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The economies within an online social network market. A case study of *Ravelry*.

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Abstract

The capacity of the internet to handle micro-transactions and to cater to niche markets is a boon for some areas of the creative industries, which have always been associated with small-scale micro business activities. This paper looks at the specific case of the specialist Social Networking Site *Ravelry*: a site for knitters, crocheters, spinners and dyers. It traces the interactions between amateurs and professionals through the emergence of social networking sites. An analytic framework of social network markets (see Potts, Cunningham, Hartley and Omerod, 2008) is employed to allow for the inclusion of amateur, social, semi-professional, professional and institutional actors within a networked sphere of activity, rather than excluding some of these actors as outside of recognised value-production. The reliance on social networks to determine the economic success of design, production and consumption is exemplified in this small scale example. This paper eschews the dichotomy of commercial and non-commercial by bringing to the fore the hybridity of this site where financial and social economies co-exist.

Introduction

Social network markets have been identified as an emergent form of activity found in new media environments (Potts, Cunningham et al. 2008). They operate across a diverse range of economies – from the commercial to the affective. They are interesting for the ways in which they reorganise the processes of exchange and innovation, for the avenues they provide for creative endeavour, and the hybridity of the rewards that are derived by different stakeholders. John Banks has mapped out through his ethnographic research into a computer game mod community (for *Trainz*) some of the complex motivations and negotiations that go on in an environment that could be characterised as a social network market (Banks 2007). We have also done some work on what kind of labour relations might be associated with an

environment relying on user-generated content where social and commercial economies co-exist (Banks and Humphreys 2008).

In this paper I want to look further at these concepts using a different case study, to see both where it is possible to identify similar interactions taking place, and to see what specificities arise in different sites. Social network markets are an emergent phenomenon that may be re-ordering the processes of the market as it shifts from industrial production to networked production. The institutions associated with these processes are still emergent and disruptive for existent institutions. Social network markets have been characterised as embodying a Schumpeterian process of creative destruction (Potts, Cunningham et al. 2008:177). This paper begins to interrogate which institutions and practices may be failing and what may be emerging in their place.

I use the specialist social networking site *Ravelry* as an interesting example of a complex blend of users, economies and motivations. It is a site that caters to the niche market of knitters, spinners and crocheters¹. Started just over two years ago, and still in beta, it has attracted nearly 300 000 users to date, many of whom are very active. I chose this site over a couple of other specialist SNS's because unlike, for instance, *Cellar Tracker*, which is a site for wine lovers to upload information about their cellar and their reviews and tastings, knitting and yarn spinning and dyeing are activities where there is creative input, design, and modification done by a large percentage of the users. Very few of the users of *Cellar Tracker* are actually making wine themselves. Knitting, though devalued as banal and somewhat grandmotherly by many, has recently been enjoying a surge of popularity amongst younger people (Chin 2002; Parkins 2004) and activists, as well as continuing to hold fascination for people who have happily knit for most of their lives. It can be included as a category of the creative industries: it generates economic activity and cultural capital. As Potts *et al.* point out "...almost all industries started as hobbies by enthusiastic amateurs or shunned obsessives" (Potts, Cunningham et al. 2008).

Social Networking Sites (SNS's) are intriguing for the ways in which they disrupt conventional media production and consumption relations through the use of user-generated content. *Ravelry* adds further complexity through its members' inherently creative practices and attendant innovations, and through knitters' long traditions of gifting as well as

commercial trading. In this paper I will describe the activities and functionality of the *Ravelry* site, examine the commercial, social, reputational and charity economies that can be identified in the activities on the site, and conclude with commentary on where the points of interest in relation to the understanding the mechanisms of this social network market lie.

Ravelry – the site

Ravelry is a site that caters to a specialist niche. It is owned and run by a couple, Jess and Casey Forbes who live in Massachusetts. Jess, a passionate knitter, wanted a database to keep track of her projects and ‘stash’ (stash being the term fibre people use to describe the yarn and unspun fibre they have stored, waiting to be used) and to create a resource that would allow people to easily find information about patterns and yarn. Casey a computer programmer, built the site. Initially they showed it to a group of about 100 people who were friends and friends of friends. There was some enthusiasm, and so they decided to open the site, via a registration process, to other users while it was in beta. They had fifteen thousand users sign up in the first weekend (Y Knit 2008). The only marketing done was viral spread through the blogging and e-list networks. There was no need to ‘build a community’ for the site as there was already a strong, existing, well connected, network of knitters passing information between themselves on the internet. Casey and Jess now work fulltime on the site and also employ another two workers.

Users have their own profile areas where they are able to upload photos of the items they are knitting, with details of the yarn they used and the patterns they followed and any modifying done for their own purposes. These details are aggregated with other users’ project details, and also linked variously to commercial and non-commercial places where the patterns or yarn are available (sometimes for sale, sometimes for free in the case of patterns), both on and off the *Ravelry* site. Local yarn stores and libraries are also linked to (with maps and contact details). Searches allow the user to browse photos of the multiple versions of a pattern that have been knitted by other users, thus allowing them to see how the pattern looks in different yarns, sizes, colours and variations/modifications. Sometimes there are hundreds of finished versions of a particular pattern available for viewing. Comments about patterns and yarns are made, alerting people to their pitfalls or joys, there is a ‘favoriting’ system which generates searchable popularity metrics in all available categories and so on. Much of the data available about the patterns and yarn has been previously available elsewhere on the net,

but the aggregation of the data into one very user-friendly searchable database which draws on user-generated content has proved immensely successful.

Designers are able to upload their patterns to either sell or give away, with a PayPal payment system in operation within the site for those without their own commercial sites. Advertising is also available on the site, with both commercial retailers and individual designers paying for ads on the site. *Ravelry* also has *very* active discussion boards about not only all things associated with yarn, knitting and crocheting, but also politics, religion, special interests and so on. These boards are surprisingly well populated. By June 2008, a little over a year after the public beta test began, there were over 6000 groups and there had been over 5 million posts to these boards.

boyd and Ellison offer the following definition of a social network site:

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (boyd and Ellison 2008:211)

Ravelry easily fits within this definition, with perhaps an added affordance of the ability to track the connections between objects as well as people. *Ravelry* is thus a database for projects; a space to view other peoples' projects; a space to share patterns, information, yarn and gifts; to design; to market designs, yarns and stores; and a social network site.

The diverse economies of Ravelry

Networked production online has often been characterised in dichotomous terms as either market or non-market by writers like Benkler (2006). In his explication of non-commercial networked production found in activities such as open source software production, Benkler is able to draw out the interesting characteristics of such production and its different motivational drivers and different sense of scale and mechanisms of efficiency. Work such as this and other commentators like Leadbeater and Miller's work on 'Pro- Ams' (Leadbeater and Miller 2004) and Jenkins' work on convergence, (Jenkins 2006), begin the task of mapping out the emergent processes of production enabled by new media environments and changes in communication technologies. However it is now time to try and tease out the complexity that exists in the environments that don't fit neatly into commercial or non-

commercial, market or non-market, but instead embody a range of practices that spread across all of these forms in the same space. *Ravelry* offers a strong example of such an environment.

It's been easy to talk of the differences between commercial and non-commercial markets as distinct in some ways, as the motivations for participation in each are quite different and the rewards for participation can also be markedly different. But those differences would seem to indicate that the two forms of economy or exchange would not necessarily come together in a seamless fashion. When gifting or social economies are described probably one of the easiest things to identify is that the terms of the 'give and take' of exchange are tacit. We give time and energy to someone else often without a direct expectation of something in return, although we may have a vague expectation of similar attention from that person in the future. We give material gifts without an explicit expectation of a return gift, although there may be an unstated or implied expectation of reciprocity. Sometimes we give to the community at large and the reward will be a gain in social status or reputation.

Commercial economies on the other hand are much more explicit in their terms of 'give and take'. We exchange material goods for prices that are explicit. We exchange labour for wages and conditions that are formally agreed upon. We have many institutions that have grown up around the industrial models of production that help to articulate these mechanisms of exchange. Copyright and intellectual property are notable institutional forms that regulate the flow of cultural goods and information and are based very heavily upon linear modes of production. Labour laws and negotiation practices are also well entrenched. There are numerous laws and organisations that work to enable these systems to work and the processes are well worn pathways. Industrial commercial exchange is full of metrics and standards and standardised processes. These are not the kinds of mechanisms we find in social economies. Amateur labour won't be corralled into standardised time frames of work and won't be held to deadlines. The particular value of a contribution to a social economy is rarely externalised into an explicit metric.

But we are seeing in the development of social network markets the beginning of the crumbling of the distinctions between commercial and non-commercial. Although the two forms of exchange have not always been mutually exclusive, the advent of digital media

forms in networked environments where user-generated content comes from the social process of connecting with others and participation, sees the tightening of the relationship between the two. What is becoming clear is that although this may be an emergent form that users are making up as they go along with some success, the institutions which seek to regulate and control them are becoming less and less adequate to the task.

Various labour theorists have analysed the processes by which affective labour or intellectual labour are being incorporated into the flows of capital (Hardt and Negri 2000, Ross 2000, 2006, Terranova 2000) and have most often characterised this in terms of exploitation. But attention must be paid to the flows of power and control in open architecture structures where users are participating, contributing and gaining rewards of both a financial and social nature. Emergent networked structures of production seem to require different frameworks of understanding that can be generated from our understandings of industrial style modes of production. While not wishing to suggest these older models have no relevance at all, or that power is no longer concentrated in uneven ways, it's important to notice the ways in which some of the distinctions previously relied upon are breaking down and to notice what is emerging.

Potts *et al* argue for viewing Creative Industries (CIs) through the lens of social networks.

...social networks [are] a basis for identifying and classifying the CIs as the industries predominantly characterized by economic actions that occur in the context of and as a result of social networks, a definition that then holds over both production and consumption. (Potts, Cunningham et al. 2008:173)

It becomes necessary to try and understand the coordinating mechanisms that order those actions across the range of economies at play within a social network market. Thus instead of settling for either the commercial or non-commercial, the market or non-market as a means of understanding processes we need instead to engage with the unruly behaviour of productive users consuming and producing across a range of motivations and to varying ends.

Potts *et al* argue that:

The analytic distinctiveness of the CIs rests thus not upon their nonmarket value, but upon the overarching fact that the environment of both their production and consumption is essentially constituted by complex social networks. The CIs rely, to a greater extent than other socio-economic activity, on word of mouth, taste, cultures, and popularity, such that individual choices are dominated by information feedback

over social networks rather than innate preferences and price signals. *De gustibus non est disputandum* is simply not the point, but rather that other people's preferences have commodity status over a social network because novelty by definition carries uncertainty and other people's choices, therefore, carry information. Economic and cultural evolution is a consequence of this process. (Potts, Cunningham et al. 2008:169-170)

The task of this and further analysis must then be to look at what drives choices (for production and consumption, or participation), what institutional constraints and affordances are determined by technological, social and cultural structures, as well as individual taste. This paper represents a start on one such analysis. It is by no means complete, but a contribution to a body of work we need to build through observation of the emergent structures and processes.

In this section I will briefly describe a number of different 'economies' identifiable within *Ravelry* that represent the flows of connections and activities that make up the complexity of this particular social network market. They should be seen as mutually constitutive, depicted here as separate merely as a heuristic device. In fact, as will become obvious by the end of each section, the attempt to identify distinct strands of the economy are almost impossible as each bleeds into the other.

Commercial Economies

As alluded to above, there is much commercial activity involved within the *Ravelry* network. This includes the direct commercial transactions that take place between producers and consumers through the site interface. These are mediated by *Ravelry* which takes a small cut, and by whatever online banking or transaction service is used (eg. PayPal) who also take a cut. Online stores can be listed on the site, and for instance, if a user wishes to buy a particular yarn, they can peruse the list of online stores that stock that yarn. This aggregation of information about retailers and wholesalers and what they have in stock is seen as particularly valuable in saving time often spent searching from store to store for a particular yarn.

Other, more derivative, commercial exchanges may take place through, for instance the site mechanism that allows a user to enter the details of where they bought a particular yarn.

Links are made to the yarn stores cited, Google maps are offered showing the location of the store, and information is entered about the store's opening hours and so on, as well as links to the store's website if available. The indirect marketing is a spin-off from the premium placed on information about specific projects. User-generated recommendations are seen as much more powerful than paid for corporate advertising, as the word of a friend or trusted other is seen as carrying far more weight. Facebook is a good example of another social networking site that uses user recommendations as a form of advertising. Sites like Amazon employ it in slightly different, but in principle similar, ways. Advertising and marketing thus occurs through both commercial and non-commercial affordances on the site. A designer or yarn seller might pay for advertisements on the site, but also gain exposure through various other user-generated mechanisms. The larger publishers also scan the discussion boards to gauge how their latest publications are being received and use this information to guide to some extent their future directions. The harnessing of user-generated content to each of these ends is an example of the blurring of the distinction between the commercial and non-commercial economies.

There is also a users' trading system set up – advertised on the BBS 'destashing and ISO (in search of)' trading category. Users can set up a payment system through the site and have a tab on their profile where they can list fibre they have for sale. The interesting aspect of this trading system is the work that is done in policing what is an acceptable amount of commerce for one user. The destashing affordance is not open for commercial retailers to use – users are only supposed to sell through the board if they are getting rid of unwanted yarn they have stashed. Moderators then have to determine if someone has started using the site as a retail outlet because of the lower fees associated with the site than if they were to sell through eBay. If a user is perceived to be buying cheap yarn and reselling it through the site as a profit making venture this is disallowed. However it is a socially determined and cultural norming issue as to how this is policed.

A thread on the destashing discussion list within *Ravelry* highlighted the differing perceptions of users as to what was allowed and the difficulties in defining what is selling for 'personal' reasons and what is commercial selling (when it would seem that all selling is commercial). The intent is for there to be trading of items 'stashed' but no longer wanted, either as yarn-

for-yarn barter, or yarn for money. How much trade of yarn for money is permissible and who will draw the line is contentious. One commenter noted:

...honestly it seems almost like a business for some. They pick up yarn on the cheap that they have no intention of ever using, but know they can probably offload it with a profit on Ravelry since you've got a market of tens-of-thousands of crafters and you can skip the annoying fees of eBay, etc.
(Shannon)

Another asked:

So who gets to be the destash police? "Sorry you have a \$600 medical bill this month, but you've reached the destash limit, so you must be selling for profit. See ya!"
(Maggie 314)

The first poster also commented:

there were a few posters that seemed like they were running a business vs honest destashing. I know the mods are good at getting the true commercial vendors out of there, but sometimes it seems a bit like abuse of the spirit of Ravelry. It will never be a perfect system and I'm not suggesting there's a limit or anything like that; I honestly don't have a solution, just giving my point of view like many.
(Shannon,
From thread: Items for sale on Ravelry? <http://www.ravelry.com/discuss/for-the-love-of-ravelry/221585/51-75>)

In these conversations we can see the mechanisms for a hybrid commercial/non-commercial venue being worked out. There is discussion (sometimes quite robust), there are moderators, who are other *Ravelry* users and are volunteers, and there are the owners who set the policy and occasionally intervene. It is not an unregulated free for all – there is a hierarchy of decision making and interventions available, but there is also the pervasive notion of 'the spirit of *Ravelry*' at work within this corner of the commercial economy. The confusion as the tacit rules of a social economy articulate with the explicit norms of commerce is clear, and it is these grey areas of crossover that seem to generate the most tension.

The non-commercial and social economy

The exchanges made on a non-commercial basis range from the bartering of goods through to exchanges of information, the gifting of items, and other non-commercial links such as the links to local libraries offered in the pattern and books section. Volunteering is a big part of how the site is able to operate as it relies on voluntary labour for board moderation but also

for developing the wiki which carries most of the site documentation and instructions on how to do things on the site as well as what the policies are.

The ‘spirit of *Ravelry*’ is a big part of the culture of the site, but it is often linked to the broader perceived culture of knitters as in general being habitual gifters. Many people knit items that they give away to friends and family and thus there is an established (though not uniform) culture amongst knitters of creating goods that are given away. This dovetails with the rhetoric of the site that generosity is a key to the sites’ success. The cultural norming that goes on around the concept of generosity is quite overt, and the rewards for gifting are discussed below in the section on reputational economies. Although not everyone ‘plays nice’, there is a way in which many of the conversations on the discussion boards in different groups strive for respect, drawing on the ‘*Ravelry* culture’ to invoke calm when a breakout of bad behaviour is threatening. My observations across a limited but diverse range of boards indicate that the dictum to ‘be excellent to each other’ laid out in the site policy is used by many moderators to pull people into line when discussions become overheated. It is reinforced with the tool moderators can access that allows them to insert a banner at the top of a discussion page which says: *This is a heated discussion. Please show respect for your fellow Ravelers.*

The site owners Jess and Casey freely admit that the site could not function without volunteer labour and they often acknowledge volunteer’s efforts. At one point a group of users banded together to raise funds for *Ravelry* in order to upgrade the servers that the site was running on. Tens of thousands of dollars were donated to the ‘Ravelraisers’ and new servers duly bought. (People also donated stash items and finished objects to be given away as prizes for donating.) The sense of ownership in the site that these kinds of power-sharing arrangements give to users is clear. It will be interesting to see how this relationship evolves as the numbers steadily increase, the workloads increase, the paid workforce increases, and the commercial side of the site develops. Currently the site is interesting for the clear focus the owners have on providing a service to their fibre-enthused users rather than turning a large profit. In eschewing large commercial retailers as the focus of business, and encouraging all their users to participate in ways both commercial and non-commercial they have established a particular set of cultural norms that seem to differ from services set up purely for commercial reasons. They seem committed to providing pathways into business for small time pattern

designers and yarn spinners and dyers, and maintaining a focus on providing increased functionality to their users. This isn't non-commercial, but it indicates a set of priorities that may be giving different weighting to social priorities. In part this may be an adaptation required when an environment relies so heavily on an open architecture and the participation of so many users for its success.

Charity economies

One smaller but active kind of economy in operation within this community is the activity of knitting for charity. Knitters often gift their work to charities to sell to raise money. This is an obvious example of an activity that straddles the commercial and the non-commercial economies as social motivations are rewarded with both social and financial rewards that benefit the community as well as the individual. The example given above of the fund-raising for new servers also works on this kind of model.

Interestingly charity knitting raises questions on the intellectual property front, as pattern designers wrestle with creating licences that are flexible enough to restrain people from mass production commercial use of their patterns but allow them to be used for charity production and small scale (craft market) commercial production. Intellectual property and copyright are in fact a cause of confusion and difficulty for many Ravelry users (see an analysis of how Ravelry users grapple with IP and copyright in Humphreys 2008). The behemoth that is copyright law is too complex and too rigid to deal with the needs of micro-publishers, amateur publishers and all the cross-jurisdictional issues that arise in a site like this. It is an example of an institution failing in the face of change. Something far more flexible and simple is needed to help in the articulation of the new mechanisms at play.

Reputation economies

The reputation economy operates very much within the social sphere but has impacts on the commercial practices and fates of both individuals and businesses. Gift economies have been shown to be motivated in part by altruism, in part through social norms of reciprocity (expectations that giving a gift will result in receiving a gift at some point in the future), but also in part by reputation and status seeking (Lampel and Bhalla 2007). Lampel and Bhalla distinguish between reputation and status by defining reputation as an informal and social

structure, whereas status is more formal in that it is a hierarchical system that allows people to measure themselves against others. Status systems in online environments can be found on sites like Slashdot, and eBay, where users are able to rate each other on their contributions in some way. The *Ravelry* site doesn't have a ratings system for people, only for their patterns or yarn, and hence I refer to reputation more than status within this environment.

Reputations within the network are built or undermined through a number of different mechanisms. Popularity is one that can be read through the patterns, yarns and project pages. The most popular recent patterns/yarns are put on the front page of their respective sections. Most popular "over time" (rather than recent) can be found through pattern or yarn searches where the search results are ranked according to popularity among other users. Thus the number of times a pattern has been listed in individual project pages is aggregated and popularity easily assessed in numeric terms. It is also possible for users to comment on those patterns and their experience of them, such that reputation can be enhanced or detracted from according to the commentary of the users, both directly on the pattern page but also through the discussion boards. The same applies to yarn. The structure of the site thus allows for a variety of avenues to reputation building.

Many designers on the site offer some of their patterns for free, and see this as a marketing ploy to enhance their reputation. As with any commercial branding, reputation is important for selling their patterns and over time they work hard to build it within the online networks of knitters (not just in *Ravelry*). It is not uncommon to see a designer offer a pattern for free when starting out. If it becomes a hit, as some of them do, they begin to establish their name as a designer worth buying from. It is this pathway from beginner designer, able to upload a pattern for free and find a distribution network, through to full-blown entrepreneur that offers interesting insights into innovation and how it might be fostered. The ability to build a reputation through a site such as this, without having to rely on being picked up by one of the big knitting publishers is offering many designers the scope to move out of the non-commercial and into the commercial economy. Patterns are tested by an ever increasing network of users, and the best will float to the top of the lists and create the reputation a designer needs to build up a business.

Of course reputations are vulnerable and precarious, and if a bulletin board discussion finds traction with attacking someone's reputation this can have dire consequences for the recipient. The most notable destruction of a reputation in the *Ravelry* boards occurred with a thread that ran to over 12400 posts on the business practices, or the improprieties of a particular woman and her yarn selling business. It appears this woman was running a scam, and even faked her own death at one point to avoid her obligations. One of the interesting features of this discussion thread, aside from the ways users from all over the world were able to aggregate information on their experiences of doing business with this woman, were the various other people who were implicated in the scam and who tried valiantly to clear their names within the context of the thread. One woman had a business with a similar name, and as the scammer had a practice of closing up shop and starting out under a new name when things became heated, people were always on the lookout for new businesses springing up with similar names to the last. Thus a number of small and micro-businesses were undermined that it appears may have been perfectly legitimate enterprises run by other people. But the lack of trust and suspicions about authenticity created by the practices of the scammer made it almost impossible for the innocent bystanders to defend themselves. The lack of clearly defined trust mechanisms became an issue, and the vagaries of the socially driven reputational economy point up the precarious nature of reputation and the lack of any formalised mechanisms of redress. Again, this is a feature of the social economy of tacit rules and assumptions that, in crossing over with the commercial economy, creates areas of confusion and tension.

One final point about the reputation economy is about established offline businesses and how their reputations can be enhanced or not, depending on the kind of engagement they have with their online patrons. As an example, in Australia, two of the very well known yarn suppliers are Bendigo Woollen Mills (BWM) and Australian Country Spinners (ACS) whose mill is in Wangaratta (business is based in Melbourne). BWM does not have an official presence on the *Ravelry* site, although people have started a group for BWM users on the site. Comments are made about BWM and, say, their choice of colours this season or their discontinuation of a favourite type of yarn on the discussion boards of this group (and other Australian groups). Many of these comments are disparaging, and often accompanied by complaints about the lack of responsiveness of the BWM business to internet inquiries and

orders. They are pleased with BWM for being cheap and local, but frustrated with the lack of online service.

By contrast, ACS has a marketing manager, 'Damo', who has established a presence in *Ravelry*. In a brand promotion style exercise of relationship building with the customers 'Damo' has set up a group and discussion list for ACS in *Ravelry*, to which he regularly contributes. He responds to comments on these boards, but also to comments about ACS in other boards – when someone on the Aussie Sock Knitters group makes a comment for instance – making it clear that he devotes a significant amount of time to managing the reputation of the company within this site. His presence has the effect of making the *Ravelers* feel their opinions matter, and that they have a closer relationship to the company. Damo organises offline SnBs (Stitch 'n' Bitch meet-ups) in towns and cities that he is travelling to and has started an online site for knitters and spinners called *Knitterati* that over 500 people signed up to in the first two weeks. The presence of this marketing manager, who has established a profile for himself and a friendly relationship with users has the effect of hosing down any persistent attacks on the reputation of ACS, whereas BWM remain oblivious to what happens to their reputation with this cohort of their customers. ACS are a larger company than BWM and can afford to put resources into this venture in a way that presumably BWM find themselves unable to afford. It's interesting to note on the ACM board where a user chastised ACM for a particular practice as being unfair, it was another user who came to ACS defence with the following comment:

After talking to Damo face-to-face about issues like these its really opened my eyes to how the wool/knitting industry works in Australia. I for one now actively look for ACS yarn over other ones as they listen to their consumers. (For the record, BWM has replied to a group of us previously with "Thanks for your input, we dont care"). Bex. <http://www.ravelry.com/discuss/australian-country-spinners/212671/26-50>

The building of social relationships and trust ultimately can lead to the defence of reputation not by the company but by other users. It's difficult to define this as either commercial or non-commercial – it is more of a hybrid act.

Intertwining of economies

Through observing the various flows of economies found in *Ravelry* it became clear that each aspect was dependent in interesting ways on others. Thus the commercial is dependent on reputation (not a new phenomenon), which can be built and destroyed through the information flows on discussion boards, the relationship building through the social networks

(Damo being a good example), the voluntary labour and inputs of users who upload content about products and information about sources and resources. The non-commercial and affective flows that imbue the site with dynamism are not just a pathway into commercial production (although they can be), but also offer rewards of immaterial and social kinds. Marketing and advertising happen in both commercial and non-commercial venues within the site and are linked to venues outside the site. Perhaps one of the more interesting aspects of the processes of production and innovation found here, are the ways in which they differ from industrial production models. Although some things resonate with the old structures (branding and its associated affect and relationships is not a new idea for instance), many aspects – determining the levels of input to the site, determining who gets paid for input and who is working for free (working for the passion of their hobby) also means living with the uncertainty of what will be produced and in what kind of timeframe. The lack of ability to standardise the mechanics of production means that the outputs of such a system are thus far quite unpredictable. Any site that is reliant on user-generated content will encounter similar conditions.

Mechanisms in play for pattern success

As a way of trying to synthesise how these various economies work within the social network market, in this section I want to briefly analyse what elements contribute to the success of a pattern. If, as Potts *et al* suggest, this is a market where the choices of others determine to a large extent the choices of individuals, then what technological, social, cultural, economic and institutional forces derived from the flows of the above economies come into play?

The front page for the patterns section of the site facilitates numerous pathways into the patterns stored in the database. There is a search for popular patterns by category (sweaters, socks, cardigans, shawls, etc), which will list the patterns ranked by the most popular projects. Thus if a search is done on socks, the list starts with Cookie A's 'Monkey' sock, with 5577 projects listed. In effect, it is possible for the searcher to view 5577 individual versions of this sock as uploaded by the users who have made them. Of the top ten patterns 8 are free and 2 are published in popular knitting magazines or books. By organising the list ranking via popularity it is clear that the choices of others are used as a key determinant in the

search results, rather than any kind of paid-for ranking system, or a listing by designer, or by style, or alphabetically.

The next feature the pattern front page is a pair of side-by-side boxes advertising a particular pattern. The left hand one is ‘curated’ by site owner Jess, and presents a pattern that she thinks is worthy of attention. The right hand box is a paid-for ad. These two boxes are headed ‘Featured Patterns’ with subheadings ‘Jess’ selection...’ and ‘A lovely sponsor...’. Thus again the commercial sits beside the non-commercial on the podium of ‘special’. However strictly speaking, Jess is a commercial actor, so even though the ad is not paid for, it is commercial in some ways. As should be clear by now, the distinctions are often difficult to make.

Beneath these featured patterns is a block of 12 ‘Designers on Ravelry’ which shows the profile pictures and links to 12 designers. This list changes with every refresh of the page and is random. Outside the main frame is the left hand column which offers a search box with various filter options, and then a list of ‘New and Popular – the most active recently published patterns’. This list evolves on a daily basis, with some patterns maintaining position for weeks before dropping off the top 10. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this list is that the most popular patterns are often patterns that are being used in community events. Thus, rather than being based on completely individual tastes, they may be part of a ‘mystery’ knit-along, a knitting club knit-along or the current project of the ‘sock wars’ game. To participate in a mystery knit-along, users sign up and are then sent the pattern for an object in instalments, so that the full shape of the garment or object is only revealed over time. Club knit-alongs are often ‘exclusive’ patterns that are being released to members of a club to knit before the full commercial or public release of a pattern. Thus a sock club may sign on and receive ‘kits’ with the pattern and yarn bundled and sent to each member. They then knit up the project at the same time, posting to the discussion board with problems and fixes and commentary on the pattern.

At the time of writing number three on the ‘most recent and popular’ list was ‘The Detonator’ – a sock pattern being used in the sock wars game. This is a game about speed knitting and good postal technique. Participants sign up to play and they each begin knitting the socks (in this case the Detonator) on the same day. If a player receives a finished pair of the socks in

the mail before they have finished their own, they have been ‘assassinated’ and must send their incomplete socks to the assassin, who tries to finish them before being assassinated themselves. Some knitters assassinate three or four others in the timeframe of the game. Competition is often used as a driver of uptake and participation and the sock wars are an interesting version of this phenomenon for this context.

The top ten list is interesting for the ways it highlights that choices may be driven by things other than taste, money, or ‘rationality’. They may be driven by group membership, or through socially networked connections. What the commercial relationships of ‘clubs’ to pattern publishers is will vary – thus what determines the groups’ choices is open to numerous influences.

For instance a member of the *knitterati* club mentioned above, which is the marketing vehicle of the commercial enterprise Australian Country Spinners, may be motivated by the free yarn and patterns offered sporadically by the club, or the geographical proximity of the supplier (as opposed to the often global nature of online communities and the international locations of various popular yarn suppliers that make prices prohibitive). The selection of patterns used as giveaways or for knit-alongs made by the company may be driven by what the company has commissioned, who the company perceives to be its users and what demographic and taste patterns they perceive those users to have. Other clubs are not associated with commercial enterprises and will have their own criteria for selecting projects to be jointly focussed on. The competition for attention on a site as large as this is reasonably intense, and there are discussions on the designer boards about the best strategies for getting noticed. There is little overt competitiveness between designers and much more adherence to ‘the spirit of *Ravelry*’ and the values of cooperation, even in the midst of competition for attention.

One final aspect of the elements of pattern success is the affordances of the ‘long tail’ (Anderson 2004) of user recommendations which allows the searcher to follow connections and recommendations made by other knitters about particular patterns. Although the site does not provide the same ‘recommendation’ mechanism offered by sites like Amazon, there is commentary by users, and there are pathways to less popular patterns enabled through a number of co-location affordances. The multiple pathways through linking on offer can lead

users to discover little known designers, patterns and yarns. The discussion boards also function as recommendation sites, as users talk about the merits of their current projects.

Conclusions

The flows of information, affect, money and labour that converge in a complex social network market are difficult to separate. This paper has sought to highlight some of the characteristics of each and how they interact within a specific site. In this case study the commercial economy is driven by social imperatives as well as more commonly understood financial imperatives. Labour is done by both paid and unpaid workers. Designers often share their work both by giving it away and by selling it. Many users feel encouraged to produce their own patterns and share them on the site for the first time. The lowered barriers to entry, the help offered by other users, and the ready-made global distribution market offered by the site make entrepreneurial efforts more readily rewarded. Information is exchanged in vast quantities, feeding into both social/affective economies, reputational economies and commercial economies. The information is produced by users and site owners, volunteers and paid workers, entrepreneurs and consumers. There are rewards associated with each economy – monetary rewards, social reputation, business reputation, and the inherent affective rewards of relationships and creativity. In one sense, all aspects must be attended to if full participation is the goal. Relationships are as important as designs and business strategies. Motivations are heavily tied to the range of rewards, and one user may occupy a number of different positions at different times and in different places within the site and within the network structures. Users often both produce and consume, and with the lowered barriers to entry, the possibilities for innovations to be made, noticed and commercialised are all supported in a site like this.

The networked production model evidenced through specialist social networking sites such as *Ravelry* does not conform to an industrial style production model. The complexity of activities and relationships going on in this site and their varied formats demand new theorising. This is a production model where the outputs are unpredictable, the timeframe for production is flexible in the extreme, the outputs are sometimes social rather than material, and the benefits are sometimes financial, sometimes social, sometimes both. Exactly who is deriving these benefits varies and ranges between users as consumers, users as producers,

retail and wholesale businesses and the site owners. The possibilities for innovations to gain traction in this environment seem good, and the scale of the engagement means it rather resembles a large R&D lab. This kind of phenomenon has been remarked upon in relation to computer games and their mod communities (Postigo 2007). However the open network system being employed in this site, where the walled garden is eschewed in favour of extensive linking and networking into other sites, would seem to enable a greater capacity for innovative design and technique to flourish and be capitalised upon outside the confines of the *Ravelry* site.

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¹ The site is used by knitters, spinners and crocheters, but for the sake of brevity I will mostly refer to knitters in this paper rather than all 3 each time.