Chapter 1.11
Community of Production

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INTRODUCTION

There is no universal agreement regarding the meaning of the term "social software." Clay Shirky, in his classic speech "A Group is its Own Worst Enemy," defined social software as "software that supports group interaction" (Shirky, 2003). In this speech, this scholar of digital culture also observed that this was a "fundamentally unsatisfying definition in many ways, because it doesn't point to a specific class of technology."

The example offered by Shirky, illustrating the difficulties of this definition, was electronic mail, an instrument that could be used in order to build social groups on the Net, but also to implement traditional forms of communication such as broadcasting, or noncommunicative acts such as spamming. In his effort to underline the social dimension of this phenomenon, rather than its purely technological aspects, Shirky decided to maintain his original proposal, and this enables scholars engaged in the analysis of virtual communities to maintain a broad definition of social software. Heterogeneous technologies, such as instant messaging, peer-to-peer, and even online multigaming have been brought under the same conceptual umbrella of social software, exposing this to a real risk of inflation. In a debate mainly based on the Web, journalists and experts of the new media have come to define social software as software that enables group interaction, without specifying user behaviour in detail. This approach has achieved popularity at the same pace as the broader epistemological interest in so-called emergent systems, those that, from basic rules develop complex behaviours not foreseen by the source code (Johnson, 2002). This definition may be more useful in preserving the specific character of social software, on the condition that we specify this carefully. If we include emergent behaviour, regardless of which Web technologies enter into our definition of social software, we will once again arrive at a definition that includes both everything and nothing. Emergence is not to be sought in the completed product, that may be unanticipated but is at least well-defined at the end of the productive cycle, but rather resides in the relationship between the product, understood as a contingent event, and the whole process of its production and reproduction. A peculiar characteristic of social software is that, while allowing a high level of social interaction on the basis of few rules, it enables the immediate re-elaboration of products in further collective cycles of produc-

tion. In other words, social software is a means of production whose product is intrinsically a factor of production. Combining hardware structures and algorithmic routines with the labour of its users, a social software platform operates as a means of production of knowledge goods, and cognitive capital constitutes the input as well as the output of the process.

If a hardware-software system is a means of production of digital goods, social software represents the means by which those products are automatically reintroduced into indefinitely-reiterated productive cycles. This specification allows us to narrow down the area of social software to particular kinds of programmes (excluding, by definition, instant messaging, peer-to-peer, e-mail, multiplayer video games, etc.) and to focus the analysis on generative interaction processes that distinguish social software from general network software. Moreover, following this definition, it is possible to operate a deeper analysis of this phenomenon, introducing topics such as the property of hosting servers, the elaboration of rules and routines that consent reiterated cycle of production, and the relationships between actors within productive processes.

NORMATIVE EVOLUTION OF THE INTERNET FROM NET95 TO WEB 2.0

At the end of the 1990s, two particular events gained wide social significance in the evolution of global telecommunications networks. First, a deep restructuring of the fundamental architecture of the Internet radically transformed the network which had been born in the ARPA laboratories. Coming out of a rather narrow military and academic sphere, the Internet became at once easier and more complex. Graphical user interface (GUI) principles simplified computer and database management for a growing mass of individuals who were ready to get connected, giving birth

to a vigorous codification of intermediate zones between man and machine. Operating systems, appliances, software, automatic updates: the popularisation of the Net has proceeded through a constant delegation of terminal management from the user to the software producer, and in the case of software distributed under the juridical instrument of the "license of use," this delegation consists in the property of parts of the "personal" computer. The American constitutionalist Lawrence Lessig, underlining the social relevance of this phenomenon, describes the original network (Net95) as being completely twisted, subject to the control of those coding authorities that, since 1995, have reconfigured the architecture of cyberspace (Lessig, 1999).

The second event that has contributed to the morphology of the transformation of new information technologies is a direct consequence of the first, and concerns contents, or products, of this new kind of network. The more Internet has been regulated by a wide group of code writers, among which a narrow circle of economic players who have assumed positions of power, the more personal relationship networks based upon it have assumed social significance and cultural reach. Ease of computer management and development of applications that allow social interaction in an intuitive and simple manner have brought blogs, wiki, syndication and file-sharing platforms to the scene. The growing use of these Internet-based applications, a result of the convergence between the regulation and socialisation of cyberspace, has slowly attracted the attention of political and economic organisations due to its capacity to allow a widespread and participative use of digital goods and knowledge. So, the first realisation of Web 2.0 (or semantic Web) was the product of a normative process operated for the most part by software engineers, a product which, arriving later, attracted the attention of the social sciences, which tended to view the means of that production as black boxes. In this period, between the last two centuries, besides more profound reflection on

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