Chapter 31
Seeking Utopia: Communities and the Commons in the Contemporary Media Environment

Natalie Pang
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

ABSTRACT
The chapter starts by elucidating the concept of the contemporary media environment as a complex interaction of two computing variables: the growth of personal computers, and the popularity of the Internet and World Wide Web. This environment is then analysed for its impacts on collective processes in both virtual and physical communities. It is argued that these collective processes contain multiplier effects; and one of these effects lies in the subtractability of resources; an important concept in the knowledge commons. Examples are used to illustrate these perspectives. The author maintains, throughout the chapter, that it is essential to see all of these interactions as two-way, dialogical relationships and structuration theory is used in support of this argument. As a concluding note, the chapter makes a number of forecasts on the benefits and potential pitfalls for the society as a result of these relationships.

INTRODUCTION
As far back in 380 BC, philosophers have thought about, and debated about the ideal community. Thinking around such work was perhaps best captured in Plato’s The Republic, where he began with the attempt to define justice – highlighting that ‘it concerns the way we ought to live’ (Ferrari, 2000, p 28). In that light, he also lamented that ‘the unjust man enjoys life better than the just’ (ibid, p 35) and argued for the need to address these issues in order to achieve a ‘just’ community.

These thoughts by Plato were later made popular by Sir Thomas More’s Utopia in 1516, describing a fictional island with an outwardly perfect social system. Since this famous work, communities, philosophers, researchers, writers, and the like—have used Utopia to refer to the desire for an ideal society. The study and desire for the commons today (Pang et al, 2008) reflect a core belief in such epitomes. Likewise, Hardin’s (1968)
famous essay on the ‘tragedy’ of the commons also summarises criticisms against the commons.

Does it remain an unrealistic dream? Or have people, communities, the society at large – been defining and refining their own Utopia, even if unconsciously? The criticism that it is unrealistic aside, Utopia captures the essence of Plato’s Republic, where a society ruled on principles of equality, peace, and tolerance was also sustainable because of its focus on collective instead of self interests. At the core of these ideals is the fabric of collective processes governing communities, and an inquiry on how it has evolved together with changes in the contemporary media environment is important.

This is the key objective of this chapter, and the chapter endeavours to achieve this goal by discussing structural forces shaping, and are shaped by communities – at the same time making distinctions between the key collective processes governing communities of today.

**THE DUALITY OF STRUCTURE**

Giddens argued that structures, together with meanings and actions are continuously interdependent:

*The best and most interesting ideas in the social sciences (a) participate in fostering the climate of opinion and the social processes which give rise to them, (b) are in greater or lesser degree entwined with theories-in-use which help to constitute those processes and (c) are thus unlikely to be clearly distinct from considered reflection which lay actors may bring to bear in so far as they discursively articulate, or improve upon, theories-in-use (Giddens, 1984, p. 34).*  

This clearly articulated the recursive nature of human relationships in communities. In the everyday exchanges between human actions and structures, people are also constantly transforming the very same structures that empower or constrain their actions. This insight is essential in realising that the study of people and their interactions with various political, technological, social, or economic structures there is the inevitable dilemma of structure and agency. In other words, studies involving human communities must account for both objective and subjective realities.

The central notion of structuration theory focuses on how the conflict between objective and subjective realities can be resolved. Structures are viewed as ‘both the medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices’ (Giddens, 1979, p. 5). Given this insight, cultural context can thus be understood as being generated and regenerated through the interplay of actions and structures. This is known as the duality of structure, which is explained as:

*Structure as the medium and outcome of the conduct it recursively organizes; the structural properties of social systems do not exist outside of action but are chronically implicated in its production and reproduction (Giddens, 1984, p. 374).*  

Using three analytical structures, such duality can be illustrated (Figure 1). Structures of signification, domination and legitimation are