. Given that /r/IAmA is the 7<sup>th</sup> largest subreddit, this incident illustrates redditors putting the rights of individuals before those of the community since the users decided to shut down a huge part of the website for a single individual.

Lastly, the State, or the Reddit administrators, has become autonomous from the original collective consciousness. According to Durkheim, the State from a mechanical solidarity symbolizes, reflects, and embodies the collective consciousness while the State from an organic solidarity becomes autonomous from the collective consciousness. (43) In 2014, Ellen Pao became the CEO of Reddit and subsequently banned five subreddits “based on their harassment of individuals.” (Reddit, "Removing Harassing Subreddits.") This decision encountered a huge opposition from redditors who accused Pao from neglecting the “freedom of speech” that has been often advocated by Reddit before her; the former CEO, Yishan Wong, during his administration, promised: "We stand for free speech... we are not going to ban distasteful subreddits." (BBC News) This controversy exposed the State not reflecting the collective consciousness of the virtual community and rather becoming independent and autonomous from it.

While Reddit has been sometimes criticized for its seemingly strong collective consciousness, which is also pejoratively called the Reddit’s “hive mind”, a close inspection of Reddit reveals that such “hive-mindedness” is confined to the segments of the virtual community and that the Reddit as a whole has very weak collective consciousness. In other words, due to the significant growth of the division of labor, Reddit’s collective consciousness has been localized and undermined to the point where individual consciousness triumphs the collective consciousness. Furthermore, the advance of division of labor led to the separation of the State from the initial collective consciousness as shown by the Reddit CEO acting contradictory by more or less constraining the freedom of speech. Therefore, given the above evidences, Reddit has more essence of organic solidarity than that of mechanical solidarity.

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