

'KARMA, PRECIOUS KARMA!'

KARMAWHORING ON REDDIT AND THE FRONT PAGE'S ECONOMETRIZATION

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ABSTRACT

The social news aggregator *Reddit* temptingly suggests that we may regard the collaboration and communication between users as altruistic interactions. On Reddit's numerous topical subsections (subreddits), users post various content: they exchange opinions on current events, share personal experiences, hand out advice, support e-learning and even commute material gifts. It is 'a website about everything', claiming to be 'powered by community, democracy and you' (Figure 1). Despite this reassurance of Reddit's altruistic approach to peer collaboration, this paper analyses internal meta-discourses and conflicts which indicate opposing ideological justifications and controversial incentives for contributions. While some Redditors insist on following idealistic, topically focused motives for their participation, others suggest that they mainly post content with the aim of collecting 'Karma-points'. The latter approach has been called 'Karmawhoring': a term which references Reddit's ranking and evaluation system of contributions through the allocation of Karma-points. Reddit's Karma-system and the possibility of up-/downvoting content is a strategy that aims to decentralise the governance of content and leave the decision of its subjective quality to the crowd. However, the conflict between idealistically and quantitatively motivated user behaviour has led to a discrepancy between value assessments of Reddit's content. The numerical representation of contributions' value through Karma-points, calculated by users' up- and downvotes, does not function as uncontested, reliable signal and equivalent to a (highly subjective) qualitative valuation of content. Instead, Karma-points have been internally problematised as a quasi-monetary incentive for users' participation which undermines community-benefiting contributions. This 'econometrization' of Redditing also appears to be a result of the community's growth in scale. A user focus on 'gamification' elements, such as Karma-points, may be particularly appealing once the visibility of communication is regulated by a vast amount of other users and interpersonal feedback becomes less likely. Majority participation and the crowds' signals of topical demand regulate the content supply. In this sense, Karma turns into the social media equivalent of

money, and Karma-points gain an indirect relation to monetary value.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reddit is a social news aggregator typically divided into various subsections (subreddits) where users willingly share personal experiences, hand out advice, support e-learning and even commute material gifts. Registered 'Redditors' can up- or downvote other users' posts and comments which has the dual function of ranking content and likewise enabling the collection of 'Karma points'. While up- and downvotes indicate the feedback to a contribution through a direct, numerical representation of users' negative and positive assessment, Karma points are calculated by an algorithm which takes into account factors such as the date of a post, its classification as an original link or added comment as well as the respective source. Depending on the subreddit, the topical platform where a post has been placed, reasons for considering a contribution as '(un-)valuable' and signalling such an evaluation through up-/downvotes or comments may be helpfulness, informativity, creativity, provocativeness, innovation or wittiness.

[Figure 1: Screenshot excerpt of Reddit's frontpage, available at: <http://www.reddit.com/>, accessed on 2 May 2013]

The notion of *value* is crucial in this context, since recent developments on Reddit suggest that the numerical representation of a contribution's appreciation often deviates from the qualitative assessment by Redditors as expressed in comments or meta-discussions. Karma-points might indicate a high value by representing a large amount of upvotes, however within the community one can observe discursive controversies that the allocation of Karma-points and a (highly subjective) quality of Reddit's content tend to stand in contrast to each other. Instead of acting as a reliable signal of the content's value in terms of its benefit for the overall community, Karma-points are meanwhile considered as a symbol for quantitatively oriented content choices which neglect any idealistic approach of community-oriented user behaviour. Discussions, controversies and conflicts between users on Reddit indicate that the popularisation of a former sub-cultural platform has led to a concurrence of users who represent opposing criteria for assigning value to a contribution.

This paper will analyse discussions and conflicts between users in order to assess the different mechanisms of content valuation and users' indicated motives for involvement on Reddit. In this context, we approach Reddit as system of peer collaboration and production. The term indicates 'a

subset of commons-based production practices. It refers to production systems that depend on individual action that is self-selected and decentralized, rather than hierarchically assigned' (Benkler 2006, p. 62). The discursive threads which evolve through contributions of various registered users are the core of Reddit's user generated content, and form the website's product. What Redditors produce are in the end discussions grouped around a suggested topic and/or link. The generated traffic functions as an incentive for embedded, commercial advertisement.

Reddit is an insightful case of peer production and direct peer-to-peer interaction since the actual 'product' is rather ephemeral: The textual threads, combinations of an initial post and subsequent comments, constitute the collaborative, intellectual product. Seeing that Redditors often address highly subjective and controversial topics, the question arises of how such content—which can be mainly evaluated by applying *subjective* criteria—creates challenges for the governance and collaborative judgement of contributions' value. We are not dealing with a product whose use value can be assessed objectively by criteria such as functional/dysfunctional, right/wrong—as may be the case for software programming or most information on Wikipedia for example. Instead, we are looking at content that is subject to a 'matter of taste': its value and quality is therefore highly negotiated within the community.

The incentives for users' voluntary contributions and the value of their invested labour is still a crucial issue in analyses of peer production. Since input is neither monetarily rewarded nor defined by objective market regulations, one is left wondering about alternative incentives as well as the value assessments of users' efforts. Benkler identifies the difference between *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* motivation as a key feature of peer involvement. While extrinsic motivations involve distinct, external inducements such as money, reputation or any quantifiable reward, intrinsically motivated actions exclusively affect a person's internal state, such as happiness or personal fulfilment (see e.g. Ryan/Deci 2000).

On Reddit, peer production and users' interactions appear to be torn between (at least) two motives for contributions: On one hand, there are users who explicitly comply with Benkler's definition and emphasize the importance of ensuring a topical variety and content quality of Reddit. They perceive a (self-)responsibility to ensure that the value of a contribution corresponds to its benefit to the community. Surely, we cannot determine whether this is their actual motivation, however we can identify the communication of such incentives. On the other hand, users reveal an interest in maximising their Karma-points which they gain for individual contributions and accumulate on their overall profile. Their endeavour to gain Karma-points follows an extrinsic

motivation^[1]. These 'powerusers' are following a pejoratively termed strategy of 'Karmawhoring'. The latter phrase shall also be used as 'in-vivo code' in our paper to designate a user behaviour on Reddit that seems to be mainly quantitatively motivated. It does not merely refer to a pejorative designation by critical users, but is also self-referentially applied by users who openly admit to Karma-oriented posting strategies (see www.reddit.com/r/upvote or www.reddit.com/r/karmawhore).

This paper will therefore analyse how the possibility of collecting and allocating Karma-points through up- and downvotes relates to users' emphasised motivations for participation. Naturally, we cannot address these motives directly: Instead, we will analyse cases where peer motivations for contributions are expressed through meta-discussions regarding internal issues on Reddit or revealed in critique of other users' behaviour. It appears that with the growing scale of Reddit's overall community, one can observe criticisms of an aesthetic shift in its dominant content. While contributing innovative content and encouraging in-depth discussions are described as an idealistic values, particularly represented by long-term Redditors, the increased competition for each others' attention has led to a rise in content which is able to appeal to a majority of users. It does not require any expression of dis-/approval that exceeds a decision between up- or downvoting. Such a development has also promoted the dominance of Karma-oriented, extrinsically motivated postings.

Especially on the subreddits r/TheoryOfReddit, r/circlebroke, and r/circlejerk one can observe a strong tendency of users to discuss meta-topics. Besides analyses of content from those contexts, we will look at discussions where, for example, the problem of Karmawhoring is not addressed as such, but where instead users accuse other Redditors of Karmawhoring or behave in a specific way, either employing or criticising Karma-oriented strategies. This lastly mentioned object of analysis often evolves from conflicts, which mostly means cases where users deliberate on whether a post or comment is mainly motivated by potential Karma-achievement. Such discussions arise especially around posts which tend to trigger quickly expressed (dis-)approval by up- or downvoting a post rather than encouraging in-depth discussions.

Furthermore, external websites such as Karmawhores.net document the rising interest in enabling a quantifiable measurement of achievements and representation of gratification for participation in Social News Media. The website generates linear diagrams from Redditors' statistics and can be used as an econometric visualisation of their performance.

In the following, we describe how an ideology of intrinsically motivated peer production currently

conflicts with an extrinsically motivated user behaviour encouraged through the website's Karma-gratification system. We firstly introduce Reddit and its functionalities in more detail in order to provide a base for the ensuing analysis. Subsequently, we elaborate on our main hypotheses which we intend to validate through an analysis of meta-discussions and conflicts on Reddit as expressed in posts and comments. This applied analysis focuses on cases where Karmawhoring and counter-strategies become explicitly visible on Reddit. Our approach includes examples of Redditors criticising Karma-oriented 'powerusers', forms of top-down governance exerted by moderators/administrators or implied by rules, and bottom-up governance through 'naming and shaming' as well as mass downvoting campaigns of a respective user.

2. REDDIT: 'THE FRONT PAGE OF THE INTERNET'

The social news platform Reddit has had 71,435,935 unique visitors in June 2013, consisting of over 2,344,323 logged in Redditors, in June 2013 (see www.reddit.com/about/). Redditors can post text, links, pictures or videos and other users can comment on these posts or merely up- or downvote them. One does not need to be a registered user to read the posts, but an account is necessary to actively contribute. Registration does not require users to provide their email or any personal details however. Therefore Reddit's data on users lacks certain information, for example on their demographics or geographic location. Since June 2008, Reddit can be classified as an Open Source Project: most of the codes and libraries are freely accessible on *GitHub* under a Common Public Attribution License (see <https://github.com/reddit/reddit/wiki/API>).

Reddit was founded by Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian in June 2005. They sold their project to Condé Nast Publications in October 2006, and it has since operated as a subsidiary of Condé Nast's parent company, Advance Publications. It cannot be determined for sure how much Reddit was sold for. Alexis Ohanian said in an interview: 'People ask how much it was for, but I haven't even told my girlfriend. I tell her, 'You can Google it, and you'll find it was between \$10 million and \$20 million''. It later sold for a highly controversial amount somewhere in between 50 million and 700 million USD (see www.theatlanticwire.com/technology/2012/10/depending-who-you-ask-reddit-worth-240-million-or-700-million-or-50-million/58533).

2.1 HOW REDDIT WORKS

What you first see when you go on Reddit.com is the so called 'front page' which contains

topically-varied posts from diverse subreddits. The order of these contributions can be ranked by the criteria 'hot, new, rising, controversial, top, saved'; the default view is set to 'hot'. The aforementioned categories represent different algorithms that determine according to which selection criteria posts are being arranged.

Apart from the front page, where content is topically mixed, users can create subreddits dedicated to issues of their choice. Originally, Reddit's front page used to be a subreddit itself, but nowadays it acts as part of the website's gratification system. Highly rated or controversial posts will appear on that page which you will see initially when visiting www.reddit.com. 'Making it to the front page' is therefore also an incentive for posting content that has a potential to gain a lot of upvotes (ranked: top) or results in controversial assessments (ranked: controversial). The algorithms which are responsible for ranking these contributions take into account the relations between up- and downvotes a post has received so far, the amount of comments as well as the time passed by since the content has been posted (see Yeo 2012 for a more detailed description).

In currently 243,582 subreddits—new ones are created by users day by day—Redditors submit questions, post pictures, ask for advice or simply tell stories. The most accessed thread so far was a so called 'AMA' (Ask-Me-Anything): a question and answer session given by U.S. President Barack Obama in August 2012 (see <http://locatingthesocial.wordpress.com/2013/04/10/i-am-barack-obama-president-of-the-united-states-ask-me-anything/>). It received 5,598,171 [page views](#) which is more than double than the second most accessed thread on Reddit in 2012.

Popular subreddits which new users are by default opted into are 'technology', 'music', 'gaming', 'funny', 'worldnews', 'science' and 'politics'. So, even though Reddit claims to be a 'website about everything', there are topics which are particularly popular as external statistics show (see <http://stattit.com/subreddits/>). Hence, it addresses or rather embraces certain target groups. Even though no topics are officially excluded (except for when it comes to legal issues), there is a propagation of popular content through up-/downvoting defined by the user group that is online at any particular time. For example during the night hours in the U.S. where traffic on the site is low, one can observe posts which invite Australian users to post new content (and likewise posts lamenting Australian users' poor contributions). It is common to use browser add-ons such as Reddit Enhancement Suite which allows for additional features, particularly with regards to users' customisation of their Reddit-experience.

2.2 PEER PRODUCTION AND REDDITING, OR: 'UPVOTE IF YOU LIKE BACON'

As mentioned before, the up- and downvotes that a post receives are calculated into Karma points depending on an algorithm which, for example, takes into account the time elapsed between post and vote. The allocation of Karma does only account for link-posts however: mere text posts ('self-posts') are not eligible to achieve any points for a user. This gratification logic is already a result from past 'Karmawhoring' strategies. The discussion below explains the development while likewise referring to a counter-intuitive depreciation of individual text contributions. A user whose account has since been deleted asked 'Self posts get no karma, even though 99% of the good stuff on reddit is self-posts? Shouldn't it be the other way around—you get karma for things YOU have written, not just linked to?' In this context, the user Anomander replies:

'Self posts used to give karma, this was disabled because 'UPVOTE IF YOU LIKE BACON' was an honest to god karmawhoring strategy, and in such great effect and quantity that they were deemed problematic and there were concerns they were taking over from legitimate content. I think the top story from the time was 'upvote this if you think George Bush is a shitty president.' No content, no discussion, no effort from OP, just a lot of people agreeing that GB looks like a chimp and was unfit for office.' ([source](#))

The explanation given by this Redditor indicates that the possibility to collect Karma points encourages a user behaviour which might not endeavour to contribute to a lively discussion, but aims at maximising Karma. Self-posts were not conducive to encouraging textual interaction or provoking controversial discussions (since that would have led to downvotes as well). Rather they aimed at affecting mass agreement expressed through pre-defined yes/no options expressed in up-/downvotes, and were mainly concerned with minor issues with a high likelihood of compliance. In this sense, disabling the collection of Karma points through self-posts is an early example of structural counter strategies in order to ensure a certain 'quality' of Reddit's overall content, topical variety and depth. More recently, one can also observe that some users appear to be very sensitive towards strategies that are too obviously targeted at maximising Karma-output. This paper will analyse some of these strategies further on in more detail, and demonstrates the conflict between users striving for a maximum of Karma points, and those who take an interest in Reddit's overall variety and (a hardly definable) quality.

This notion of subjective quality is highly relevant to the initially mentioned 'value' of a contribution. It has already been pointed out that involvement of users in peer-production may not be regulated by conventional property- and contract-based logics as is the case for companies or markets. It differs from profit-oriented, private business production as well as from public production by state enterprises since its '[...] product is not exchange value for a market, but use-value for a

community of users' (Bauwens 2006, p. 1). However, recent dynamics on Reddit indicate that there is a tendency to create substitutes for monetary achievement measurements: quantitative assessments of social media participation through achievement badges, levels and progress bars, virtual currencies or (Karma) points do not merely document a transfer from gaming elements into social media contexts. They also build upon an internalized appreciation of quantifiable performance and success. We will get back to such a social media *gamification*, a term coined by Nick Pelling in 2002, later on.

3. HYPOTHESES AND ASSUMPTIONS

An issue which will be addressed in this paper is the incompatibility of understanding 'Karma points' as reward for contributions in favour of the overall community, and the perception of Karma points as personal gratification for popular posts. The idealistic notion of impartial, content-focused evaluation is at the heart of Reddit's collaborative content concept: Karma-points are meant to serve as a secondary incentive for active contributions which constitute Reddit's content and provide the base for its ad-funded as well as subscription-based ('Reddit Gold') business model. ('Reddit Gold' is the website's premium membership program which provides users additional features when using Reddit.) Nevertheless, one can observe a conflict that emerges from discrepancies between part of the communities' communicated, explicated social values and the numerical value of Karma-points. While some users condemn behaviour on Reddit that is obviously quantitatively oriented, others admit to perceiving Karma points as final gratification for their contributions (see [/r/UPVOTE](#) or [/r/karmawhore](#)). The possibility of achieving a high amount of positive feedback and Karma-points has been meanwhile described as a repetitive formula (see <http://redditkarmawhore.blogspot.de/>).

Considering the spiritual background of 'Karma' as a core concept of religions such as Sikh, Buddhism or Jainism whose origin can be geographically located in Indian cultures, the term implies very distinct connotations. Even though the meaning of 'Karma' differs slightly within the respective religions, a common denominator is the belief in a direct relation between cause and effect. Any event which is experienced by an individual is always understood as a result of the individual's former actions. The impacts of any behaviour may only be perceivable in another, following life, but they are necessarily interlinked with the personal behaviour. This means positive

or negative experiences may also be caused by actions a person cannot remember. Hence, 'Karma' also refers to a conviction that any event expresses justice.

In this sense, Reddit's Karma points refer to a user behaviour which is concerned about the 'wellbeing' of the community, but is nevertheless motivated by self-interest. In contrast to Karmawhoring however, users claim that their self-interest is not mainly driven by the desire to accumulate Karma points, but is based on the realisation of a self-inflicted degeneration of the platform. Posting interesting content and maintaining a constructive flow of communication also ensures that the website continues to be valuable for the respective user. Since Karmawhoring usually addresses the most common denominator of Redditors, it inhibits the possibilities for heterogeneous, innovative and controversial content. With respect to the previously given definition of Karma, it is obvious as well that the phrase 'Karma-whoring' is an oxymoron. 'Karma' implies an intrinsically motivated aspiration to affect your environment positively since this will impact you in the same sense. In contrast, the term 'whoring'—which might be critically seen, but shall be adopted here as a kind of 'in vivo'-code—pejoratively condemns profit oriented user behaviour: 'Karma at any cost' is the rather obvious accusation. The inherent discrepancy between the two terms indicates a misuse of Reddit's Karma-system as criticised by users who encourage content-oriented postings. As mentioned before however, users who advocate Karma-oriented interests have re-appropriated the term for themselves. Such a linguistic re-appropriation of originally stigmatised terms can be observed in various other contexts, as for example regarding the terms 'queer', 'freak', or (quite recently) 'geek' (see Galinsky et al. 2003).

Karma points are meant to structurally regulate Redditors' behaviour in a way that makes the website worthwhile for its community of users. However, the *econometrization* of participation results in usage strategies which might have a negative effect on the website's content and contradict its rather idealistic mentality. With econometrization we intend to address internal website features as well as external services that allow users to measure their virtual involvement and therefore quantify their 'success'. In the following, we will also refer to the design-concept of 'gamification' (see Pelling 2011 [2002]) in order to explain how elements and visualisations of quantification may affect a social media community such as Reddit. The communicative rules and content regulations appear to be limited in the extent to which they can be regulated by virtual infrastructures, and are then subject to peer-to-peer negotiations. These can be expressed in interventions of administrators, users' critique of others' behaviour (in comments or through downvoting) and in Reddit's code of conduct (Rediquette).

When talking about 'structural' features or the 'infrastructure' we are referring to predefined usage elements on Reddit such as the given up-/downvote buttons, text fields which can only contain hyperlinks or comments, or the various possibilities of sorting content and creating an individual user profile through chosen subreddits and bookmarking posts under 'saved'. The paper therefore looks at the conditions for interaction as given by Reddit's website structure, but it also takes into account peers' governance and efforts to enforce a certain user behaviour in order to ensure an individually defined and historically produced community mentality, or one could say: ideology.

After this introduction into Reddit's functionalities and stating our assumptions about the relation between Karma-points, particular content and (un-)idealistic claims to motives for contributions, we will now analyse conflicts between Redditors who represent Karma-induced contributors and those criticising a fixation on quantifiable measurements of participation.

4. KARMA, PRECIOUS KARMA!

As part of its 'About' information, Reddit already anticipates the questions of 'Why should I contribute?' in terms of 'Why should I try to accumulate Karma?' (see www.reddit.com/wiki/faq).

The first indications given here are phrased as rhetorical questions:

'Why should you try to score points in a video game? Why should your favorite sports team try to win the championship? Or, to look at things from a less competitive and more altruistic perspective, read what [philosophers have said about the matter](#)—namely, don't set out to accumulate karma; just set out to be a good person, and let your karma simply be a reminder of your legacy'.

Both types of answer are quite revealing, since they do not actually argue by referring to the users' participation as the main condition for Reddit's business model: A more direct answer would be that while the users' contributions manifest the product, their up- and downvotes are supposed to assure content's governance and quality. Instead, the quote above refers to an internalized logic of collecting points that we are familiar with from games and sports without questioning the (somehow irrational) gratification mechanisms behind such endeavours. Moreover, it refers to a 'do good—feel good' mentality which is meant to provide benefits for altruistic user behaviour in a rather 'spiritual' way. One is left wondering why these answers propagate a competitive *or* altruistic reasoning. Another more likely answer seems to be that users should contribute and collect Karma since it provides them with personal agency to determine content on Reddit. Users should post and vote, since otherwise they are simply exposed to contributions they might not be interested in.

Even though we have problematised up- and downvoting on Reddit so far, this mechanism also enables users to influence the website's content in favour of majorities' interests. Of course, there is some democratic potential behind this structure as well. In this sense, the effect and potential of Karma are torn: The option to allocate Karma to users' posts gives people power to influence content on Reddit, but it might also makes them fall into quantitatively oriented usage patterns. In this sense, Karma is simultaneously the solution and the problem.

4.1 GAMIFICATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA

'Gamification'—a term coined by Nick Pelling in 2002—has become a ubiquitous, though somehow transparent layer of social media (see Zichermann/Cunningham 2012; Fuchs 2012; O'Brien 2010). The concept which has informed website designs and interfaces that encourage users' active participation, originally started as a project to rework electronic devices. Pelling himself wrote about the original idea that, in late 2002, he '[...] coined the deliberately ugly word 'gamification', by which I meant applying game-like accelerated user interface design to make electronic transactions both enjoyable and fast. Note that I was much more interested in applying gamification ideas to electronic devices than to the Web back then'. (Pelling 2011) Today, the concept describes the transfer of elements, typically known from video/computer games, into non-gaming contexts. Gamification basically means instrumentalizing '[t]he process of game-thinking and game mechanics to engage users and to solve problems' (Zichermann/Cunningham 2012: xiv). Characteristic strategies of gamification are the inclusion of achievement badges, levels and progress bars which provide virtual currencies or points.

In contrast to games, social media usually do not offer objective procedures in order to gain achievements and rewards of participation. Following a game's pre-defined structure will usually lead to in-game rewards. Superficially seen, participation is led by incentives similar to gaming, however users do not interact with a calculable programme. Hence, if they want to gain rewards for their participation, they have to acquaint themselves with content logics, audience preferences and communication habits of the respective social media. In order to achieve and maximise feedback—or rather gratification, they adjust their social media participation to an assumed audience. In the following chapters, we will describe exemplary approaches of users in order to maximise their achievement of Karma-points, what kind of content such behaviour may facilitate, and how other users attempt to counteract such an influence on the overall appearance of Reddit.

4.2 KARMAWHORING AND REDDITORS' CRITICISMS

The development of increasingly Karma-oriented contributions can be observed in several forms among Redditors and currently polarises the overall user group. Before elaborating on cases where users countered Karmawhoring-strategies with reactions going beyond critical comments, we will introduce some of the discussions and criticisms regarding this issues.

An exemplary Karmawhoring-technique is expressed in posts providing narrative teasers of possible stories: the respective users assure they would be willing to tell more, if only other users would give them upvotes in advance. The effort of participation is only made under the condition of a noticeable reward. In a thread on sexual encounters with prostitutes a user wrote, for example: 'I'd go into a lot more detail if I knew there was a chance that people would see the comment—so I'll see if this has any replies before I spend any time writing stuff out' (see Figure 2; the original post has since been deleted). Seeing that the only way to be sure that a post has been seen and gained attention is through the numerical feedback of Karma-points and up-/downvotes, the user basically awaits other users' feedback as a quasi-monetary prepayment for their contribution. S/he does not mainly express a desire to share a story and information, but aims at ensuring that the contribution gains attention. This approach has a certain resemblance to imageboards such as 4chan where a thread's position on the front page is not determined by Karma/up- and downvotes, but by users' reactions. In order to keep posts in a thread and in a high position, users can 'bump' them. This means they do not add any meaningful content, but mainly write 'bump' as a comment and hence keep the post visible on a 4chan subforum. This also resulted in posts which would for example show an image of a girl with the added promise that nude pictures of her would follow if the post would continue to get bumped and therefore obtain a high position in a forum.

[Figure 2: Screenshot excerpt of a thread on Reddit.com, the source has been deleted, accessed on 29/01/2013]

Avoiding self-posts (which are not eligible to receive Karma) or reposting former self-posts as screenshots (that can be posted as links to pictures, mainly uploaded on imgur.com, and can therefore gain Karma-points) is another strategy of Karmwhoring. In this context, the subreddit r/keto (which topically focuses on Ketogenic dieting) has even excluded the possibility of posting links, since it disables Karma-oriented posting. In the beginning of 2013, it was announced that '/r/keto goes self-post only to increase post quality, criticism and calls to unsubscribe abound'. One reason was a moderator's link-repost of another user's self-post which resulted in an outraged

discussion (see Figure 3): 'Scumbag mod[erator]... Hides [my](#) self post thanking the mods for the achievement and links an image to reap the karma'. The comment 'HOW THE FUCK DID YOU GET BACON THERE?' also indicates that '(Upvote if you like) Bacon' may have become a synonym for Karmawhoring. The same accounts for the term 'circlejerk': Just as 'Karmawhoring', this term constructs an analogy between (morally disputed) sex-practices and user behaviour that mainly aims at gaining Karma points.

[Figure 3: Screenshot excerpt, available at: www.reddit.com/r/keto/comments/15txl6/weve_reached_50000_subscribers_congratulations/, accessed on 15/07/2013]

A lot of Reddit users comment critically on Karmawhoring-strategies since they address the lowest common denominator which usually involves already popular topics. Reposting quantitatively 'successful' content (which is widely seen as Karmawhoring by users), identifying and repeating broadly appealing content, inhibit the innovative potential of contributions. This aspect may also explain the success of highly repetitive memes such as 'grumpy cat' or 'paranoid parrot'. The figures 4 and 5 also suggest that the Karmawhoring-discourse has affected the creation of memes itself. On Reddit, the challenge of addressing a mass social media audience partly undermines users' reasons to contribute with posts that encourage more than up-/downvoting or leaving a short witty comment. Such a development—and this is a trend that particularly long-term Redditors render problematic—results in (subjectively determined) lower quality content. In a thread which explicitly questioned the meaning of the term Karmawhore, the user *ascendant23* commented critically:

'Karmawhore means someone who submits cheap, circlejerky posts, or appeals to the lowest common denominator in order to max out their karma. In more or less the same reason why, in other creative endeavors, the effort that makes the most money isn't necessarily the most culturally or artistically valuable. And some of us view some of those creators as not even trying to make anything artistically or culturally meaningful, but generally lowering the overall quality of both while cashing in a fat paycheck. Karma whore means basically the same thing, except they're making karma points rather than, you know, actual money.' (see [source](#))

The comparison between Karma and money as well as the mentioned criticism refers to evaluation criteria of content which are not guided by the numerical value of a post. Instead, s/he uses a subjectively determined understanding of quality which involves aspects such as innovation, news value and artistic impression. Even though these characteristics will certainly vary from person to person, a main commonality is an endeavour to follow idealistic values which may be compared to the mantra of 'art for art's sake'. In contrast, Karma-oriented Redditors specifically target prevalent

interests which ensure a high likelihood of positive feedback. It is particularly interesting that even terminologically this comment refers to some of Benkler's early observations in peer production. As he wrote, '[...] it begins with the opposite of lowest common denominator. It begins with what irks you, the contributing peer, individually, the most' (Benkler 2006, p. 259). According to the aforementioned user, this characteristic cannot be claimed for parts of Reddit's production logic. Instead for some, Karma-points function as equivalent to monetary reward: they predominantly post content according to selection criteria—such as the popularity of certain topics, genres or memes—which will maximise positive feedback and hence Karma. This does not mean that on Reddit we are not dealing with a mode of peer production: Instead it seems that the inclusion of gamification elements which allow users to quantitatively monitor their contributions' performance, along with a growing community scale that brings with it a higher degree of competition among peers for attention, in effect undermine the intrinsic motivations of peer production.

[Figure 4: Meme template hinting at a de-valuation of Karma-points, available at:

<http://i.qkme.me/3u0vsc.jpg>, accessed on 15/07/2013]

[Figure 5: Meme template addressing the possibility to employ Karma-critique as strategy to gain Karma-points, available at: <http://i.qkme.me/3thtfq.jpg>, accessed on 15/07/2013]

Moreover, users show a particular critical assessment of Karmawhoring in cases where rather emotional, sensible topics are discussed. After the recent death of actor James Gandolfini a user posted the actor's picture along with the comment 'Rest In Peace, James Gandolfini.' ([source](#)). As highest ranked 'top'-comments one could then read other users' controversial reactions: 'The last thing he said was 'don't use me to get imaginary points on that website you visit with the cats'', 'Honestly this is really just shamelessly cashing in on his death for karma', but also: 'There's more karma going around to the people bitching about others trying to get it than there actually is going to the karma whores themselves'.

While we can determine a highly critical stance towards Karmawhores among some users, for specific topics and on certain subreddits, there are on the other hand users such as *Apostolate* or *Andrewsmith1986* who openly advocate Karmawhoring and even monitor and visualise their Karma-achievements in diagrams on the external website karmawhores.net. One main reason for the critique of users who are mainly posting in order to accumulate Karma is that they merely multiply content at the expense of Reddit's uniqueness and quality. A similar claim is that the

multiplication of Redditors (due to its recent popularisation) has had a similar effect, and that only niche-subreddits with a small number of contributors allow for non-hierarchical communication:

'The worst thing about Reddit is how hard it is to become part of the conversation. By the time you notice something on the front page, unless you're replying to a reply to a top comment, there's no way anybody is ever going to see whatever it is you have to say. [...] The smaller sub-reddits that I post in (r/lawschool and r/vegan, for example) usually have interesting content when I visit and they have small but devoted communities. But the nice thing is not being drowned out if you feel you have something to add to a conversation' ([source](#)).

This statement also feeds into an argument which we made earlier: that the increasing number of users and the popularisation of Reddit discourages in-depth discussion and instead promotes expressions of dis-/approval by quickly up- or downvoting posts.

In contrast to other social media such as Facebook or Twitter which both offer an infrastructure that allows for an 'accountability' of original contributions as well as their re-distributions (see Paßmann/Boschoeten/Schäfer 2013), the numerical feedback mechanisms on Reddit remain anonymous. While the 'Like' button on Facebook reveals who supported the user's contribution and—as the aforementioned authors describe—retweeting and favoring on Twitter is often clustered around networks between socially tied accounts, Reddit does not encourage reciprocity on such a basic, infrastructural level. Interaction via Twitter and Facebook may be compared to an iterated prisoner's dilemma where the likeliness of cooperation and sharing are encouraged, since participants know that they will have to interact again. Hence, they are more likely to show balanced reciprocity. Reddit meanwhile only offers very limited, vague possibilities to verify that a user has been supporting a specific post or account. Besides personally assuring or explicating their support in comments/messages, a user cannot communicate merely using Reddit's infrastructure that they have supported a post. Up- and downvotes cannot be used as a communicative medium of verified exchange, since the voting accounts stay anonymous. Users might indicate their positive or negative reaction in a comment, but this cannot be verified through the website's predefined possibilities for interaction. Partially, this condition has been circumvented through so-called 'voting cliques', where a group of accounts consistently and repeatedly votes on specific content' ([source](#)). In these cases, a repeated and (roughly) numerical distinct number of upvotes ensures the reliability of a social sub-network. This problem has been identified by Reddit already however and is being addressed through (temporary) account bans.

Supporting a specific account is therefore either an expression of particularly liking the respective content or is based on a social relation accompanied by such a strong trust in the other person's reciprocal support that any further assurance of it is no longer necessary. Such an evaluation

system also implies that building and relying on social ties is highly risky since there is no possibility of validating your peer-group's support. Up- and downvoting on Reddit cannot follow any reliable signals that would allow for account-bound reciprocity between strangers. Moreover, the scale that is required to achieve top rankings is numerically too high for it to be achieved through mere networking. The decision to up- or downvote a post therefore tends to be based on individual content evaluations or a (content-related) basic attachment or aversion to another user's account. Nevertheless, an analysis of 'in-real-life' (IRL) meetings of Redditors could be additionally insightful in further studies.

Majority participation and the crowds' signals of topical demand regulate the supply. In this sense, Karma turns into the social media equivalent of money, and Karma-points gain an indirect relation to monetary value. Through lobbying user attention, it seeks to redirect the online gaze in a similar way just as advertising seeks to do, and this is often for overt economic reasons. Redditors have registered this development and therefore the indication of alleged value through Karma-points and qualitative assessments of content have gained a reputation for being contradictory.

4.3 KARMAWHORING AND COUNTER-STRATEGIES

On www.reddit.com/wiki/reddiquette one can find Reddit's collectively written and continuously changing 'Reddiquette'. This list of Dos-and-Don'ts is '[...] an informal expression of the values of many redditors, as written by redditors themselves'. The rules that one can find here are meant to instruct users' interactions and reflect an ideal code of conduct. By explicitly referring to unwanted behaviour, the Reddiquette also indicates a history of previous Karmawhoring approaches—some of which one can still observe. One main rule listed in the guideline is: 'Don't... [t]ry to manipulate the voting mechanism'. This includes, for example, the following tactics:

- Hint at asking for votes. 'Show me some love!', 'Is this front page worthy?', 'Vote This Up to Spread the Word!' [...]
- Send out IMs, tweets, or any other message asking people to vote for your submission—or comply when other people ask you. This will result in a ban from the admins. Your submission should get points for being good, not because the submitter is part of a voting clique.
- Create mass downvote or upvote campaigns. This includes attacking a user's profile history when they say something bad and participating in karma party threads. (This kind of mass downvoting or personally attacking specific accounts has been called witch-hunting as well, see www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/wiki/witchhunting).

There are several disciplinary forms to counteract Karmawhoring which can be differentiated into

bottom-up and *top-down* mechanisms. Reddiquette is an example of a top-down attempt to prevent Karma-oriented postings. It condemns a user behaviour exclusively aiming at accumulating Karma, appeals to idealistic, moral ambitions and encourages an impartial evaluation of content. Moreover, there appear to be three main mechanisms—which sometimes do not exactly comply with Reddiquette itself: Direct censorship through top-down interventions by official Reddit moderators/administrators; self-discipline and a sensitivity among users for non-repetitive content that does not mainly reflect a desire for gaining points; community discipline and downvoting presumable Karmawhores on a mass-scale. The last two examples are forms of bottom-up governance. Mass downvoting campaigns may be described as internal Reddit ‘shit storms’ targeting user profiles which have gained a reputation for being Karmawhores. This counterstrategy conflicts with the rules of Reddiquette, even though it claims to ensure these guidelines by their partial violation in other aspects.

Example for direct censorship and top-down strategies are interventions made by moderators who warn users, delete content or (shadow-)ban individual Redditors for violating Reddiquette. This aspect also makes clear that examples of Karmawhoring are either particularly obvious but very volatile (since they may be subject to enforced deletion), *or* rather ambiguous cases of Karmawhoring which may be disputed, *or* they are merely reflected in meta-discussions. This is a structural condition for any analysis of Karmawhoring since its object of interest is potentially subjected to ‘extinction’. Cases where one can still observe moderators’ intervention are usually documented by their official statements. This is, for example, the case in [/r/leagueoflegends](#), an e-sports subreddit. In this context a moderator addressed the problem of vote-cheating and users’ protests against being banned or against their comments being deleted. After defining vote-cheating as something ‘inorganically being done to manipulate votes on a post or comment’ which conflicts with the aforementioned Reddit-rules, the moderator countered users’ resistance regarding the negative enforcement of certain behaviour as follows:

‘If we catch an account or set of accounts vote cheating on reddit, then there is a good chance we’ll take some sort of action against those accounts (such as banning). The reason I’m directly bringing this up on the big e-sports related subreddits is that the problem of vote cheating has started to become very commonplace here. It is damn near ‘expected behaviour’ in some folks eyes, so recent banning incidents have been met with arguments such as ‘everyone does it!’—this is not an acceptable excuse. ([source](#))

The same message has been placed in other subreddits such as [/r/starcraft](#), and [/r/DotA2](#). It indicates the necessity of direct administrative intervention in order to minimise the dominance of posts that are getting upvoted due to unfair competition and biased votes.

Such an intervention also raises the issue of *governance* in peer production. We have stated before that Reddit is based on a global, heterogeneous user group and consists of content that can hardly be judged according to consistent, objectively definable good/bad criteria. In this sense it differs from peer production cases where (often) small, expert communities work together towards an aim whose success can be easily defined by objective criteria and hence where contributions can easily be classified as (counter-)productive. This difference also implies that governance and control of content through administrators on Reddit is defined by subjective criteria and is often a topic of negotiation itself. It also shows that governance through 'charismatic leadership' such as referred to in former studies on peer production of *Wikipedia* (see O'Neil 2011) or free software (see Dafermos 2012) is ruled out due to the scale and heterogeneity of the Reddit community. Topical or charismatic authority may only exist in distinct, smaller subreddits. Since content cannot be defined as verifiable knowledge anymore, but instead is classified as entertainment or art, its judgement therefore becomes a 'question of taste' and authority based on specific 'knowledge' and performance can hardly be claimed. Reddit's Karma-system and the possibility of up-/downvoting content is therefore a strategy that aims to decentralise the governance of content and leave the decision of its subjective quality to the crowd. The intervention of administrators shows however that such a bottom-up control only works to some extent and needs some additional, authoritarian interference from time to time. Similarly, Loubster and den Besten have stated a less idealistic view of peer production. On the basis of a study on Wikipedia they noted that the Online-Encyclopaedia '[...] has strayed from its idealistic origins and has been able to sustain itself only by adapting more and more of the features found in regular firms' (Loubster/den Besten 2008, p. 1).

Still, users exert bottom-up influence on other users' behaviour. This kind of *community discipline* involves for example mass downvoting that punish a respective user for (allegedly or rather subjectively crowd-defined) 'bad' posts. Moreover, the self-reflexive discussion of issues in meta-comments regarding the development of Reddit can be considered as a peer-to-peer approach that aims to regulate users' self-discipline. They play a 'consciousness raising' role, point out issues on Reddit and reflect on possible reasons, such as this post by a user who questioned the inhibiting impact of default subreddits on traffic in newly founded subreddits.

'The current system of congregation into default subreddits is causing Reddit to splinter into many offshoot subreddits. Some users are so deep in the meta/real/true/republicof hole that they do not even participate in the default subreddits. This is a sign that Reddit is getting so top-heavy that people are falling off. Participating in a community with so many voices and differing opinions

makes your own opinions feel small and unimportant. You may start to enjoy other people's voices in the community less. This might happen until you find a smaller, niche subreddit that fits your interests. This is a sign that Reddit is getting so top-heavy that people are falling off.' ([source](#))

This post has been submitted to the subreddit 'Theory of Reddit' which is defined as '[...] a mildly navel-gazing space for inquiring into what makes Reddit communities work and what we in a community can do to help make it better'. In this sense, posts here explicitly hope to expose problems to other users which might help them to instruct their own behaviour in a way that increases content quality and interaction on Reddit.

In addition to this somewhat conventional 'educational approach', there are other bottom-up strategies trying to prevent certain developments which are not merely caused by Reddit's infrastructure, but are rather induced by users' particular behaviours and appropriation of the up-/downvote-system. Mass downvoting campaigns can target certain user profiles, and punish those users for their posting-behaviour. With user driven 'mass downvoting campaigns' we mean cases where a group of users explicitly agrees on collaboratively downvoting a specific post/a certain user (no matter what s/he posts) or where such a 'punishment' of a user follows an automatically seeming, tacit crowd-consent. This either forces a user to adjust his/her behaviour or it pushes them into creating a new account—of which many Redditors appear to have several of anyway, such as a not-safe-for-work(NSFW)/porn account and a more sanitised, office-friendly Reddit account. (This relates to subscriptions of particular subreddits as well as Reddit's bookmarking function.) Mass downvotings conflict with Reddiquette and have been critically called '[witchhunts](#)' (potentially targeted at [moderators](#) as well). Nevertheless, this exertion of peer-pressure occurs and some cases have even gained some fame among the community. Particularly well-known is the case of the user *Apostolate* who has meanwhile reached meme-status and will be analysed in the next chapter.

4.4 'NOBODY CARES, APOSTOLATE'

Apostolate can be regarded as one of Reddit's most famous, though highly controversial 'celebrities'. S/he belongs to a user group that is registered on www.karmawhores.net, a website which visualises the quantifiable aspects of Redditing in neat diagrams (see Figure 6). *Apostolate* currently (July 8th, 2013) leads the list of 'Top comment Karma' (see Figure 7). Usually there are certain virtual events which produce or rather initiate the aforementioned celebrity status. Some

deliberations on popularization-processes of 'powerusers' on Reddit can be found in this [thread](#) which also emerged from a post describing the rise of Apostolate.

[Figure 6 and 7: Screenshot excerpts showing statistics and visualisations of Reddit 'powerusers', available at: www.karmawhores.net, accessed on 08/07/2013]

Apart from being a 'successful Redditor' in terms of accumulated Karma points, Apostolate has become particularly famous after commenting 'I hate the movie 'Avatar.' on a [post](#) by another user starting with the question 'What do you hate that everyone else seems to enjoy?' This post was submitted on 24th of July 2012. When sorting this thread by 'top' one of the first comments is 'HIMYM. Awful, awful show'. Apostolate replied to this comment with a .gif, a moving image, showing the actor Neil Patrick Harris in 'How I Met Your Mother' with the message 'You're a jerk' (Figure 8). This led, at first, to the repost of a user-generated .gif, containing the message 'Nobody cares Apostolate'. This iconic reply by the users Quarter_Centenarian and Drunken_Economist have respectively gained 1,863 and 1,386 Karma points. Even though it is not the highest rated .gif, the video of Drunken_Economist showing the catch phrase 'Nobody cares Apostolate' in a deck of cards has gained particular popularity (Figure 9). In the aftermath, plenty of similar .gifs were produced and became a common reply to any comment or post by Apostolate. The saying has since been frequently referenced on the subsequently created subreddit www.reddit.com/r/nobodycaresapostolate.

[Figure 8: Gif screenshot, available at: <http://i1.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/original/000/362/582/bc8.gif>, accessed on 15/07/2013]

Figure 9: Gif screenshot, available at: <http://i3.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/original/000/362/591/e6d.gif>, accessed on 15/07/2013]

The thread was even reposted in the subreddit [/r/bestof](http://r/bestof). Some users' aggression towards Apostolate becomes very obvious in this context, and the terminologically indicated critique on witch-hunts is intuitively comprehensible:

Why is this best of? Why do people give a fuck about shit like this? (first comment sorted by 'top' or 'hot' likewise)

It's not the power-users that bother me, it's the hordes of mouthbreathers who always comment on how he's in every thread. (second comment sorted by 'best')

Nobody cares, matritrion [the name of the user who reposted the thread in the bestof-subreddit]. Seriously, novelty account and reddit celebrity stuff does not belong here. (second comment sorted by 'new')

Good, shut that fucking Apostolate dude up. / He is a fucking loser. Doesn't he have any free time

to GET OFF THE INTERNET???? (first and second comment sorted by controversial)

Briefly before this incident, which led to Apostolate's comment being subjected to repetitive 'Nobody cares'-replies (as were other comments by users who were suspected of Karmawhoring), another user pointed towards Apostolate as a rising power-user. On 22nd of July 2012 WuhanWTF posted:

'Well look over here, there seems to be a new one on the rise: [Apostolate](#). Redditors are swarming around him like flies on shit. [...] I also noticed that, to some degree, he panders to the hivemind. Yesterday I saw him reply to a comment about 'Myspace Top 8 drama' talking about how people who use that site are retarded. Typical anti-social network circlejerker.' ([source](#))

Such comments and community events draw users' attention towards single accounts. Those users subsequently experience the rejection and disapproval of the crowd. Such cases are examples of community discipline and mass-downvotes or rather rejection that aims at affecting a certain behaviour in the respective user. The user can either give up their account and create new username (meaning abandoning the collected Karma points since these are not transferable), show a change in behaviour to calm the angry 'virtual mob' or wait and hope that the aggression might subside over time.

Seeing that, as we mentioned initially, Apostolate is still at the top of the list of Karmawhores.net the users' impact seems rather minor. However, if one follows Apostolate's 'Reddit career' chronologically by looking at collected contributions on the user profile www.reddit.com/user/Apostolate, it seems that overall his performance on Reddit became more ironic—referring to his controversial status on Reddit—as well as 'apologetic' in a sense. For example, in response to the question 'Who is the most hated Redditor of all time?' s/he replied 'Hi. Haven't posted as much in about a year :0' and after another user's comment that Apostolate was unpopular due to his 'Karmawhoring' s/he noted 'You can't prove that in court' (see www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/1hssjt/who_is_the_most_hated_redditor_of_all_time; Figure 10 and 11).

[Figure 10: Reddit thread screenshot, available at: www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/1hssjt/who_is_the_most_hated_redditor_of_all_time/cay2985?context=3, accessed on 15/07/2013]

[Figure 11: Reddit thread screenshot, available at: www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/1hssjt/who_is_the_most_hated_redditor_of_all_time/cay2amz?context=3, accessed on 15/07/2013]

Karmawhoring is a phenomenon which can only be determined according to very subjective as well as highly normative criteria. One might be intuitively drawn to the part of the community which conservatively defends 'the old Reddit' and the idealistic notion of being 'powered by community, democracy' and the user. However, one needs to consider the desire to gain Karma points as an equally 'legitimate' incentive for contributing. In this sense, the case Apostolate is an example of negotiation processes between certain user attitudes and social values. A Karmawhoring-critical 'philosophy' normatively idealises certain contributions: these users insist on a motivation for contributions which is intrinsically motivated and aims at benefiting the community. Gaining Karma-points should not be seen and appropriated as personal gratification, since such an attitude allegedly produces repetitive content and inhibits the further development of the community. With the practices/strategies we have described before, they exert peer pressure on users who deviate from such an idealistically inspired motivation for peer production. Seeing that Apostolate is still at the top of the list for comment-Karma, these approaches are not necessarily quantitatively successful, but they are an obvious example of users' collaborative approach to cultivating a distinct attitude expressed in certain contributions.

5. THE POPULARISATION OF REDDIT AND THE FRONT PAGE'S ECONOMETRIZATION

What makes Reddit such an insightful example of peer production is that it is not a product whose value may be easily measured by objective criteria. While the result of software crowdsourcing, for example, can be rather easily assessed—basically by if and for what purposes the software works—the (e)valuation of content on Reddit is guided by subjective, interpersonally changing criteria. As Bauwens writes, peer production projects '[...] are open to all comers provided they have the necessary skills to contribute to a project. These skills are verified, and communally validated, in the process of production itself' (Bauwens 2006: p. 2). On Reddit however, skills and therefore value cannot be validated objectively. As we have pointed out by analysing users' discursive and practical implementations versus rejections of Karmawhoring, the numerical value of a contribution represented by Karma-points does not function as a universally accepted symbol of its qualitative value. Quite the contrary, Karma-points have gained a reputation for indicating less innovative, mainstreamed content which is able to appeal to the 'new' social mass media consumers. Hence, we are facing dynamics which seem significant for opposing value evaluations in peer production of cultural content. The features and criteria which determine the value of a post or comment are controversially negotiated among users. Some users insist on assessing the value of a contribution

by its benefit for the community. A post's or comment's value therefore relates to idealistic, social values which are expressed as (alleged) motivation for a contribution. This attitude is based on highly subjective criteria for attributing value to a post/comment. In these cases, value is not fixed, but is subjected to interpersonally varying appraisal. Likewise, deriving a contribution's value from its received upvotes and achieved Karma-points just relies on a majority's assessment and is again closely interrelated with respective subjective assessments. However, in this case the quantitative mediation of users' appraisal allows certain subjective criteria to be translated into a distinct numerical representation. The question that animated our analysis was what kind of assessment-bases were responsible for generating this controversial value indicator.

Moreover, one needs to refrain from adopting the normative assumptions which are reflected in internal controversies on Karmawhoring. In a way, maximising Karma by understanding which content is able to appeal to a majority of Redditors and what type of content is capable of generating lively discussions and contributes with rather detailed insights or analyses express two different types of skills. The opposing user mentalities revealed in exerting or countering Karmawhoring indicate that a differentiation between 'high brow' and 'low brow culture' as we know it from traditional media is being negotiated within the new medium as well.

The discrepancy between (let's say) 'Karma- and Contentwhores'—this shall prevent the misleading impression that we have a normative preference for either of these user strategies—particularly appears to have a historical dimension: long-term users in particular seem to reject Karma-oriented posting. Their rejection of Karmawhoring also complies with an effort to minimise the influence of new users which may not share the principled convictions of early contributors. One has to take into account that Reddit started as a community with a sub-cultural appeal, a counter-project to mainstream information and entertainment sources. Users' conflicts and criticisms also document the consequences of a more recent popularisation of Reddit which stands in contrast to its former sub-cultural status. They are highly normative expressions of negotiations between long-term users who claim to represent the old and 'real' Reddit so far, and users who are identified as the cause of the various changes in Reddit's culture and appearance. The contrast between practices of Karmawhoring and resistance against powerusers indicates a divide between the early Redditors who claim a more intimate knowledge of the community and its rules because they have been there longer. They became familiar with Reddit in its early stages, when it was a comparatively small-scale community. In such a context, the rules for interactions and the conditions for gaining positive/negative attention differ from possibilities to be appreciated among

the vast number of members that Reddit has meanwhile obtained.

'Digital economies of scale' are especially relevant here: Discussions are reasonable and feasible as long as the overall community has a relatively manageable size. The number of users on Reddit however (as mentioned before, in June 2013 the website had 71.435.935 unique visitors and 2.344.323 logged in Redditors) makes it more difficult to provide a virtual environment where people may engage in discussions with each other on an equal basis. The competition for attention is enormously high, and there are various factors (bad timing, boring topics, badly phrased or titled issues) which may lead to posts and comments being ignored. Breaking the website into multiplicities of subreddits was one strategy of dealing with this issue, but even such a strategy only works for some, less popular topics.

As we have initially mentioned in this chapter, the appraisal of contributions' value does not follow commonly definable criteria. Hence, value on Reddit cannot be conceptualised in terms of following a coherent 'value theory'. One encounters a discrepancy between discursive assertions of a (historically founded) user mentality that complies with an idealistic 'gift economy' and a quasi-monetary econometrization of participation. The latter, Karma-oriented aspirations promote an adaption of contribution choices in favour of their likeliness to appeal to a large number of users. Seeing that we stated that this opposition results from historical developments and a growing community scale, it is significant that the notion of 'gift economies' has been applied with regards to early virtual communities as well as to the early stages of even more recent networks. With regards to 'The Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link' (WELL) network, Rheingold ascertained characteristics of '[...] a kind of gift economy in which people do things for one another out of a spirit of building something between them, rather than a spreadsheet-calculated quid pro quo' (Ibid. 1995: 59). More recently, Paßmann, Boeschoten and Schäfer (2013) have applied the notion of 'gift economy' in order to describe parts of the German Twitter scene and quantitative monitorings of user participation via *Favstar*: an 'application that tracks retweets and favourites (called Favs)' (Ibid.: 7). They also observed that an '[...] inflated number of Favs in question here sheds doubt on their value as a gift' (Ibid.: 9). Similarly on Reddit, Karma-points have lost their commonly accepted correlation to content quality which is defined by idealistic and moral values. This development indicates a historical development throughout which successful strategies to achieve attention have significantly changed. Rheingold already acknowledged in 1995 [1993] that in the virtual community he described '[...] elegantly presented knowledge is a valuable currency. Wit and use of language are rewarded in this medium, which is biased towards those who learn to manipulate

attention and emotion with the written word' (Rheingold 1995, p. 59). Such a learning process of understanding how to appeal to the Reddit community accounts for Karma-whores as well as those users who claim to represent an altruistic approach to Reddit. However, the conflict between them shows that the rules and conditions of how to appeal and 'manipulate' have changed. If one wants to stay within Rheingold's metaphor of rhetoric as currency, one could say that a former currency of Reddit (in terms of valued topics and rhetoric) has partly lost its value, is being contested and possibly extruded by a new type of valued currency: contributions appealing to a majority of users.

One should not be misled by the contrastive motives for participation. Both attitudes share the premise that a form of other users' perception and feedback acts as incentive. However, due to the popularisation of Reddit and the growing community scale a shift in the conditions and possibilities of gaining attention occurs. While posting innovative, non-mainstream content might be more likely to receive attention within a smaller community of users which defines itself by a sub-cultural ideology, the contribution of uncontroversial, easily compatible content—such as cute cats—is more likely to appeal to the majority of a large, heterogeneous community and may hence (predictably) result in positive, quantified feedback. Both strategies are developments rooting in respective historical stages of Reddit's community. Currently, this clash of adaptations to conditions for gaining attention, has led to opposing assessments of contributions' value. The criticisms and conflicting approaches we have analysed previously represent a conflict between representative mentalities which comply to a 'gift economy' versus 'gift econometrics' which involve a distinct quantitative representation of participation and are supposed to act as a (controversial) indicator of contributions' quality. Such a development is possibly a common epiphenomenon of growing communities: the development on Reddit is reminiscent of dynamics on the imageboard 4Chan where one could observe an aggressive rejection of new users who were aggressively addressed as 'newfags/cancer' and criticised for contaminating a former, sub-cultural status. One might even say that historical events such as the eternal September 1993 and the popularisation of *Usenet* likewise go back to an imagined infiltration of a community by outsiders and has similarly led to controversies between long-term and new users.

In this sense, the econometrization of Reddit and other social media has been perceived as the infiltration of intrinsically motivated participation and interaction. Such an assessment discursively also relates to anti-capitalist motivations and claims which have been implied in optimistic views which apply to early examples of peer production and may still account for early stages of even newer projects: '[...] the editors of a special issue of *Capital & Class* on peer production noted that

prime examples such as GNU/Linux development and Wikipedia initiated a new mode of production but 'also reasserted very oldfashioned trends of profit-making and the colonisation of knowledge' (Karatzogianni & Moore, 2009: 11). Let's face it: informational capitalism seems to be able to handle a zone of free digital goods reasonably well' (Kreiss/Finn/Turner 2011). Eventually, users' resistance against Karma-points as the ultimate indicator of value relates back to a rejection of economically optimized production practices as they have been fundamentally criticised much earlier and were by no means specific to social media: 'So that capitalism is without doubt the universal of every society, but only insofar as it is capable of carrying to a certain point its own critique—that is, the critique of the processes by which it re-enslaves what within it tends to free itself or to appear freely' (Deleuze/Guattari 1977, p. 270). The Karmawhoring-criticisms therefore pick up on a well-known discourse of creating and especially maintaining production practices independently from capitalist determinations of value. Users' discontent can be seen as resistance against a degeneration of community-oriented communication and the channelling of altruistic interaction into functionalistic, efficient content production. It seems problematic however, or rather debatable, how to determine whether participation in social media is still encouraged by an inherent desire or a craving for *Favs*, *Likes* or *Karma*. There seems to be a critical, but impalpable tipping point when a mainly (at no time exclusively) intrinsically motivated peer participation turns into a dominant aspiration to gain quantifiable gratification.

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[1] We do not mean to say that the categories 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' are the *only* motives for contributions. Naturally, one can assume that there is a far more complex variety of multiple, interdependent reasons to engage in Redditing. For instance, social media users have been frequently accused of narcissism (see Buffardi/Campbell 2008; McKinney/Kelly/Duran 2012; Panis/Nardik/Konrath 2013). Authors such as Reiss (2012) have pointed out that an 'intrinsic-extrinsic dualism' is a conceptual simplification and one has to take into account that more complex interactions between both types of motivation take place. Hence, while we do acknowledge that Redditors are influenced by a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, we believe that nevertheless, one is able to identify 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' as important categories in internal conflicts on Reddit and self-reflective discussions of users. We will hence analyse those normative claims that insist on the damage of Karmawhoring as

well as accusations of alleged 'Karmawhores'.