We are social animals and as such we develop considerable skills and tools that help us to communicate, compete and cooperate. Governments and cultural institutions arise out of the need to share resources efficiently, and libraries are one important kind of cultural institution that have long exemplified cooperative sharing. Collaboration is a special kind of cooperation that assumes strong intrinsic intention to achieve a common goal and in many cases is used as a metaphor for cooperation and sharing. Collaboration has become the go to strategy for attacking complex problems. This trend is illustrated in all arenas of endeavor from industry (partnerships and cooperative agreements) to science (collaboratories and translational research) to education (social learning and distributed cognition). Collaboration and implicit cooperation are supported by the emerging cyberinfrastructure that makes possible the WWW and today’s social networking services.

Wherever one looks, the messages of our culture promote collaboration as the way to improved use of resources and outcomes. Open access information, open standards, and open source software all emanate from the desire to share intellectual and physical resources and invite collaboration and cooperation. Clearly, collaboration is a significant driver of human progress and considerable efforts are given to create tools and services to support it (e.g., the CSCW research and development community).

In addition to the explicit collaboration that people undertake, cyber-infrastructure allows people and machines to leverage the implicit activities of people as they work and play online. Although not true collaboration, such systems have become known as recommender systems that depend on collaborative filtering algorithms. We are thus witnessing increasing examples of cooperation and collaboration among collectives of people and machines.

As with all important ideas, collaboration can become dogma if it becomes the default rather than a choice. It is just important that we ask, “When is collaboration not effective and what are its limitations?” as it is to ask, “Why it is effective and how can we best apply it.” Certainly collaboration comes with costs associated with communication overhead and additional monitoring support. Moreover, collaboration requires personality traits and organizational cultures that help or hinder effectiveness. Any serious treatment of collaboration must at least state underlying assumptions and better yet question them. To do so seriously yields a strong basis upon which theoretical and empirical evidence of the effects of collaboration stand. The collection of papers in this book presents cases of collaboration and cooperation from a range of these perspectives.

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