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## **Working Alone, Together: Coworking, Community, And Cultural Flow**

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# Working Alone, Together: Coworking, Community, And Cultural Flow

## Abstract

As the workforce shifts towards more contingent labor and freelancing and entrepreneurship are on the rise, where will knowledge workers find productive spaces to work and opportunities to build community? This dissertation is an ethnographic study of coworking: defined as the formalized sharing of workspace through membership-based community building and networking. Technological advancements and the Internet Revolution have sparked a transformation of where and how work is done. Within a coworking space, individuals do not all work for the same company, the same industry, or for employers in the same city or even country. And yet, they are coworkers: they are working alone 'together.' In order to understand why and how people are engaged in coworking, I conducted 10 months of formalized fieldwork within one such coworking space, IndyHall in Old City, Philadelphia. During that time, I conducted 23 formal hour-long interviews in addition to participation in the various day-to-day events and activities of the community. Beyond my fieldwork in the physical space, I conducted three years of online ethnography of the broader coworking movement, including: reading and participating in different global and local coworking blogs, online interviews with people from coworking spaces in other parts of the United States and Europe, following Twitter and other social media activity, and tracking and archiving online media coverage—including national, global and local news sources—of coworking. Following my three years of intensive fieldwork, I have maintained relationships with the IndyHall community which has continued to inform my insights. My research produced an ethnographic narrative and quantitative data that support my conclusions. I conclude that the rise of coworking is a result of globalization and corporate neoliberal policies that have left knowledge workers seeking out community for both social and professional needs. Further, I posit that coworking spaces act as nodes within broader cultural flows, citing Urban's (2017) analogous assessment of 'the corporation,' by providing an environment wherein various commodified and noncommodified cultural inputs that individuals and small companies bring with them into coworking spaces can be transformed into new commodified and noncommodified outputs.

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COWORKING, COMMUNITY, AND CULTURAL FLOW

Madeline Boyer

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WORKING ALONE, TOGETHER: COWORKING, COMMUNITY, AND  
CULTURAL FLOW

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*Dedication*

To my parents.

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## ABSTRACT

### WORKING ALONE, TOGETHER: COWORKING, COMMUNITY, AND CULTURAL FLOW

Madeline Ann Boyer  
Greg Urban

As the workforce shifts towards more contingent labor and freelancing and entrepreneurship are on the rise, where will knowledge workers find productive spaces to work and opportunities to build community? This dissertation is an ethnographic study of coworking: defined as the formalized sharing of workspace through membership-based community building and networking. Technological advancements and the Internet Revolution have sparked a transformation of where and how work is done. Within a coworking space, individuals do not all work for the same company, the same industry, or for employers in the same city or even country. And yet, they are coworkers: they are working alone 'together.' In order to understand why and how people are engaged in coworking, I conducted 10 months of formalized fieldwork within one such coworking space, IndyHall in Old City, Philadelphia. During that time, I conducted 23 formal hour-long interviews in addition to participation in the various day-to-day events and activities of the community. Beyond my fieldwork in the physical space, I conducted three years of online ethnography of the broader coworking movement, including: reading and participating in different global and local coworking blogs, online interviews with people from coworking spaces in other parts of the United States and Europe, following Twitter and other social media



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# **Chapter 1: Working Alone, Together**

## **1.0 Introduction**

In Philadelphia's Old City, people are hard at work in an office suite with clusters of desks, scattered LCD displays and laptops. Some are sprawled on couches, or gathered around whiteboards drawing out ideas. In the office kitchen, there are several loaves of bread set out to share. In one of the conference rooms, a meeting is taking place; in the other, two men are recording a podcast. At first glance this may seem like the workspace of a typical new technology company, but a closer look at their computer screens, and a more careful listening to their conversations reveals something very different. In fact, it reveals echoes of a very old practice made new: artist guilds of centuries past. That's because these individuals do not all work for the same company, the same industry, or for employers in the same city or even country. And yet, they are coworkers: they are working alone 'together.'

One effect of the Internet Revolution has been a transformation in where and how work is done, and coworking – defined as the formalized sharing of workspace through membership-based community building and networking – is one aspect of this transformation. Though coworking emerged in many places simultaneously, the term itself was appropriated from the world of computer technology in 2005 by Brad Neuberg of the Hat Factory and Citizen Space in San

Francisco. Since then, thousands of coworking spaces have developed across the globe. Much like the early Christian Church, the coworking movement is fragmented, characterized by negotiations over definitions and “what counts” and does not as proper coworking (see Chapter 5). There are annual conferences (and unconferences)<sup>1</sup> where these boundaries are hotly contested and zealots evangelize about the coming workplace revolution fueled by the coworking movement. Within coworking spaces, however, these topics are rarely considered. Individuals in coworking spaces are much more concerned with the implications on their own daily lives: what coworking does for their socializing, their work, and their neighborhoods or cities. Ultimately, coworking is simultaneously hyper-local and globally connected.

This dissertation explores the phenomenon of coworking in relation to broad transformations in the modern workplace (especially the corporation) over the past ten years. I examine coworkers’ attempts, through an emphasis on community building, to generate connections to, and social change within their particular localities. Coworking blurs the lines between private and public life and personal and professional lives: your friends are who you work around, and your work is influenced and shaped by your friends. While there does exist a global ideological underpinning to coworking as a social movement, my fieldwork

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<sup>1</sup> An “unconference” (or barcamp) is a type of gathering characterized by agreement on general thematic principles, but do not have content sessions or agendas created before its start. Participants co-create the agenda at the beginning of the unconference by suggesting sessions (both content and format) and inserting them into the agenda grid (time and room/place).

revealed again and again how coworking was primarily used to reconnect to notions of place by people whose work is lacking concrete connections to space. The coworking form is both novel and nothing new, recombining characteristics anthropologists have studied time and again in a way that fits today's particular cultural environment.

## **1.1 Definitions**

### **1.1.1 What is coworking?**

It is important first to clarify what we mean by 'coworking.' The term 'coworking' (*never* with a hyphen) refers to a wide array of workspace sharing practices, with varying aims, levels of formality and stability, but with similarly espoused values and ideology.

Hot Desking This term is derived from “hot racking” in the nautical world. It is a practice wherein sailors on different shifts will share the same bunk as neither of them need it at the same time. This is least formalized form of coworking: an individual with workspace to share will advertise availability and will schedule rotating (or regular) spots in their workspace. This can be a rented space, home office--or just on their couch. This practice of time-sharing desks is similarly used in corporate settings as a means of reducing costs. Typically, hot-desking, or hoteling, in traditional offices is applied to sales or consulting departments where employees are not always in the base office, but the practice is spreading. Remote (or tele-) workers adopted this practice to cope with isolation. Those



with the space to accommodate extra people will share work space with employees from their company or team, people connected to them through their personal or professional networks, or even more “random” individuals they find by posting in online forums.

Jelly One ‘step’ up from hot-desking. A common metaphor used in describing a jelly is “sending out a bat signal.” One or more individuals will organize a time and place to meet to work and advertise it through their networks (social media and professional contacts). Sometimes jellies meet at regular intervals or in the same place repeatedly, but it can be fluid in both time and space. One key facet is that jellies are free events. The term jelly was coined in 2006 by two New York City roommates, Amit Gupta and Luke Crawford, who realized that they enjoyed working from home, but missed the collaborative environment of a traditional office. [“Jelly” was chosen because they were eating jellybeans at the time they were discussing it—no deeper meaning here.] They began inviting friends (and their friends) over once a week to work from their home. Freelancers and other independents quickly caught on to the idea, resulting in a large surge in the number of jellies around the world (Grossman 2007, Orsini 2012). For three years (2011, 2012, 2013) there was a Worldwide #Jellyweek<sup>2</sup>, where Jellies were organized all over the world to attract and engage people to the coworking

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<sup>2</sup> <http://jellyweek.tumblr.com/>

movement. During my fieldwork, I participated in a Jellyweek event at a bar in Philadelphia.

Coworking Space A jelly may or may not have a set schedule or regular attendees. But in many cases, a community starts to build around a particular jelly and eventually reaches some sort of critical mass. Members of a jelly may decide that this mode of work has been beneficial to them and that it is something they want to commit to in a more permanent form. Capital is raised and a location is found for the coworking space. A coworking space is a permanent physical space that is managed as a business (even if profit is not the aim of the founders). This form of coworking serves as the focus of my research, and the home of the scene described in the opening sentences of this dissertation. There are virtually limitless configurations of coworking spaces. It will be scaled to fit the membership it serves. Some are as basic as a room with desks and/or long shared tables, others may take up a whole suite, floor, or building. The spaces may be singularly functional, or have multi-uses: kitchens, workshops, conference rooms, lounges, recording and photography studios. Amenities will also vary greatly, but free wifi and access to power seems to be the constant, even in tropical outdoor coworking spaces<sup>3</sup>. There may be a community kitchen, while other times a for-profit cafe may serve food and beverages at a cost.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see <https://www.beachub.com/>

As the coworking movement (or industry) has begun to mature and evolve, more approaches to how coworking spaces are opened have emerged. The earliest form of coworking takes a grassroots approach: build the community, then find a space to house it. Alternatively, with the growing popularity and awareness of coworking, many space owners have tried the opposite approach (“build it and they will come”), as well as franchising models, both to mixed levels of success. This approach has appealed most to entrepreneurs and investors who view coworking as a viable business model with a large market to capture. One notable franchise, The Hub, later rebranded as Impact Hub along with a shift towards including business incubation, and has grown to 92 locations worldwide. WeWork, has of late become almost a coworking conglomerate: it has made acquisitions of nine large companies in diverse industries (including a coding school, meetup.com, and technology and app companies), and has grown to 362 office locations in 68 cities (Ghaffary 2018, WeWork.com). WeWork locations tend to cater to small start up companies (or smaller satellite offices of larger companies), rather than to individuals—though there are individual membership plans.

This dissertation does not look into the economic market dynamics of the coworking space industry, choosing to focus instead on the practices of individuals and groups within these spaces. While economic viability is a necessity at various levels (the owners need to pay their expenses of running the spaces, different space owners need to take into account competition within a

geographic area and potential membership, and the members need to be in a strong enough economic position enough to pay their memberships), my research treats those factors as external to the cultural implications of these communities.

### **1.1.2 What Coworking Is Not**

"I've heard quite a few exciting pitches over the last week, but I'll be forced to forgo those opportunities because of your mediocrity. You see, Richard, when I invited you into my incubator, I promised to get you ready for the outside world. But I failed to do that. I wouldn't trust you out there in the real world as far as I could throw you. And to be honest, I could probably throw you all the way across the front yard." —Erlich Bachman, Season 02, Episode 05 "Server Space"

In 2014, HBO debuted a show that shed light on the quirky and bizarre culture of technology startups: *Silicon Valley*. The show follows the rises and falls of a start up that owns a revolutionary data compression algorithm. The main characters live together in a incubator started by the home's owner, Erlich Bachman (played by T.J. Miller), after he sold his own software for millions of dollars. Other startups also co-habitate and work out of the house. If you took a picture of the house full of tech entrepreneurs typing away at their laptops independently or working in small groups, it would look a lot like a jelly. But is this coworking?

In a word: no. The concept of coworking goes beyond mere cohabitation of workspace. It does not simply refer to the rental of desk space and office amenities. As such, several other forms of temporary and shared workspace

arrangements do not fall under the heading of coworking. The self-appointed curators of the 'coworking movement'--a globally organized, virtually connected community--are explicit about the boundaries of what counts and doesn't count as coworking. In particular, business incubators and accelerators, hackerspaces and makerspaces,<sup>4</sup> office parks, and corporate office-sharing are not coworking spaces. While these types of spaces house similar activities, each has a different set of goals, resources and target populations they serve.

Business incubators and accelerators are places for start-ups to get resources that are tailored to new ventures: connections to funding, mentorship, and training. Often times, start-ups have to apply and be accepted into incubators and accelerators, and membership is explicitly meant to be temporary. In contrast, membership to coworking spaces is not usually curated, and are not explicitly meant to be transient (even if they often can be). Coworking spaces do not provide funding to members, and as such, target members must already be self-sufficient through their employers or the revenue or investment into their start ups in order to afford membership. There are exceptions to the rule, of course. Many coworking spaces may provide free membership to certain types of members (e.g. students or non-profits), and the community members in a coworking space do offer each other mentorship and networking opportunities,

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<sup>4</sup> Hackerspaces and makerspaces refer to other communities that focus on collaborative coding/programming and physical creation (sculpture, products/prototypes, robotics, etc), respectively.

but the system is not set up for financially supporting its members as incubators and accelerators are.

Another category of shared workspace, hackerspaces and makerspaces, are not suited for general daily knowledge work: their focus is on creation of new things, both physical and digital. Hackerspaces organize their activity around specific coding and programming projects. Makerspaces house shared equipment for the fabrication of prototypes, sculpture, small-batch production of products, and robotics. Here again, you may find blurred boundaries: when IndyHall expanded their physical footprint in 2016, they found they had enough space to create a workshop for members to use for screen printing and other 'physical projects'; however, this was not central to their mission and organization the way it is for hackerspaces and makerspaces.

More general office-sharing, either in office-parks or under-utilized space in a specific company's offices may look the most like coworking, but do not share the same values-driven approach. Office-sharing in its most general sense has a transactional business model (money exchanged for spaces and amenities). The target market here includes traveling businesspersons who may already have a base of operations within traditional corporate offices, whereas coworking spaces strive to create a more stable community of familiar faces. As an illustration: StateFarm opened an experimental self-identified coworking space called NextDoor in the Lincoln Park neighborhood of Chicago. I visited the space a few times after moving there in 2017. It looks like a coworking space with lots of

shared tables, couches, whiteboards, a cafe, conference rooms, and a big community calendar. In the days I spent there, though, the only conversations I had were with the barista, and to ask “Is this seat taken?” There was no concerted effort to create connections between the patrons of the space. Ultimately, it wasn’t much more than an amenity-heavy coffee shop (though kudos for the free financial coaching and evening workshops that are sponsored by StateFarm). Conversely, the coworking movement asserts that their model maintains community development and camaraderie at the center of its mission, with financial sustainability as a means to an end rather than the end itself.

There is constant debate within the global coworking community, both online and in person, negotiating the boundaries and definitions of coworking. As the concept of coworking has entered the mainstream consciousness, corporate entities have begun to adopt coworking-inspired practices into their own companies by creating shared workspaces within their existing offices, or by opening branded spaces. For example, as early as 2010, Steelcase began experimenting in opening coworking spaces in Grand Rapids, Michigan that were fully outfitted with their furniture. In 2010, they launched a branded "corporate" coworking network named "workspring" with a flagship space in Chicago, IL and partnered with Marriott who will provide meeting spaces for members. Whether or not this "counts" as coworking, or is merely a co-opting of the phrase and trading on the popularity of the movement is as yet unclear. Chapter 4 discusses the curation of the coworking movement by the global community--through the

lens of recursive publics--and their efforts to crystalize a common set of values that will drive the movement, above any legal structure (be it community owned, publicly funded, privately held, or corporate backed/branded) or practice requirements of qualification and inclusion.

### **1.1.3 Who is Coworking?**

Over the course of my eight years of study, the composition of coworking spaces has changed greatly. As I note in Chapter 4, early on in my field notes I noted the dearth of women in coworking spaces—though today, across the globe and at IndyHall specifically, the gender representation is balancing out: whereas in 2012 64% of coworking members globally were men, in 2017 that number dropped to 53% (Foertsch 2018a: 38). Along with gender distribution, the types of working being done in coworking spaces has also diversified over time as more individuals become aware of the model and see its applicability beyond tech work (Foertsch 2018a: 27). Even as other demographic categories have shifted over time, age distribution has stayed relatively stable, with about a third of members aged 18-29, a third 30-39, and a third 40 and older (Foertsch 2018a: 5).

Coworking spaces started out as primarily freelancers and entrepreneurs. However, the popularity of the form along with the entrants of more corporatized models like WeWork, have made coworking a hip and attractive place for companies to have their employees work from. This has shifted the balance of space membership composition (see Figure 1). The decision making power in



these instances varies greatly: in some cases, the employer is allowing an employee to make whatever alternative workplace arrangements they like (work from home or a coworking space of the employee’s choice full-time or part-time), whereas in others companies specify which coworking space (often through developed partnerships). In any case, my analysis applies: there is a decoupling of work from a centralized workspace wherein a worker is fulfilling certain needs via a coworking space that is not fulfilled by the company. The influx of “employees” into coworking spaces, does however, have impacts on some of the ways in which a coworking space acts as a node within broader cultural flows (see Chapter 2).

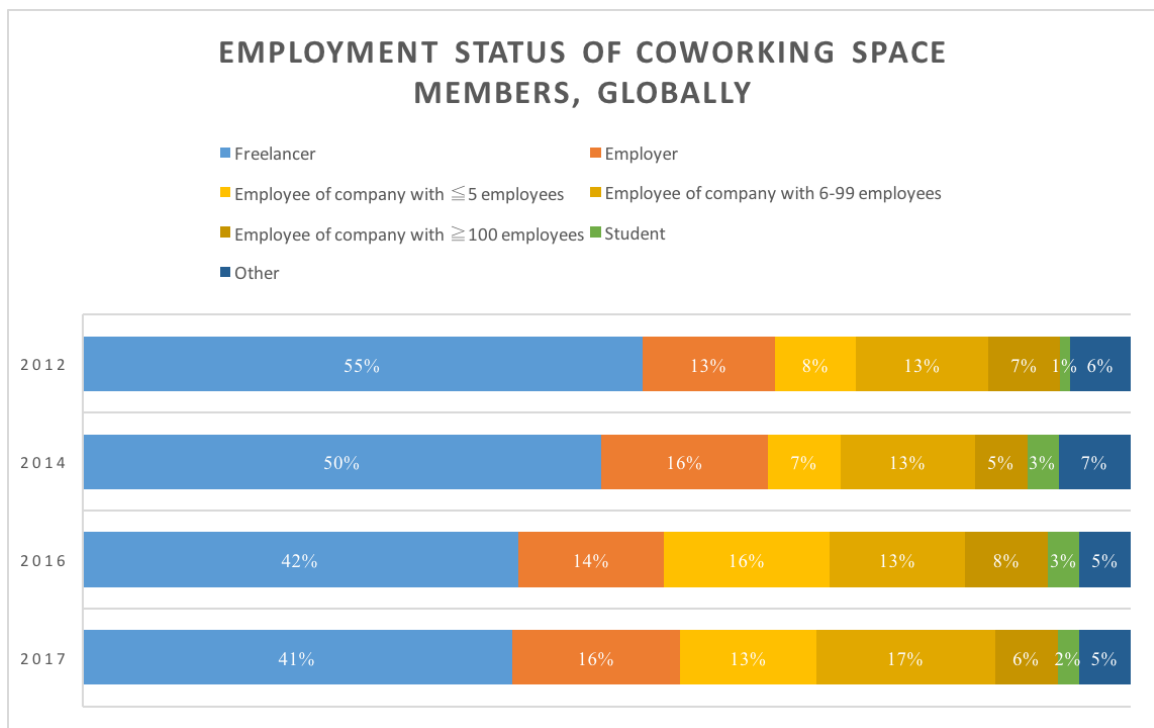


Figure 1: Employment Status of Coworking Spaces, Globally 2012-2017 (Foertsch 2018a: 14)

## **1.2 What I did (and didn't) do**

### **1.2.1 Discovering Coworking**

In the fall of 2010, I was in my second year of graduate school searching for a topic that blended my interest in business, and startups in particular, with my anthropological lens. I was conducting a pilot study of networking organizations in the Philadelphia area targeted at young professionals. I was interested in the overlap in networks of the different groups, as well as how they blended civic engagement with professional development. At the keystone event at the end of Young Involved Philadelphia's (YIP) State of Philly week of events, I ended up sitting next to a young woman during Mayor Nutter's speech. After the speech, we chatted about why we were each there. I described my project; she was accompanying her partner who is a journalist for one of Philadelphia's online news outlets. Upon learning of my interests, she asked: "Have you heard of IndyHall?"

I hadn't, and being 2010, not many people had heard of coworking at all. It was only a few years after Neuberger had coined the term, and while there had been a few New York Times articles (that I googled that night) about this curious new trend, it was still largely unknown. The following few days were a frenzy as I researched everything I could online about coworking, and discovered a rich subculture that had the promise of several anthropological touchstones for me to ground my potential dissertation project. I emailed Alex Hillman—then only a

few years into running IndyHall and not the global personality he is today—to schedule a meeting where I first saw the space and learned from an insider’s perspective what this coworking thing was all about. In our hour long conversation, my hand could barely keep up with taking notes on all of the topics I wanted to follow up on. He expressed lament that he wasn’t going to be able to go to the First-ever Coworking Europe Conference in two weeks, and I saw my first fieldwork opportunity within reach. Fortunately, I was able to secure funding quickly and make it to Brussels for this three-day long conference with coworking enthusiasts from all over Europe, Asia, and the United States. I learned about different subtypes of coworking, the software being developed to help run spaces, the challenges and barriers coworking was encountering, and the emotional (almost religious) attachment this movement inspired in people. It was exhilarating.

This budding project of mine had potential to contribute to literature about social movements, online communities, the future of work, entrepreneurship, tech and geek culture, and the corporation. It was the first time I was inspired by the explicit anthropological implications of a very business-oriented topic. My initial focus based on this trip, having never spent time in a coworking space—only hearing about how “amazing” and “important” its development was—was this global perspective. Only by actually getting in the field, through participant-observation, was I able to get to the lasting

implications on social organization that coworking really has, which is on a much more local, though networked, level.

### **1.2.2 My Role and Methodology**

My involvement with the IndyHall community has spanned almost eight years and has been on a sliding scale of engagement. I began as an outsider, spent time as a member, moved into the inner circle of influencers, and since finishing fieldwork, stepped back out to to regain an analytic perspective. Regardless of how active I am, I will always consider myself a part of the IndyHall community. What afforded me the possibility of staying in such close contact with IndyHall for this extended period, was that it is located in the same city as my doctoral program at the University of Pennsylvania—Philadelphia. The benefits of this advantage were not taken for granted. I was able to gain a long-view perspective of this community that simply is not possible for many ethnographers whose field sites and home base are separated by thousands of miles. Like my own variable engagement, many “Hallers” rarely, if ever, step foot in the space and only engage virtually. Some members will start and stop membership as their finances allow. Further, one-time full-time members central to the community often move on to new companies or roles and come back when they’re in between positions, telecommuting, or going out on their own again. The community and its culture, much like a corporation, outlive any specific member composition. My long-time relationship with IndyHall allowed me to track these changes over time, and to

verify that my observations of the types of relationships and flows were not one-offs or a product of the specific members at the time, and rather a product of the system itself.

Shortly after my whirlwind trip to Brussels, I began visiting the space intermittently while I was still doing coursework, and attending events that I knew were frequented by the space's members. In 2011, I officially joined as a member. The first time I entered the space as a member, I was flustered. A coworking space is a decidedly hybrid social and productive space; however, productivity comes first (most of the time). I came unprepared with my own work to keep me busy, which was a huge mistake. Even though my productivity had no bearing on other people's work, I felt like I would be judged if I myself wasn't getting things done. My developing anthropologist's mind raced to the notion of a Foucaultian panopticon: there was lack of formal authority in the space, but there was definitely a normalized notion of productivity that kept everyone working diligently. I always brought reading and work to do from then on. That day I pretended to be busy on my iPad, while in reality I was intermittently taking notes and mostly looking at a blank screen. The longer I was there, the more I realized no one actually cared if I spent 3 hours doing nothing—in fact, many members idle like that all the time, especially if their large screens faced a wall instead of a walkway. That is often the rhythm of the types of creative work that many members engage in. But coworking spaces work because on the whole, people go there to get their work done, to have people around to bounce ideas off

of, to stay motivated through social interaction. The nuanced ebbs and flows of productivity and socialization became more apparent as I spent more time as a member of IndyHall.

One year later, as I was finishing my qualification exams and getting ready for "the field," I had lunch with Alex to talk about my project and how to get more involved in the community going forward. As it turned out, IndyHall was in need of a new den mother. A den mother is essentially a hybrid office manager, community director, and public face of the coworking space. I learned that Dana, the woman I had met at the Young Involved Philadelphia event two years prior, had been the first den mother. The role was instituted when the community had first grown beyond its core of a dozen or so people and needed some extra administrative direction. Even though three men succeeded her, the name stuck. Parker was a Philosophy major from Dallas who moved to Philadelphia to use the den mother position as an opportunity to find out what he wanted to do (more about his story in Chapter 4). James, a doctoral student in music, held the post for a year. My predecessor and den mother mentor, Adam (another Texas transplant), found his calling in community management and now works closely with Alex teaching about coworking spaces and creating and sustaining community.

Doing ethnography teaches an anthropologist much more than just about the community she is studying. It teaches her about herself; and learn about myself, I did. I learned that I should never hold an administrative post. Ever.

Frankly, I was terrible at the job, and I think I may have created more work for Alex and Adam than I helped. Luckily, they are two gracious guys who recognize that den mothers are transient characters, using the position as a time to figure things out while getting intimately involved. My tenure was short--ten months--but represented the deepest part of my fieldwork. As den mother, I was afforded a backstage perspective of, and involvement in the management of the space and community: its finances, membership, daily maintenance and decision-making processes. This insight was critical in the formation of my analysis, in particular my work in Chapter 5, for my understanding of coworking in a recursive frame. I learned the systems and platforms through which it self-directed and managed, and how it created its own solutions to issues unique to coworking spaces.

Furthermore, it gave me a meaningful place within the lives of all of the members; I wasn't simply the awkward anthropologist taking notes in the corner, I helped them get situated when they joined, knew each of their names, refilled the toilet paper, kept them apprised of the latest IndyHall events, handled their billing, attended and helped organize their events, and most importantly, made sure there was always coffee in stock to brew. They take their coffee seriously, so I was immediately granted a status of import. The first week I was left alone to run the space while Alex and Adam went to present at a conference, the coffee ran out. This induced a panic attack in me: as a non-coffee drinker, I had no idea what counted as good, and what I needed to do to remedy the situation. By good fortune, the former den mother, James, was working from IndyHall to finish his

doctoral dissertation and was able to help me out. Crisis narrowly averted. I joke about these vignettes, but these experiences were central to my understanding of what coworking, closest to its intended purpose, is all about.

This role also quelled some of my unease with the ethnographic process in general: I never wanted to feel like I was just taking their time, their stories, their trust, and giving nothing in return. During one of IndyHall's lunchtime Show and Tell events (when members talk about and get feedback about projects they're working on, ideas they have, who they are, etc.) I presented a version of the talk I gave to my dissertation committee as a means of being fully transparent about my aims, theories and methods. I made it clear that I was always available for questions about my role, research, and conclusions. My completed dissertation will be readily available to the community.

Beyond my participant-observation at IndyHall as den mother, I have completed three years of online ethnography which consisted of (1) reading and participating in different global and local coworking blogs and online communities, (2) following Twitter (and other social media) activity, (3) online interviews with people from coworking spaces in other parts of the United States and Europe, and (4) keeping track of and archiving online media coverage--including national, global, and local news sources--of coworking. Over the course of my research I conducted and transcribed 23 formal hour-long interviews, and had countless informal conversations and discussions. Finally, I attended



coworking-specific events (including the aforementioned Coworking Europe Conference) and visited other US coworking spaces.

### **1.2.3 What I didn't do**

If I may let some of my some of my business background sneak in: strategy is about what you say “No” to. Creating my fieldwork plan was not simply about listing all of the things I wanted to do, but also consciously deciding what was outside of the scope of my project and narrowing my approach. I did not spend significant time with other coworking spaces. I did not expand my field focus to international coworking spaces, though I made sure to investigate coworking within the context of a global landscape (unavoidable given the global nature of the online coworking communities I studied.) These were both intentional choices, based on my experience with the community leading up to my fieldwork. My experience and understanding of IndyHall deepened and changed greatly over the first two years of my interaction with the coworking space. I believed that to try to embed myself in multiple spaces would have diminished my understanding of any one of them. To be a true anthropologist, and not merely a journalist passing through on a national (or international) tour of coworking, I needed to develop roots within a single community. Following individuals through the same cycles I myself experienced—from interested party, to new member, to familiar face, to community catalyst—took years. Several of the

keystone stories in this dissertation would not have revealed themselves to me had I split my fieldwork across different coworking spaces and geographies.

It is true that coworking spaces are by nature highly varied—the communities are shaped and influenced by the particular mixes of individuals, their professions, regional backgrounds, and aspirations. A space that is much more skewed towards female members over male, telecommuters over entrepreneurs, or small companies over individuals would no doubt have changed some of the insights I write about here. My experience in this one coworking space is definitely nuanced, but it is not idiosyncratic. The assertions I make about coworking in this dissertation are grounded in my experience at IndyHall and tempered by my online ethnographic methods and attendance at global and national un conferences.

### **1.3 Organization of Chapters**

In this dissertation, I hope to answer the question “what do you [both members and society at large] get from coworking?” To organize my chapters, I have decided to follow coworking through the different places it creates connections for its members. First I set up the theoretical constructs from which I draw for my analysis of coworking (**Chapter 2**) and place the rise of coworking in the past few decades within the broader history of work in the modern world (**Chapter 3**). Then I go on to examine IndyHall as “clubhouse,” the online community surrounding the coworking movement, and N3RD Street—the

Philadelphia neighborhood where IndyHall is situated. This path follows coworking from the intimate to the broad impacts it has, and also through face-to-face and virtual interactions. The bleed-over inherent in these categorizations will become apparent in the chapters themselves. For example, in the clubhouse of IndyHall, much of their interaction is beneath the observable surface, and occurring through the online tools they have created for the internal community of IndyHall. Much of the virtual community of coworking at large also incorporates face-to-face meetings at unconferences and when traveling and visiting different coworking spaces. The connection to local community (N3RD St., proxy for Philadelphia) also draws upon national and global frameworks of engagement through varying organizations.

In **Chapter 4**, I expand on my fieldwork at IndyHall itself, describing the space and its evolution over its six year history, the members and leadership, and benefits members experience from physically being in the space. In particular, I look at the story of *Flyclops*, a game and phone app development company, comprised of three men who met at IndyHall when working on completely disparate projects and career trajectories. Included in this trio is Parker (the den mother who first welcomed me into the space six years ago), Dave (the brother of Sean—IndyHall’s resident artist I will talk more about in Chapter 5), and Jake (the husband of Amanda, a fermentation guru, who holds workshops out of IndyHall on the weekend).

In **Chapter 5**, I look at the virtual realm of coworking—the tools and processes the space develops for itself, the importance of Twitter and other social media to the coworking movement globally, and the blurred lines between virtual and face-to-face community building. I contextualize my work within the anthropological scholarship on online communities, and use the story of IndyHall’s cofounder, Alex Hillman, as a way to show how coworking constitutes a recursive public, one “that is vitally concerned with the material and practical maintenance and modification of the technical, legal, practical, and conceptual means of its own existence as a public”(Kelty 2002: 19).

In **Chapter 6**, I broaden the scope of the impact of coworking to look at the localities in which they operate, specifically in the case of IndyHall, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I describe the engagement of IndyHall’s members in the arts, philanthropy, civic and political matters, and the technology and “geek” culture of the city. I use the story of **Philly Give&Get** to outline how relationships within the framework of the coworking space ultimately transformed into a philanthropic organization that benefits Philadelphia youth and brings into question traditional models of philanthropy and fundraising.

In **Chapter 7**, I summarize my arguments and discuss the implications of my findings. I re-situate coworking within the context of the modern corporation, whose structures dominate current models of work in the United States and globally. In what ways does coworking challenge the status quo, and does it provide something to knowledge workers (or beyond) presently lacking? Finally, I

discuss opportunities for future scholarship on coworking, wide teams, and the corporation.

#### **1.4 My Imagined Audience**

This dissertation provides an ethnographic account of a single coworking space and the cultural flows in which it exists. It has been my goal from the onset of my doctoral studies to bridge the gap between theoretical and applied anthropology, particularly within the realm of business, or corporate, anthropology. My background in my undergraduate studies was a dual degree in Anthropology and Management and Entrepreneurship—I have always been fascinated by the intersections of culture and the modern workplace. I aim to show that these coworking institutions blur the lines between traditional anthropological distinctions: the public and the private; mechanical and organic solidarity; the contractual and non-contractual relationships; Foucault’s governmentality and self-actualization. As such, it is my aim with this dissertation not only to speak to the importance and implications of the coworking movement within anthropological scholarship, but also speak to its importance to the practitioners of business—those who are creating and managing the workplaces where people spend over 90,000 hours of their lives (*Happiness at Work, Psychology Today*). I aim to show that the benefits and questions surrounding coworking and similar forms of hybrid community

building have broad application, creating more space in the field for subject matter that strays beyond the traditional mainstays of anthropology.

## **Chapter 2: Coworking and the Corporation**

### **2.0 Introduction**

In the modern era, the corporation has become central to the organization of everyday life in industrialized nations. It is not only a place of production of commodified goods, but also an engine of cultural production and hub of socialization. Like corporations, coworking spaces themselves are a result of self-initiated economic activity: in order to house the community it purports to serve, it must raise capital and charge for memberships to keep the space running. Unlike corporate actors however, the main goal of assembly is not economic profit *per se*. Rather, coworking spaces strive to mediate the development of non-contractual social relationships that ultimately may or may not yield incidental, yet beneficial economic results. You cannot walk in to a coworking space as a member with the primary goal of mining for business opportunities: the system filters out that type of engagement. Insider status—measured via trust and friendships—is what unlocks the potential for creating contractual/economic relationships (see Chapter 4). Members, instead, bring with them their own means of self-sufficiency (it is how they are able to pay membership). They are seeking to fill a different role that the corporation plays in many of their peers' lives: a source of socialization and belonging.

This chapter reviews the current theorization of the corporation as well as its relationship to the coworking movement, which is at once a step apart from

while simultaneously embedded within the corporate systems in late capitalism. I propose that coworking acts as a mediator between individuals and corporations and the state: a node within the same networks. I situate the coworking model within Greg Urban's proposed model of corporations as nodes within cultural flow, as well as classic analyses of social organization, specifically Durkheim's "Division of Labor," Smith's "Wealth of Nations," "Foucault's "Security, territory, population." Using these frameworks establishes the coherence of the coworking model with established anthropological knowledge while also highlighting what is novel and important about this development in how individuals in the modern world organize and distinguish between their public and private lives.

## **2.1 Theory of the Corporation**

"Anthropologists are more interested in why peasants don't change than why the auto industry doesn't innovate or why the Pentagon or universities cannot be more organizationally creative? The conservatism of such major institutions and bureaucratic organizations probably has wider implications for the species and for theories of change than does the conservatism of peasantry" (Nader 1969: 289).

As a discipline, too often anthropology narrows its focus of ethnographic inquiry to include only those groups perceived as marginalized and lacking agency. Minorities, exotic tribes, the poor: these groups are the subjects of anthropology. Even in the early anthropology of industrial work, varied motivations, informal organization, strategies and obstacles were attributed only to the factory floor (Gardner 1946, Chapple and Coon 1942, Richardson and



Walker 1948). Management, on the other hand, was viewed as a homogenous--in terms of goals, strategies and motivations--site of power, where formal organization ruled all. While assembly line workers were informed by their personal experiences, identities and relationships, the middle manager was merely an agent of promoting the corporate goals of extracting value. Over time, anthropologists questioned this imbalance and began to “study up” (Nader 1969). In some ways, the project of corporate anthropology can be seen as aligning itself with the projects of science and technology studies (STS), aiming to open the “black box” of the corporation, rather than taking for granted its dominance and perpetuity in the modern world (Latour and Woolgar 1986, Knorr Cetina and Preda 2005). Ethnography of the corporation now concerns itself not only with the complexity of social behavior and organization within sites of power, but also their importance to global capital flows and social processes (Ong and Collier 2005).

Corporate anthropology concerns ethnography both in and of the firm (applied and academic), and anthropologists have “embraced and demonstrated anxiety toward hopes that by participating in powered social arenas in new ways, critically engaged researchers might advance much needed understanding and impact on challenges, both grand and subtle, facing the contemporary world” (Cefkin 2009: 21). What it means to be a corporate anthropologist changes with the context within which they are practicing. It depends on “the specifics of who we work with, how we are funded, and what we are asked to produce” (Blomberg

2009: 214). One easy distinction would be between anthropologists working in the corporations and those working for corporations. However, that line is not always so clearly drawn. Melissa Cefkin explains that her research interests are “the way that financial constructs... inform a worldview and set of practices against which sales representatives of a global firm negotiate their role and participation in the firm’s business and the global economy more generally”; her business counterparts are interested in how the sales representatives are able to use the firm’s tools and processes and how valuable they are (Cefkin 2009: 8). In any case, corporate anthropology has grown out of recognition on the part of anthropologists that all societies are affected in real ways by the actions taken by corporations (Schwartzman 1993: 2). It is also due, in part, to recognition on the part of businesses of the value that anthropologically informed ethnography offers to both operations and design.

### **2.1.1 Anthropology Of The Firm: Corporations and Their Effects**

#### *Social Form*

The modern corporation finds its roots in much older forms of association. Ecclesiastical, feudal, and educational corporations and medieval guilds were readily known forms that persisted through time--beyond the lives and participation of any particular individuals--while pursuing particular goals. The modern business corporation grew out of these older forms, but also finds its origins in the family. Weber details the transformation of the household economy

in medieval Europe, the gradual separation of the household from matters of accounting and accountability, for legal purposes (Weber 1978). While most may identify the corporation as a legal entity, it is its rapid spread--in the last 150 years or so--as an identifiable cultural (social) form that gives it its force (Bakan 2004). In John Davis' historical account of the development of corporations, he provides a criterial definition that includes: associate activity; creation by the state, or other higher level power in the case of religious corporations; voluntary inception and compulsory endurance; autonomy, self-sufficiency, and self-renovation; compulsory unity; motive in private interest; and functions for public services that are better achieved through the associated form than by an individual (Davis 2000: 13-34). Maine, Fortes, Durkheim, and Radcliffe-Brown all highlight some of the features outlined by Davis. While Maine emphasized the persistence (endurance and self-renovation for Davis) of corporations, Fortes recognized the autonomy, or aggregate personhood of corporations (Maine 1917, Fortes 1969). This issue of unity, particularly with respect to how a corporation interacts with the external environment, along with enduring persistence and explicit purposefulness separate corporations from other associative social forms theorized by anthropologists (Radcliffe-Brown 1965).

### *Impacts*

It is argued that the modern corporation is responsible for creating and accelerating current processes of globalization that constitute the era of the 'new economy' (Smith 2002). However, the old international economy constituted by

market trade between regions, and colonial trade routes and projects (Dutch East India Company, for example) date back to (and beyond) the 1840s when Marx and Engels were beginning to write. In fact, the imagination of a global economic system necessarily presupposes their depiction of capitalism's "need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. [Capitalism] must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere" (cf. Marx and Engels 1978). They understood capitalism to be global in nature in the long-term (Renton 2001). Furthermore, the relationship between colonialism and business interests are noted in the works of Mintz (1989), Taussig (1980), and Wallerstein (1974). Furthermore, much work has been done on anthropology of labor and the communities surrounding global factories (for examples see Burawoy 1979).

### **2.1.2 Anthropology In The Firm: Organizational Culture**

#### *Applied*

One way to think of different types of corporate ethnography is put forth by Cefkin. She delineates between workplace and consumer studies, and within these two threads are theories of practice and orientation to design (Cefkin 2009: 12). Theories of practice in both workplace and consumer studies find their theoretical bases in the ideas of everyday practice and habitus, as written by Michel de Certeau (1984) and Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1990). Thick description of the everyday activities provide rich basis for the analysis of organizational

cultures. Consumer studies additionally include an orientation to design, in that research is conducted with an end user in mind: the information gathered will be used to design a product that suits the needs and wants of the consumer base studied. This method of examining the different types of performed by anthropologists in corporations allows one to see the range of roles they can play: both as the academic and as the employee. Marietta Baba creates similar categories of research: consumer behavior research and entrepreneurship, product design research, internal organization research, intercultural training and international business management (Baba 1986: 17-20).

Schwartzman also offers up yet another a way of distinguishing between different forms of corporate anthropology: (1) the anthropology of work, (2) studying organizational culture, and (3) the analysis of organizing processes and their relation to larger systems (Schwartzman 1993: 27). She defines the first mode of investigation as “emphasiz[ing] the importance of examining work and the workplace from a broader perspective,” whereas studying organizational culture consists primarily of looking at culture as an external variable, culture as informal organization, or culture as both formal and informal organization (Schwartzman 1993: 27, 33-35). Anthropology of work and organizational culture differ on their macro/micro level analyses. Her third category, however, is one that promotes an interactional approach, where forces at the macro-level are thought to be visible in interactions (a micro-level approach) (Schwartzman 1993: 38).

While Cefkin and Baba make distinctions based on the object of inquiry and therefore the role the anthropologists occupies in the organization, Schwartzman highlights the level at which analysis takes place. These systems of classification are not in conflict. It would be possible, then, for an ethnography to be both a workplace study and an anthropology of work (or a consumer study based in processual and interactional analysis). As Rick Robinson explains, “application of methodology to an arena doesn’t make a domain, or a discipline. Theory debate does” (Robinson 2005: 2).

The question of what corporate ethnographers produce has been an area of concern for many academics. This is especially true when anthropologists are explicitly working for businesses. As in academic anthropology, the work in its corporate counterpart is “problem driven” (Jordan 1994: 5). However, when in academia a monograph, journal article, or ethnography is produced, a “deliverable” is what comes out of a lot of applied corporate anthropology. A deliverable is most often an “ethnographically sensitive” analysis and documentation that answers the questions and attempts to solve the problems set forth by the business at the onset of the project (Cefkin 2009: 22). Furthermore, the form which these deliverables take are highly varied, as opposed to the traditional typed 8 1/2” X 11” ethnographies of academia. These documents are reports, PowerPoint presentations, images, diagrams, and a many other myriad of forms. George Marcus notes, “only in the writing of ethnography, as an effect

of a particular mode of publication itself, is the privilege and authority of the anthropologist unambiguously assumed” (Marcus 1995: 97).

It is often the case that corporate anthropologists have to justify the legitimacy of their research and methods, because the fruits of their labor do not often follow the path of traditional academic research. It is a curious characteristic of corporate anthropology that there are more (scholarly) publications about doing ethnography in industry than actual ethnography; it is almost the reverse situation in academic anthropology (Blomberg 2009: 22). It is true that there are often proprietary issues (including non-disclosure agreements) that hinder the publication of certain kinds of information, but Blomberg suggests that the real problem is “a lack of institutional support” for such endeavors (Blomberg 2009: 22). She suggests that the quality of ethnography is of the same caliber of academics, especially given the richness of insider information that these anthropologists have, but that the academy has been reluctant to engage this information in the larger anthropological context.

### *Academic*

The field of corporate anthropology seems to have been animated through history by the series of analogies used to view the corporation. The earliest ethnographers of business were not anthropologists. Weber, Taylor, and Marx all used empirical observations to support their theories. Weber’s theory of the modern bureaucratic pure-type describes the organization as ruled by rational decisions, in the economic sense, and formalized regulations (Weber 1978: 957-

1005). The corporation has a clearly identified hierarchical structure of super- and subordination. While Weber recognizes that all empirical forms are hybrid, many scholars still treat the corporation as a highly centralized, rigid form (Chandler 1977, 1998). Increasingly, though, the networked, flexible nature of post Fordist corporations is being theorized (Castells 1997). Taylor's imagining of the corporation rests on the concept of motion. A shop floor is populated by employees that are individuals, but rather, moving bodies and parts. His "Scientific Management" principles were aimed at manipulating the movements of employees (and other controlled variables) to gain the highest efficiency, a goal he envisioned as common between management and employees (Taylor 1947). Taylor's philosophy highlighted compensatory incentives as driving motivation for the shop floor to increase efficiency and thereby profits. However, he failed to take into account the inequitable distribution of surplus, intrinsic motivation, and the market as a whole.

The Hawthorne Studies are oft cited as the true beginning of business anthropology (Schwartzman 1993, Baba 1986, Jordan 2003, Sherry 1983). It began as a Taylor-esque study of worker efficiency, which led to the identification of the "Hawthorne Effect" and informal organization processes. Researchers found that productivity increased regardless of the variables changed: the attention paid to the workers through their participation was enough to increase morale and productivity (Dickson and Roethlisberger 1966, Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939, Whyte 1978, Roy 1954, Rose 1975, Clegg and Dunkerly 1980).



From the results of these experiments, as criticized as they have been, emerged the Human Relations School and the rise of industrial anthropology (Warner and Lunt 1941, Warner and Low 1947, Chapple 1941, Chapple and Coon 1942, Arensberg and Kimball 1965, Sayles 1957). These early workplace ethnographies approached the business place from a functionalist perspective, applying Durkheim's organismic analogy to the informal organization of workers on the shop floor (Gardner 1946). By applying the same theoretical models used by anthropologists in more traditional field sites, the functionalist approach carried along with it an implicit view of the corporation as a social form comparable to the village (Arensberg and Kimball 1965, Partridge and Eddy 1978).

This initial surge of corporate anthropology was tempered in the years between 1960 and 1980 due to ethical concerns raised in the field. It wasn't until the publishing of four popular books on the concept of "corporate culture" in the early 1980s, that anthropology saw an increased interest in studying business again (Ouchi 1981, Pascale and Athos 1981, Deal and Kennedy 1982, Peters and Waterman 1982). This surge was due, in part, to the increasing global nature of firms, and also to the success of Japanese corporations. Ethnographers approached businesses as nations writ small--as representations of their national cultures (Kim 1992, Lee 1998). In particular, attention was paid to the apparent differences in western and eastern business practices (Rohlen 1974, Allison 1994, Dore 1973). In this moment, the focus was not on the formal aspects of organizations, nor the informal behavior and structures of employees, but rather

the concept of an encompassing corporate, or organizational culture (Applebaum 1981, Sachs 1989, Britan and Cohen 1980, Dubinskas 1988).

The most current trends in corporate anthropology take up the issue of global capitalism, networks and processes; and workplaces are treated as examples of local instantiations of these concepts (Holmes and Marcus 2005, 2006; Miyazaki 2006, Leyshon and Thrift 1997, Maurer 2005). A growing body of corporate ethnography has exposed the people and dynamic processes that form the heterogeneity of these institutions, creating linkages between the everyday experiences and cultures of firms and industries and real effects on larger global processes (Ho 2008, Leidner 1993, Shulman 2007, Tsing 2000, 2005, Drori 2000). This research serves to transform abstract notions (such as “The Market,” in Ho’s work) into tangible institutions with traceable chains of human (in)action. Some authors draw directly from STS approaches by treating the business as it does the natural science lab, as Karen Knorr-Cetina (2005) does in her work on the trading floor. Striking a balance between deep ethnography and broader impact is the goal of corporate ethnography going forward, as understanding the complexities of globalization and neoliberalism are crucial to the field of anthropology as a whole.

### **2.1.3 Corporation as Nodes in Cultural flow**

I move now to review in-depth a new way of conceiving of the corporation that provides a frame for how coworking also functions within broader cultural

flows. Urban (2017) goes beyond the corporation as actor and the corporation as bearer of internal culture, and looks at the flows between these two positional assessments. Urban and Koh assert in an earlier paper that “modern-day business corporations are undoubtedly social groupings, characterized by many of the kinds of cultural elements anthropologist have documented for diverse societies around the world” (Urban and Koh 2013: 141). Corporations initially form, though, as a way of producing goods and services—commodities—for sale. They are the result of self-organizing activity, and have been argued by economists to function to reduce transaction costs, or in other words, as a mechanism for increasing efficiency in markets (Coase 1937). In his more recent work, Urban goes further in conceptualizing the anthropological corporation—a social group—and arrives at four conclusions.

First, that “modern for-profit corporations are engines for the transformation of noncommodified culture into commodities” (Urban 2016: 349). He bases this first on the assumption that commodities, rather than being labor congealed (as Marx would put it), are in fact congealed culture. Noncommodified culture is carried through habits, skills, knowledge, values, and processes, which are then, through the coordinated activity of the corporation, converted into commodities which are sold on the market and to other businesses. Simply put: the corporation processes these inflows, from both non-corporate sources (their employees and broader culture) as well as other corporations, and their commodified outflows circulate back into the broader

culture and other corporations (Figure 2). His model accounts for the noncommodified flows between corporations as well, noting that “it happens every day in innumerable ways” (Urban 2016: 331). This non commodified flow includes cultural artifacts such as “technical know-how, skills, values, ritual practices,” in addition to processes, documents, and other tweaked products (Urban 2016: 331). Such flow is impossible to eliminate—or commoditize completely. In part because of the volume of these flows, due to the fact that “culture exists as culture because of its motion, and its tendency will be to move if there is interest in it unless something prevents that motion” (Urban 2016: 332). People move from company to company bringing with them “intercorporate flows [that] shape the internal cultures of corporations that enable them to produce commodities” (Urban 2016: 332). Urban further elaborates on cultural motion by summarizing the four forces that act on cultural motion: inertia, entropy, metaculture, and interest. Interest is analogous to the economic notion of demand in this model, as the force that pulls these flows to be commodified.

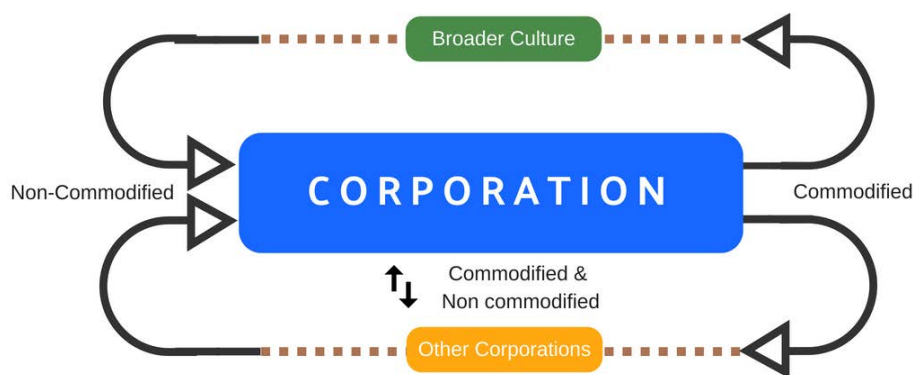


Figure 2: Urban’s Model Of Corporations As Nodes In Cultural Flow

Second, he concludes that the anthropological corporation is the “bearer of a productive culture that makes possible the creation of commodities” (Urban 2016: 349). Whereas Marx—and many anthropologists—view the owners of business as mere extractors of value who create profit as a “rip-off of labor,” Urban acknowledges the added value that comes from coordinating the internal culture towards producing marketable commodified culture. Value is not created merely from the sum of individual laborers’ work streams, but rather through their cooperation in a direction that fulfills the corporations goals. Ultimately, the corporation “hous[es] the culture of the enterprise that enables the transformation of noncommodified cultural flow into a commodified cultural flow, or that provides an added cultural tweak to an already commodified flow” (Urban 2016: 327).

Third, it is important to distinguish between the anthropological (the social grouping that bears a productive culture) and legal corporation. The legal incorporation is ultimately what grants the corporation recognition by the state and affords it certain rights and responsibilities. It is the invisible fence that allows a corporation to control their cultural outputs, such that they can be sufficiently commodified to create profit for the entity. And as Urban puts it: “to produce profit, the flow must be captured” (Urban 2016: 328). Further, it creates the condition in which the corporation itself becomes a commodified cultural entity that can be monetized via the selling of shares. This distinction between

the anthropological and legal definitions of a corporation also makes possible the application of this framework to a broader understanding of the way a variety of business enterprises are situated within broader cultural milieu.

Fourth and finally, he asserts that “while the corporation resembles the traditional object of anthropological interest...the modern for-profit corporation is a special and, in many ways, peculiar entity” (Urban 2016: 350). It is a node that is influenced by and influences broader cultural flows. What is interesting about for-profit corporations isn’t necessarily just that they are a part of these flows (because as he notes, even isolated communities participate in “broader patterns of cultural motion”), but that ultimately, they exist primarily to participate in them (Urban 2016: 350). In the next section I will compare coworking to the corporation, using Urban’s model as a reference for comparison, which I argue is even more of a peculiar entity when considering its position within cultural flows.

## **2.2 Coworking Spaces as Nodes in Cultural Flow**

### **2.2.1 Coworking Displacing, not Replacing the Corporation**

For the subset of the population for whom coworking has become a viable option, the path used to be clear: you live with your family until college, upon graduation you go out into the workforce, get married, buy a house, work your way up the organization during a long tenure, join a local church and host neighborhood cookouts. Connections to space and community were clear and the

progression was methodical. Now, you may or may not get a job in your desired career out of college; millennials are expected to change jobs 25-40 times in their lifetime, compared to the baby boomer average of 11.9 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017). Millennials are getting married older, aren't as religious as previous generations, and have lower rates of homeownership (Nichols 2017, Pew 2014). In this context, many of the moorings of social life are eroded. I argue it is in part due to the diminished centrality the corporation is playing in this population's life. One can conceive of the corporation fulfilling two roles: first, a source of income, and second, an organizing entity that creates a sense of belonging and an outlet for engagement and collaboration with other people. Therefore, the rise of contingent labor, particularly in this demographic of knowledge workers (see more in Chapter 3), means that the corporation may still persist as a source of income, but leaves individuals without a strong sense of community.

What do individuals do when the corporation is not longer playing the latter role in their lives? What coworking creates, then, is a bridge between worlds. The seeming distinction between one's family and personal life, and their work begins to dissolve in a coworking setting. The social cohesion comes not from the contractual employer/employee relationships—members of coworking spaces do not need each other in the same ways employees of a corporation do to contribute to a common singular work product—but from other forms of “needing each other,” that extends to both social and professional needs. Coworking therefore

cannot replace the corporation entirely, but displaces it into another realm of import to these individuals.

### **2.2.2 Coworking as Legal Corporation**

It is important to remember, of course, that a coworking space is more often than not a corporation in its legal form, though it is not primarily concerned with commoditization, merely self-sufficiency. In Urban's terms: a coworking space is a legal corporation, but it is not necessarily an anthropological corporation. IndyHall began as a jelly—which as you remember is a generally informal, but regularly meeting group of independents to cowork. The original members of IndyHall, including Alex Hillman and Geoff DiMasi who are credited as the “founders,” could have conceivably continued on indefinitely without formally organizing. So why create a legal entity, raise capital, find and furnish a space to house a practice they were already successfully engaging in? Simply put, legal incorporation is often out of necessity: it is risky for one person to bear the financial burden of an entire coworking space, but there needs to be a responsible party to receive payments from members to pay their bills that keep the space open. It may be useful here to consider a gym.

Individuals can exercise for free outside or in their homes. However, once an individual wants to start using equipment, the costs begin to add up. And even if an individual has the space and can afford to buy all of the equipment they need, what if they don't end up using it as often as they hope? The per-use cost



begins to skyrocket. A gym membership allows an individual to share the costs of the equipment with other members, while minimizing financial risk of not using it. Now, even if a person does have the space, and make the investment, if they ever wanted to start letting their friends, and friends of friends use their equipment, legal liability starts to become an issue. The legal incorporation of a gym by an owner also creates a pathway to mitigate this risk.

In this way, coworking as corporate entity is relatable more to the specific reasons for incorporation found in Comaroffs' *Ethnicity, Inc.* rather than to corporations writ large (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009). In that work, they chronicle the ways in which pre-existing cultural groups (tribes, nations) corporatize as a means of monetizing and protecting their cultural identities. Cultural groups are thereby able to extend the impact and awareness of their cultural capital via incorporation. The process is similar for the traditional-type coworking space origination that is emblematic in the story of IndyHall. Much like the tribes in *Ethnicity, Inc.*, incorporation allowed for them to expand the impact of the culture they had already cultivated, while mitigating the financial and legal risk associated with that growth. Furthermore, the "corporation of IndyHall," viewed through Urban's cultural motion model, makes sense when applying Matthew Hull's analysis of bureaucratic institutions (2012). They don't simply emerge for the sake of creating paperwork and replacing existing social forms, but rather rise up from within those cultural flows themselves. The emergence of the corporate

entity known as IndyHall was the most effective way of lowering the transaction costs of practicing coworking.

### **2.2.3 Comparisons to Urban's Model**

As discussed, Urban conceives of the corporation as a node within larger flows that congeals cultural inputs into commodities. As an engine of transformation the inputs are people, ideas, and other commodities that come either from broader culture, or from other corporations via economic transfer (buying intellectual property, paying for training, and the like from other companies). This transformation also requires an internally productive culture. That is, the activities of everyone within the corporation must be coordinated and organized towards the end of turning inputs into commodified outputs. This conception of the corporation—as culturally productive, rather than exploitative—is the most easily transferrable model to that of coworking, though with important differences.

First: Commoditization. Whereas the corporation's primary function is to commoditize its inputs, in coworking commodification is usually a by-product rather than a prime directive. For example, the brand recognition of IndyHall has created a market for Alex Hillman to sell his gained knowledge via consulting and speaking engagements on community building in the workplace. However, by and large, the commoditization in coworking comes from individual activity (the

member-entrepreneurs selling their products and services to customers), not coordinated activity by the coworking space itself.

Second: Productive Culture. A hallmark feature of an anthropological corporation is the existence of a corporation-internal culture: a set of shared, learned and transmitted knowledge, skills, habits, values, language, practices and other behaviors. Urban takes this one step further to assert that the corporation has more than a culture, but a *productive* culture. That is, a culture that coordinates and directs activities in ways such that the corporation is able to commoditize cultural inflows. While a coworking space does in fact create a shared culture among its members that persists beyond any one individual joining or leaving the space (though, as all culture, changes over time), it does not possess what one would describe as a productive culture. Productivity is a goal, yes, and the culture is one that needs to promote production, in that members join the space not *only* to socialize, but also to do their work. However, there is not a coordination of activities among the members such that the space can create and export commodities, as is vital to the corporation.

Third: Permeable Membrane. Corporations have many built-in mechanisms to prevent the outflow of non-commodified culture. They don't want their ideas benefiting others without being monetized in some way by the corporation and so they build safeguards: patents and trademarks, non-disclosure agreements, non-compete clauses of employment (though in practice these are difficult to uphold in court, they functionally serve as a deterrent), even so far as internally secret

development teams for new products (as an example, see Apple and their iPhone development process). Coworking spaces thrive on having a porous membrane. New people bring ideas, knowledge, skills and the like in, and take them out freely. In fact, the spread of the noncommodified culture of one coworking space out in to the world ultimately furthers the agenda of the coworking movement, which is a non-corporate entity.

So therefore, coworking as a practice, housed within coworking spaces as entities, serve as nodes within cultural flow that are primarily concerned not with creating profit via commoditization, but rather with noncommodified cultural motion (see more in Chapter 5). Although the outputs are noncommodified, however, transformations still take place. New knowledge, skills, processes, habits, are created and shared freely among members.

#### **2.2.4 Nodes within Nodes all the Way Down**

*Within* a coworking space, though, you can conceive of members as corporate-esque actors, congealing their own inputs into commodities (see, for example, Flyclops and Lanternfish Press in Chapter 4). It is helpful to remember here the lack of coordination towards productive ends among members, and envision members as nodes within a node, whereby the coworking space concentrates and focuses the myriad cultural inputs, and the individual members are commoditizing outputs for their own ends. But if each member is motivated by their own goals, what holds the community together?

Durkheim provides a model that allows us to look at this question at multiple levels. In his seminal work, “The Division of Labor in Society,” he details two forms of social cohesion: mechanical and organic solidarity (Durkheim: 1984). Mechanical solidarity is when individuals are bound to society without intermediary mechanisms. When social groups are small and unspecialized, all members tend to complete similar tasks and hold similar beliefs. The binding force is a collective consciousness, or more simply put: empathy. As a society grows in size and complexity, a need arises to specialize roles and tasks in order to meet the needs of the group. The collective consciousness begins to erode, but individuals within the group need each other because they can’t fulfill all of their needs on their own: you’re now a farmer or a physician—the physician can’t grow his own food and the farmer doesn’t have the skills to heal herself when she gets hurt or sick. Durkheim envisioned these distinctions as applying to different points along a society’s evolutionary path; however, in coworking, both forms of solidarity are at play simultaneously.

The coworking space as a whole operates at the level of mechanical solidarity. Coworking space members come together because of their likeness: they are similar in professional background as primarily knowledge workers, they experience similar challenges and triumphs, they found coworking out of similar urges to connect and build community. This sameness, coupled with the tight-knit, small size of individual coworking communities lends itself to the growth of empathy inherent within Durkheim’s mechanical solidarity. They feel

responsibility to take care of one another, and are compelled to socialize and connect.

At the level of individuals as these “corporate-esque actors,” organic solidarity comes into play: it is their differentiation of life experience, technical expertise, profession, and generalized knowledge that drives the “accelerated serendipity” I describe in later chapters that leads to the potential for economic, or commodified, relationships to form. In Urban’s model, he describes the ways in which relationships can be commodified via the example of John Abele and Boston Scientific Company, who used his conversations with physicians during sales meetings to tweak and improve the company’s products, thereby driving sales and profit. Contrary to Adam Smith’s notion in “Wealth of Nations,” however, the contractual relationship is *\*not\** the ultimate foundation of the interaction (Smith: 2000). Instead, the empathy and trust characteristic of the mechanical solidarity is what allows for contractual relationships to develop. And in fact, the two levels operating concurrently counteracts the Durkheimian shift away from empathy that is characteristic of the move from homogeneous to differentiated social groups.

### **2.3 Conclusion**

This chapter examined current anthropological theorization of the corporation and situated coworking within that literature. Using Urban’s model of corporations as nodes within cultural flows allowed me to compare and

contrast the corporation as an anthropological form to coworking spaces. Like corporations, coworking spaces are nodes that transform cultural inflows to outputs, create an internal culture, and play a role in commoditization of culture. They are different, however, in that they are not primarily concerned with commoditization, they lack a coordinated productive culture, and promote, rather than prevent noncommodified outflows. Further, I examined one level beneath the collective group of the coworking space—the individual member-entrepreneurs—as their own cultural commodifiers.

Inherent in this analysis are the ways in which individual actors are self-directed to organize themselves in a way that fulfills the role vacated by corporations in recent years to facilitate socialization, engagement, and community building. Whether this action is entirely self-directed requires further inspection, however. Foucault's theory set out in "security, territory, population," asserts that the state is concerned with shaping citizens in ways that conform their behaviors to the states interests (Foucault: 2009). Similarly, corporations are interested in shaping their employees to act in ways that benefit the firm's goals of producing economic profit. This bio-power is distributed among individual bodies such that individuals may be acting against their own interests without cognizant recognition that they are doing so. Therefore, it could be argued, that although those engaged in coworking are seemingly "going out on their own" and "choosing their own path" outside of the traditional corporate model of work, that by seeking out "productive" spaces, they are in fact behaving

in ways that they have been successfully disciplined to by the state and corporations. In other words, coworking participants are still striving to create economic profit and engage in the capitalist system that overwhelmingly benefits large multi-national corporations and the state.

However, it is not coworking as a practice that is the impetus for these individuals to act as economic actors; as detailed before, coworking participants come to the space having already established revenue streams sufficient to pay for membership in addition to support themselves financially. Rather, individuals are seeking, outside of the directed influence of the state or corporation, a space where they can find community, not explicitly to exchange labor for money. The bio-power of the state and corporation may be what is compelling them to work towards maximizing their own personal profits, but not what is driving them to seek out membership in this kind of community that takes the place of the corporation.



## **Chapter 3: Work in the Modern World**

### **3.0 Introduction**

This chapter reviews the salient history of work in the modern world that led to the development of the coworking practice. It is this same history of economic development and change that allowed for the rise of the modern corporation which shapes the systems within which coworking spaces exist. It is important to review this history in order to show the connection coworking has with previous incarnations of work, and how scholarly research conceived of different types of work. I primarily contrast the rise of coworking within the Information Age<sup>5</sup> with Taylorism's conception of work in the industrialized world in order to contrast the view of workers as 'cogs' in a mechanical system with workers as nodes within information flows. This historical context further supports my use of Urban's conception of the corporation as nodes within cultural flow as a heuristic for analyzing coworking in my ethnographic chapters.

### **3.1 Brief History of Work in the Modern World**

The history of work is a story of evolution, one that is characterized by punctuated equilibrium, whereby periods of stasis are interrupted by disruptive changes in the operating environment. Two such large changes occurred during

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<sup>5</sup> The Information Age is marked by a shift from heavy industry to an economy based on information technology. Following the Agricultural Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, the Digital Revolution sparked this major transformation with the quick emergence and widespread production of computer systems in 1950s through the 1970s.

the Industrial Revolution as well as with the Digital Revolution. In both cases, technological innovation incited a necessity of management practices to adapt, and created space for individuals and industries to innovate. Management and work studies have been preoccupied with the present and the future: what are the current trends? Where is the management profession going? A lens towards the past may be interpreted as regressive (O'Connor 1996: 27). What is striking, though, is that a careful analysis of current management 'movements' all have evidence of building upon and re-imagining past systems.

The Industrial Revolution is seen as one of the major turning points in human history. Beginning in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it spread throughout Europe, North America and the world. The first Industrial Revolution (Late-Eighteenth to mid-Nineteenth Centuries) was characterized by a shift in production from manual and animal labor to mechanized manufacturing. This transition occurred first in the textile industries and then spread to iron-making, fueled by the widespread use of coal. Innovations in these areas led to the rapid increase in production rates: the implementation of the assembly line required that large numbers of workers be in a centralized factory, trained in select tasks that were repeated over and over through the course of the workday. The increase in production allowed for population densities to grow at an accelerated rate, as the manufacturing industries could support (through both employment and supply) larger concentrations of people.

The Second Industrial Revolution—beginning in the mid-nineteenth century with electrification and continuing through World War I and the start of mass production—was marked in the United States by the rapid expanse of heavy industry (including railway expansion), the development of the Bessemer process (allowing for the production of steel), and coal mining. The economy underwent concentration and rapid growth--surpassing Britain's level of production--resulting in a few large corporations dominating most branches of industry.

These technological innovations were in contrast to artisanal production, where-in individual craftsmen or guilds were responsible for the production of a majority of goods. This mode of production allowed for greater flexibility of time and resource management. Craftsmen were compensated based on their production and operated on cyclical schedules, where productivity was directly related to demand. Thompson (1993) details the transition from pre-industrialization to a wholly industrialized England (with anecdotal support from other countries both industrialized and not). He questions to what extent the shift in notions of time (with the widespread use of mechanized clocks) affect labor discipline and in turn, how it affected the labor force's internal conceptions of time. Because of the shift in time conceptions in the workplace, wages went from production-based to time-based. Now the managers, who controlled the time (the only ones allowed to have watches), pushed workers to work faster: to produce as much as possible in a set amount of time. This mode of work abandoned older ways of work that ebbed and flowed with natural patterns.

There would be “bouts of intense labor and of idleness, wherever men were in control of their own working lives” (Thompson, 1993: 373). He makes note of how work forces initially resist the new ways of industrialized work. His argument culminates in the Western world’s truism: time is money.

In this environment where the labor force was resistant to change, an opportunity arose for a change in the way employees and businesses were managed. Antagonism between employees and their employers developed, with power shifting from the knowledgeable craftsman to the capital bearing owner. Navigating the transition in power dynamics—as the guilds historically held power in their “secret” knowledge of how to do the work—proved to be difficult, resulting in soldiering and strikes (particularly as the workforce began to unionize).

The growth of industry and specifically, the growth of large industrial corporations created a space for a new profession to establish itself: management. Throughout the century and a half of industrialization, people were brought “together to work in factories as opposed to...small shops or in homes” (Pindur and Rogers 1995: 60). Just as increased population densities require larger coordination, so do increased densities at work. A need for efficient planning, organizing, influencing and controlling work activities was created. The period between 1885 and 1940 is known as the classical period in the management movement (Pindur and Rogers 1995: 60). The beginnings of professional management were characterized by the desire to improve

productivity on the factory floor, as well as increasing efficiency and effectiveness of total organizations. These two aims were espoused by scientific management and administrative management, respectively.

Systematic analysis and implementation of techniques to improve productivity characterized scientific management. While Taylor is seen as the “Father of Scientific Management,” individuals before his heyday had already subscribed to the principles of this school of thought: in the United States, specifically, Henry Varnum Poor (editor of the *American Railroad Journal*) “developed a managerial system with a clearly established organizational structure” to increase accountability across the organizations (Pindur and Rogers 1995: 61).

On the other hand, general administrative management focused on the management organization of entire companies. As with scientific management, one individual is singled-out as foundational to the discipline: Henri Fayol (O’Connor 1996). Fayol is known for the five functions of management: (1) planning, (2) organizing, (3) commanding, (4) coordinating and (5) controlling (Fayol 1949). His contributions went beyond Taylor’s “basic hierarchical model....through a series of co-ordination and control methods” (Pindur and Rogers 1995: 62). Management in the classical movement was driven directly by the primary industries of the time. The factory was what demanded attention—in later periods, behavioral management and human relations management came to the forefront and the economy diversified from heavy industry.

While the technological advancements of the industrialization period set the tone and parameters for the management profession to establish itself, F.W. Taylor seized this opportunity for innovation and gave a name to the development of the field. Taylor is known as the “Father of Scientific Management,” for better or worse. While some praise his insights and contributions to the field, others criticize the short sightedness and dehumanization of business operations involved in scientific management.

Firstly, Taylor’s *Principles of Scientific Management* (as with other foundational management texts) explicitly sets his ideas apart as new and in contrast to prevailing ways of doing things. Particularly, he spends his entire first chapter criticizing the status quo, which is characterized by soldiering, or “deliberately working slowly as to avoid doing a full day’s work,” a practice that “is almost universal in industrial establishments” (Taylor 1911: 13). After setting up what is wrong with the system, he makes a case for the legitimacy and need for a system of management that is analytically devised, aligning the practice with the rigor of science because “the best management is a true science” (Taylor 1911: 7). His four tenets of scientific management are as follows:

- (1) science over rule of thumb;
- (2) scientific selection and training;
- (3) cooperation over individualism, and;
- (4) an equal division of work best suited to management and employees (list from Payne, Youngcourt and Watrous 2006: 387).

A critic of the “rule of thumb,” Taylor wanted to streamline the “haphazard” methods by which standards of production were set (Taylor 1911: 31). Because this information is handed down by word of mouth through the years, many iterations of how to do the same thing were always in circulation. Taylor espoused that “absolute uniformity” yields the best outcomes for both managers and employees: this is to be accomplished through “extensive data gathering, recording and analysis” (Taylor 1911: 36, O’Connor 1996: 34).

As seen not only in his writings, but also from his testimony in front of the U.S. House of Representatives, Taylor saw his system as not only “a device for securing efficiency,” to be implemented, but “involves a complete mental revolution on the part of these men as to their duties toward their work, toward their fellow man, and toward their employers” (Testimony 1911: 1). He believed that there was a “first-class man” for every job and that the biggest evil was a man who could work, but didn’t (Testimony 1911: 2-3). The purpose of scientific management is to match these “first-class” men with their appropriate jobs and to then maximize productivity through standardized best practices.

Taylor was criticized on many fronts. People believed that “scientific management was ‘unevenly and unscrupulously applied’” (Payne, Youngcourt and Watrous 2006: 388). It was not always the case that firms subscribed to Taylor’s principles wholesale, which fostered even further animosity between stakeholders (e.g. owners, managers, employees), and this period is rife with union conflicts and strikes. His system even further removed power (the

knowledge of doing the work) from the workers and shifted it to management; in a time where frustration was already mounting, implementation of scientific management without particular attention paid to the realigning of management and workers towards the same goals (through productivity-based incentives) could prove disastrous. His character was also called into question with regards to pig iron “experiments” and plagiarization of a colleague’s work (Locke 1982). However, later re-evaluation of these accusations shows that they may have been overly harsh (Locke 1982).

Whatever the faults and failures of Taylor and scientific management were, it is undeniable that they had a large impact on business practices and the field of professional management around the world. His ideas have been re-imagined in later movements. Furthermore, critics of Taylor characterize his methods as “dehumanizing time-motion studies” (“Return of the Stopwatch” 1993: 71-72). However, this focuses on only one aspect of his systems, disregarding the fact that even Taylor recognized the “limitations of the scientific knowledge then at his disposal” (Bedeian 1998: 8). He understood that further investigation needed to be done into the motives of men. Bedeian (1998) compares the vilification of Taylor’s shortcomings to the equivalent of “attacking Isaac Newton because he failed to invent non-Euclidean geometry or discover the theory of relativity” (8). Taylor’s innovations with respect to management in a time of technological change not only influenced business practices, but also helped to solidify the entire field of professional management.



Beginning with the advent of the personal computer in the late 1970s and culminating with the widespread use of the internet by the public in the late 90s and early 2000s, the Information Age is characterized by the rapid accessibility of information across geographic space. Like the Industrial Revolution, the new technologies of this era were concurrent with macro level shifts in the economy. Through the 1980s and 1990s, the population was shifting away from heavy industry and towards a service economy (store clerks, office workers, teachers, etc.). As the Internet and other information and communication technology (ICT) progressed, they also became a significant part of the economy.

Beyond digital media's rise to dominance over other forms of media, it has had tangible implications for the organization of firms across industries. Beyond streamlining the information management of firms as well as communication between firms (nationally and internationally), ICT has affected the ways in which individuals work. Through use of ICT, the work of more and more individuals is less about (physical) face-to-face interaction and more about using computers to complete tasks and to communicate. Many firms use instant messaging in addition to e-mail for almost all intra-office communications. By setting your availability status, your coworkers know whether or not it is an appropriate time to talk to you. This also eliminates the need to walk to a coworker's desk when you need something. So, if everyone is communicating--in addition to doing their work--through their computers, what is the need for being in a centralized office everyday?

Many firms' employees asked the same question, resulting in the adoption of teleworking programs. Teleworking, telecommuting, or remote working, is where an individual is able to work from home or “at a distributed work arrangement such as satellite work centers, neighborhood work center, flexible work arrangement and generic offices” (Siha and Monroe 2006: 456). This can either be part-time or full-time. Teleworking increases the flexibility of scheduling—attractive to individuals who have families or whose own personalities do not necessarily operate best on the traditional 9Am-5PM schedule. Often times, the only times an employee will come in to the centralized office is for meetings (either with managers or clients). ICT firms, in particular, are working to eliminate even this need with the use of video conferencing technology.

Beyond workers with traditional employee relationships with firms, the adoption of ICT has allowed for more and more individuals to make a living through independent contracting of their skills; this includes creatives (graphic designers, web developers), IT professionals (software and html programmers), writers, salespersons, as well as consultants and marketing professionals. The reduced necessity of access to a company’s capital and technology has come with the rapidly decreasing costs of computing technology. Moore’s Law, established in a paper published in 1965, documented the exponential increase of transistors on integrated circuits (Roser & Ritche 2018). The trend has held for over fifty years. In essence, since the dawn of the Information Age, computer power

doubled approximately every two years. Calculated as cost of computing power (calculations per second per \$1000), Moore's Law shows this speed of development is what has allowed for the mass affordability of information technology.

This has in essence freed these workers from the constraints of working exclusively with one company: freedom to choose and reject projects, freedom to manage time, and freedom to set the terms of compensation. Of course, the apparent freedoms associated with freelancing also come with its own major constraints and stresses, discussed later in this chapter. To some extent, there is a reversion of the impacts of the Industrial Revolution. Whereas the nineteenth through twentieth centuries were characterized by a move from guilded craftsmen to assembly line (deskilled) workers—think of the “cog in the machine”—the Digital Age has enabled some (specific, privileged) segments of workers to reclaim their crafts without completely sacrificing livelihood or career paths.

There are a variety of factors that influence the viability of working remotely, along the lines of industry, profession, location, corporate culture, and costs, for example. The vast majority of telecommuters are knowledge workers, or “highly qualified white-collar workers” (Taskin and Devos 2005: 16). Historically in the United States, this segment has been primarily made up of white, college-educated males.

### **3.2 The Rise of Coworking**

As a result of these processes, the remote workforce is reorganizing itself: independents and entrepreneurs are sharing space in order to work “together.” Coworking involves a shared working space—sometimes an office, sometimes not—but independent activity. Most often coworkers do not work in the same profession, industry or for the same companies (or even companies in the same cities or countries). The independents who utilize coworking are primarily freelance writers/web designers, creatives, entrepreneurs, and telecommuters.<sup>6</sup> Often these workers are isolated and left with no socialization during their workday (Taskin and Devos 2005; Beasley, Lomo-David and Seubert 2001; Cascio 2000). Furthermore, it can be difficult to be productive when your office is the same place as your home. A lack of separation between personal and work space leads to many issues revolving around the conflict between home and work activities. That is, when you’re working from home, *should you be using your breaks to do house-work? Are you neglecting your children by working in their presence or neglecting your work by paying attention to your children? How tempting is that Netflix movie in your queue?* Those “freed” from the office began seeking out places to complete their tasks and be around people to find a sense of community. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, independent and

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<sup>6</sup> “Telecommuter” in the context of this dissertation broadly refers to any individuals who do not have a traditional office to go to everyday

telecommuting workers fled to coffee shops to counteract the isolation and issues of productivity (think of the iconic Starbucks filled with laptop-laden professionals and creatives). Famed Starbucks CEO, Howard Schultz, recognized this burgeoning need:

“People think I’m the founder of Starbucks. I was an employee when Starbucks only had four stores. I was sent to Italy on a trip for Starbucks and came back with this feeling that the business Starbucks was in was the wrong business. What I wanted to bring back was the daily ritual and the sense of community and the idea that we could build this third place between home and work in America. It was an epiphany. I was out of my mind. I walked in and saw this symphony of activity, and the romance and the theater of coffee. And coffee being at the center of conversation, **creating a sense of community**. That is what spoke to me.” (Gallo 2016)

However, these public places were not designed with the working person in mind; they are often loud and bustling, the worker feels uneasy about taking up space without constantly buying from the vendor, and technology (wi-fi and power sources) are often unreliable. From my own experiences as a student, and confirmed in interviews, it can take months of sampling dozens of locations before finding a shop that suits your needs. Coworking evolved to fill this niche of work space needs.

Coworking has an asynchronous history. It arose within a specific environment to solve a specific set of problems for a specific sub-population. Because of this, a lot of people thought they “invented it.” At the first Coworking Europe Conference in Brussels in 2010, it was a sentiment I heard over and over.

Furthermore, it was apparent how coworkers feel that this movement is not simply a mode of a work but also an indicator of how individuals should live their lives: collaborating, engaging and innovating. The tone of the discussions about the future of coworking revealed much more than a pragmatic discussion of current state and pending action items. The debates were filled with pride in their own coworking communities, and the angry dismissal of ideas that did not align with their own. The atmosphere was more reminiscent of fervent religious debates than discussions about the workplace. The discussions were littered with references to how coworking could “save” people from the drudgery and isolation of their work, and how in order to be successful a level of evangelism was necessary.

“hey #coworkingeu let’s start working together beyond country borders and bring this new way of life to more people out there”

"#coworkingeu People are looking to break the too conventional working relationships with community-based coworking values"

*-Quotes from the live tweet wall projected behind speakers at the first Coworking Europe Conference Tweets*

Although at this point there had been several coworking meetups at the South by Southwest Conference in Austin, this conference was one of the first times a large number of global coworking space owners and catalysts (the term given to those looking to open a coworking space) had been in the same place. They were surprised to see how different coworking can be done in different places. Coming together during this nascent period also revealed factions and fissures during heated debates about what coworking is and should be. At times, the tension and

volume were high, something I had not been anticipating from my then cursory understanding of coworking as work space sharing. For the people investing their time and money in the hope of a new way of working, the stakes were high.

*Growth:*

What is astounding about the coworking movement is how quickly and extensively it has spread in the last twelve years. It has spread from one flagship space in San Francisco in 2005 to almost 15,500 spaces in 2017, and almost 1.3 million members of coworking spaces (Figures 3 & 4, Foertsch 2018b: 2).

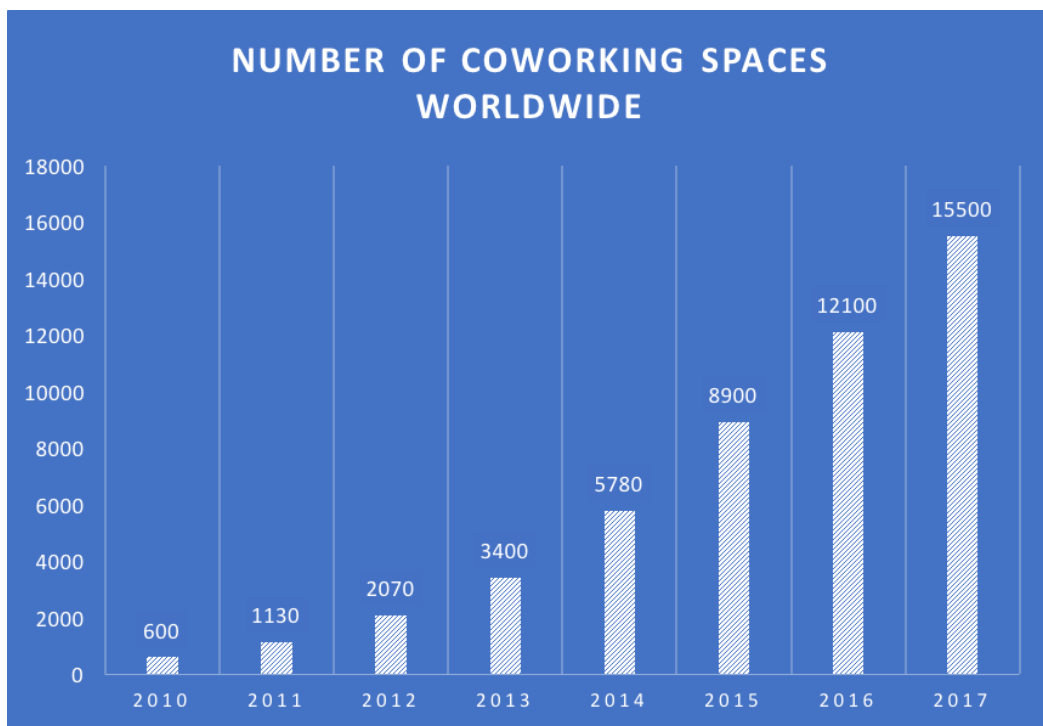


Figure 3: Number of Coworking Spaces Worldwide

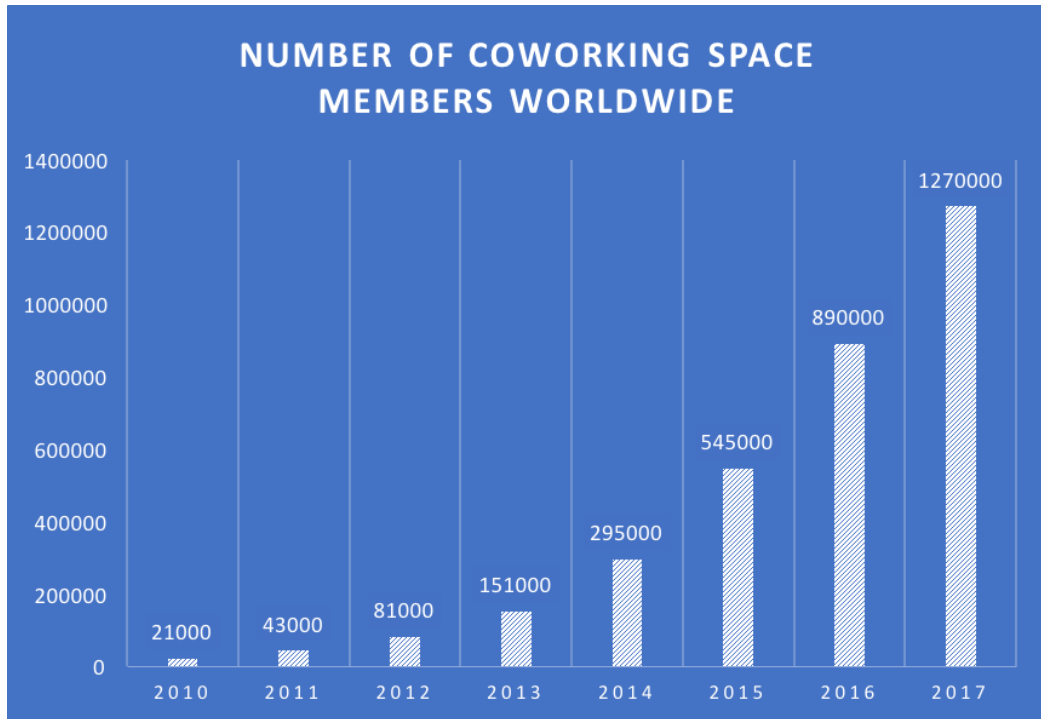


Figure 4: Number of Coworking Space Members Worldwide

This number, however, belies the number of participants involved in the movement that are not expressly members of specific spaces. The coworking movement is largely organized online, through Google Groups, Twitter feeds, blogs and other social media which constitute a recursive public (Kelty 2008) that is actively engaged in debating the practices, ideology and goals of the movement. In 2012, 94,000 tweets were composed with the hashtag “coworking” and 271,000 including the phrase without the hashtag (topsy.com), which constituted an increase of 54% from the previous year. Interest in “coworking” first manifested on Google search trends in 2006, which steadily grew with a



peak search volume in April 2018 (Figure 5); Google Scholar retrieves a steadily increasing number of citations for “coworking” from 2007 to 2018 (Figure 6).

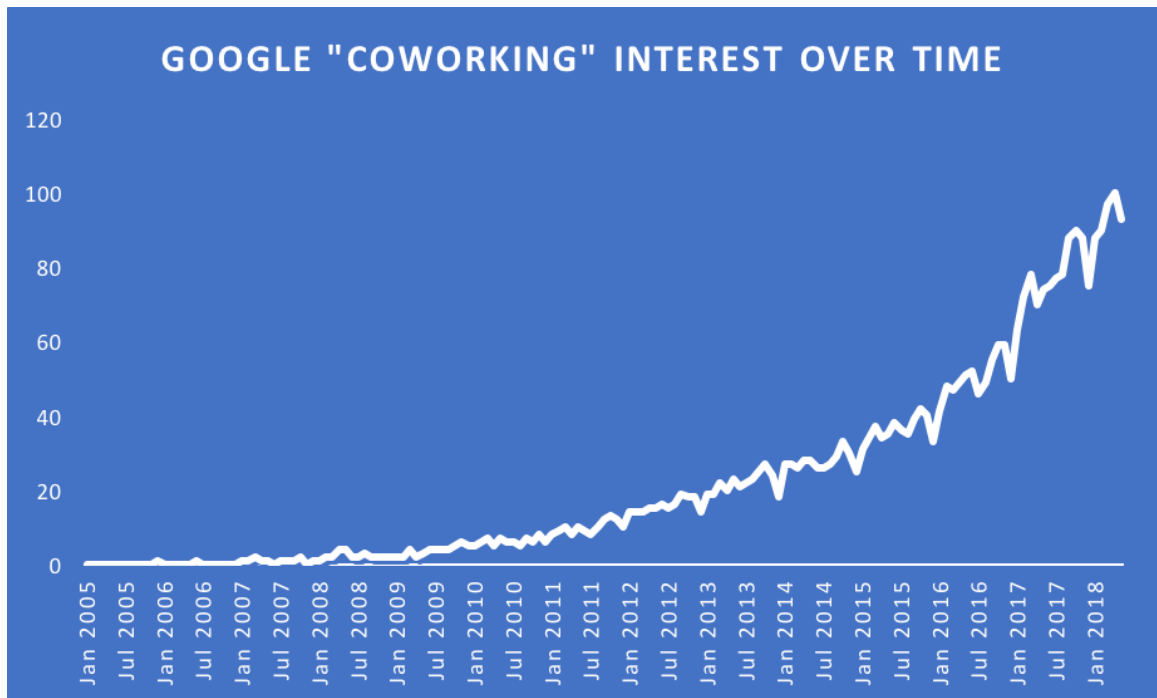


Figure 5: Google Trends for “coworking” 2005-2018

The Coworking Movement is has spilled into the mainstream consciousness, too, with media coverage from the Economist, Wall Street Journal, and other major media outlets. The New York Times first inquisitively covered coworking in 2008, ultimately treating the topic with a tone that implied little faith in its ability to move beyond the level of trend (Fost 2008).

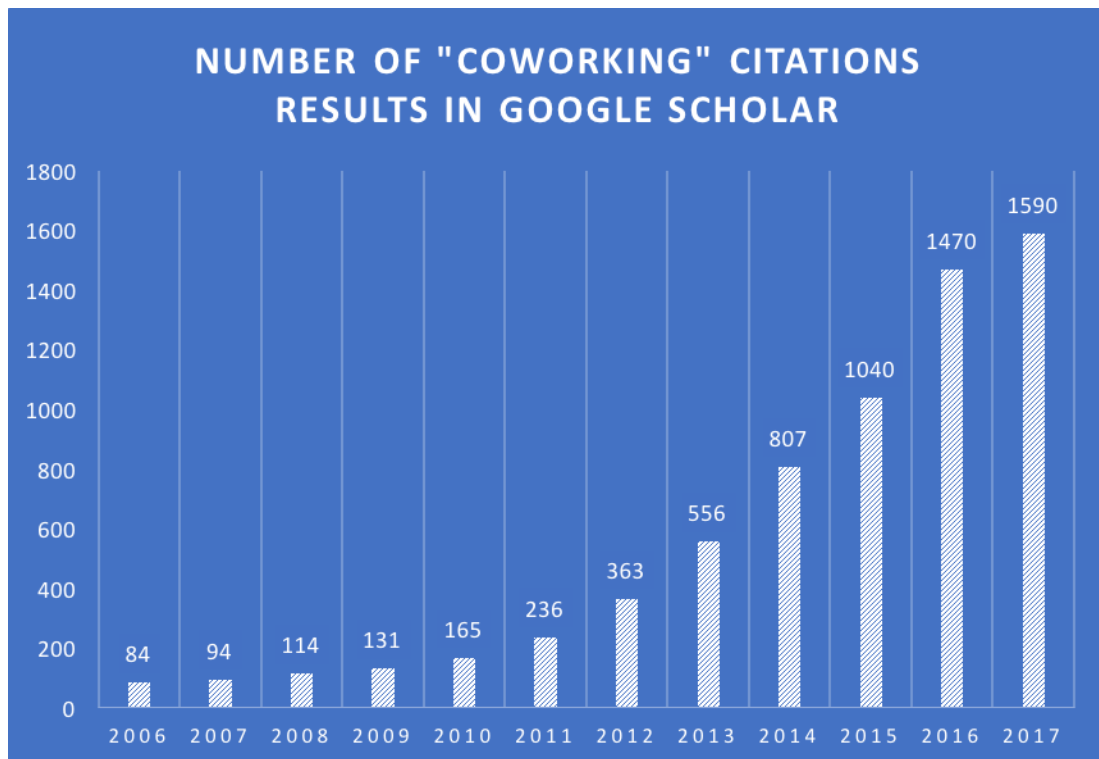


Figure 6: Google Scholar “coworking” citations 2006-2017

*Spread:*

Coworking’s expansion/success is not limited to quantitative increases just within the ‘pure’ form, either. The practice began mainly in the United States and parts of Europe. Early groups of coworkers were largely male and in tech industries exclusively. As the movement has spread geographically, the population has also seen more women participating in recent years—growing from 32% in 2010 to 44% in 2017—and a wider variety of professions (Foertsch 2018a: 38). Even for a movement so young, a line is beginning to form between ‘traditional,’ grassroots coworking, and adoption of coworking practices within large corporations in a new of ways, from furnishing spaces (Steelcase) to

incorporating internal coworking spaces in their headquarters (Plantronics). It's adoption though, has been uneven—in part due to an oversimplification in the public consciousness of what coworking is. There is often an equivocation between open floor plan and coworking, mixed-use workspace and coworking, or funky/industrial design and coworking. These conceptions of the framework distill it down to what is most visible: the physical spaces in which coworking is performed. As a consultant on collaborative workspace, community, and coworking, Alex Hillman often finds himself fielding questions such as, “What do you constitute as a ‘creative’ environment? Foosball? Raw surfaces? High ceilings?” (an actual question from an architect relayed on Alex's twitter). Such an understanding of coworking belies the complexity of what makes coworking spaces work. Creating and sustaining a coworking community supersedes the necessity of any particular kind of space. When corporations adopt open floor plans or mixed-use space, they more often than not neglect to attend to the cultural and structural changes that need to accompany the physical changes to the space. In particular, norms of communication, ownership of space, trust, accountability, and volume (one of the biggest complaints about open floor plans is noise pollution). And while strong adherents of the traditional coworking framework may cringe at the improper appropriation of the term ‘coworking’ to activities and forms that do not cohere with the core values (see below), there is little opportunity to police and maintain consistency beyond the movement itself.

- 1995: Hackerspaces (C-base in Berlin)
- 1999
  - Coworking Brian DeKoven uses word
  - ‘flexible desks workspace’ in NYC (42 West 24)
- 2002: vienna “community center for entrepreneurs” Schraubenfabrik
- 2002: Denmark LYNfabriikken
- Jan 2005: first coworking space Brad Neuberg; hosted at Spiral Muse in SF.
- 2006
  - May: jellies (Amit Gupta & Luke Crawford NYC)
  - June: First full time “coworking space” Hat Factory in SF
- 2007
  - August IndyHall Opens Doors—bootstrapped finance
  - October: “coworking” on wikipedia
- 2008
  - Feb: New York Times first article on Coworking
  - Feb: coworking term jumps to europe
  - March: Coworking meetup at SXSW
- 2010
  - April: Coworking barcamp in Italy
  - July: Deskmag
  - August 9, first #coworkingday
  - August New Work City opened using kickstarter (\$17,000)
  - October: 600 coworking spaces worldwide
  - November: First Ever Coworking Europe conference
  - December: Global coworking survey launched
- 2011
  - First Global Coworking Unconference (GCUC)
  - 61,000 #coworking tweets
- 2012:
  - Worldwide Jelly Week
  - October: 2000 Coworking spaces worldwide
  - 93,000 Tweets sent with #coworking (217,000 with and w/o hashtag)
- 2013
  - 2500 coworking spaces worldwide
  - August COHIP (insurance plan)
- 2017
  - 1M coworking members surpassed

Figure 7: Coworking Timeline

*Coalescence:*

The practice of coworking is still highly varied from space to space. They operate within local cultures and are shaped by the personalities, professions and goals of space owners and founding members. On a global scale, however, facilitated through social media, there has been a coalescence around a few foundational principles. These principles allow for a line to be drawn in the sand around what does and does not “count” as coworking. Adherence (either in practice or nominally) to these principles, rather than expression through other identifiable practices (membership-based work space sharing, open floor plans,

shared resources, among others) is what is thought to be central to the coworking practice. Expressed as the ‘values’ of coworking, they are collaboration, openness, community, accessibility, and sustainability. An iteration of these values (then four—missing sustainability) can be found on the website of Citizen Space, a coworking space opened in 2006 (now defunct, see Figure 8 for screenshot). It has since spread to other notable places on the web, including the blog of Alex Hillman, [dangerouslyawesome.com](http://dangerouslyawesome.com), in a series of posts beginning in August of 2001 (Figure 9); the website of a French coworking space, Mutinerie, in September of 2011 (Figure 10); the [coworking.com](http://coworking.com) landing page in 2012 (Figure 11); and a series on the values in 2013 by Cowork Frederick, a space in Maryland (Figure 12). The construction of these values were contested and co-created through private conversations, discussion on the coworking google group, in face to face meetings at conferences, and propagated through social media and the individual sites of coworking spaces globally (see Chapter 5).

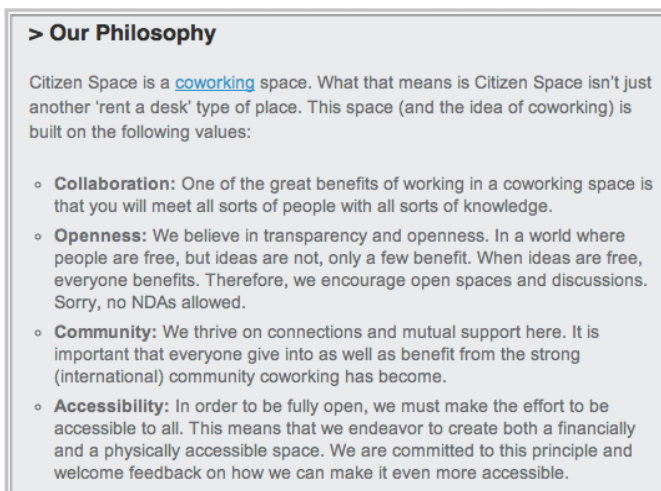


Figure 8: Citizen Space coworking values 2006

This post is part 1 of a 5 part series exploring the 5 core values of coworking: **Collaboration, Openness, Community, Accessibility, and Sustainability.**

Figure 9: Dangerouslyawesome.com coworking values 17 aug 2011

Ces échanges ont abouti à la définition de valeurs centrales du coworking qui peuvent être résumées en 5 piliers :

- Durabilité
- Communauté
- Coopération
- Ouverture
- Accessibilité

Figure 10: Mutinerie website coworking values Sep 2011

Did you know that there is a global community of people dedicated to the values of *Collaboration, Openness, Community, Accessibility, and Sustainability* in their workplaces? It's called

*Coworking.*

Figure 11: Coworking.com coworking values 2012

*Collaboration.* Collaboration refers specifically to behaviors and attitudes around trust and sharing, high contact, a learning mentality, and a willingness to connect with others. The togetherness in “working alone, together” is not simply cohabitation of space. There is the understanding of ‘we’ as opposed to a collection of ‘I’s: this orientation lends itself to members of coworking spaces not only understanding what they can get out of joining, but what they can offer in exchange. In a series of recorded talks on the five values of coworking, two female

members of New Work City in New York City, highlighted the centrality of collaboration to coworking in their experiences, “doing ‘our own thing’ doesn’t happen in a vacuum, you are surrounded by a ton of other people and you can get together with them and make something new happen (Open Coworking: 2014). You don’t even know what you might come up with. You come in with one idea, and you come out with another because other people have provided input along the way.” I have seen this value in action when it comes to collaborating both to the ends of work-related endeavors, such as for clients or projects, and even more so with respect to the coworking space and community itself. For example, annual reboots at IndyHall involve moving desks and building new ones, cleaning and organizing clutter, and planning and implementing new ideas for the space (will we install a new screen projector? How about getting the space on an automated ‘smart’ thermostat?). Furthermore, all of the events and activities put on by the coworking space are fundamental collaborative efforts. In the formulation of this value, the space manager and owner ideally act as facilitators, collaborators and resources for new projects and events, rather than gatekeepers.

*Openness.* The first level of openness is what you can see: traditionally, coworking spaces are open floor plans (though some have a handful of private offices around the perimeter). This value also refers to an attitude, one that involves free sharing of ideas, information, and experiences. You don’t see a lot of computer privacy screens in coworking spaces (again indexing the type of work(er) that is most compatible with coworking), and you overhear members

discussing the intricacies of their projects and problems throughout the day. In a 2010 interview published by Rex, Chris Messina, an early figure in the coworking movement and advocate of an open web, muses that

“openness is unfortunately one of those words that’s become somewhat geriatric, losing its teeth and forgetting what it means...When I think of openness I also think of biology and the human body. The human body is an “open system” and thrives because of its openness. The human body is constantly exchanging things it values little for things it values more. Whether you’re talking about oxygen and CO2 or nutrients and waste, the body cycles – value in and waste excreted. It requires openness to live.”  
(Hoskins 2010)

In much the same way, coworking spaces require openness from space members to thrive, the intrinsic value of coworking is lies in what happens when people make connections, and anxiety over sharing (for fears of ideas being ‘stolen’) shuts off the flow between individuals. Beyond the sharing within spaces, openness is a value also used to highlight a predisposition to share best practices and knowledge across coworking spaces, and to use the ideas of one project to spur another (‘forkability’—a borrowed concept from coding that Alex and Chris uses in describing openness). This value is highlighted in the open coworking Google group, the public coworking wiki, and the transparency among the community about successes and failures.

*Community.* It can be argued that this is the most central of all of the coworking values—it is how people are initially sold on what is different about coworking from other flexible work solutions. “You get to work with your friends,



everyday!” I’ve heard exclaimed on more than one occasion. The drive for human connection is often the impetus that has independents looking for workspace to begin with. The first symptom of working from home day in and day out is often loneliness. Community emphasizes the connections made between people, the relationships that grow from working and socializing in the same space: the value of community reinforces how coworking is about people and not physical spaces. In a photo essay, Chris Dawson—member of IndyHall, describes his experience as “coming from the cube world, it was so unbelievably refreshing to shift the paradigm from working *for* and *with* people to working *alongside* other people. You do your own thing for a while, and then you take a break. These personal work rhythms flow across the coworking space ensuring that there will always be someone else on a break too. A nod, a smile, an introduction. A brief chat - a connection made.” (Dawson 2014) Furthermore, the concept of community in coworking extends beyond the members of the space—whether they are physically present or not—to the local community and global coworking movement (see Chapter 5).

*Accessibility.* This can connote a variety of things—accessibility to the space physically, fiscally, psychologically. Mutinerie, a coworking space in Paris, equates accessibility with the freedom to work “when you want, where you want and with whom you want.” (Mutinerie 2011) The majority of coworking spaces do not curate membership in overt ways, membership is self-selecting. They may have general populations they cater to, but rarely do they turn people away

(beyond limitations of capacity). For instance, I—as an individual academic—have been welcomed in to work from a number of coworking spaces, some that catered to small companies over individuals, some where the population was made up almost entirely of programmers. While I was free to join, I recognized quickly that those spaces were not where I felt I could get the most benefit and develop the deepest relationships. People recognize fairly quickly if a coworking space is for them or not, in the conversations I’ve had and seen online, coworking space owners welcome the growth of spaces within their “territories,” as it gives more variance and flavor to the local community—making it more likely that people will participate in coworking. This runs contrary to the traditional perspective of business owners who see new entrants into their markets as potential threats. Furthermore, within the ‘core’ ideological adherents of coworking, profitability margins are low and purposefully so, as spaces strive to make coworking an affordable option.<sup>7</sup> That is, you don’t open a coworking space to make money, even if that is necessary for the sustainability of the space, though that has implications on the fifth core value of coworking, sustainability.

*Sustainability.* Being “green” or environmentally sustainable is of course what comes first to mind. We are constantly in discussions in our daily lives about the human impact on the sustainability of the planet. Although the sharing

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, the population of eligible coworking participants is narrowed to those who are independently successful enough to have the freedom and flexibility to choose their work environments—the focus of this dissertation is not to dissect the level of ‘elitism’ or ‘privilege’ experienced by participants in coworking, but rather to understand the community *per se*, and base analysis on its internal logics.

of resources and oft repurposed industrial buildings that coworking spaces inhabit do achieve some of the goals of environmental sustainability, that is not at the core of this value. Sustainability in coworking refers, rather, to the ability to keep serving the communities coworking creates, for as long as those communities are creating value for their members. In that series written on the Cowork Frederick site (2013), the author Julia explains, using the dictionary as a jumping off point:

“Exploring further, we see that “sustain” means:

1. to give support or relief to
2. to supply with sustenance: nourish
3. keep up, prolong
4. to support the weight of
5. to buoy up

And, THIS is where sustainability starts to get really interesting. Sustainability in a coworking community is about supporting, nourishing, about “buoying up” our fellow coworkers.”

While coworking spaces work at very slim margins, those margins are critical to the sustainability of the space. Even though coworking spaces (in forms closest to the ideological ideal) do not exist to make money, in the conventional for-profit model, coworking must constantly prove its viability as a business model in order to fuel its growth as a movement. No one will want to engage in the sweat equity if ultimately it will be unable to support itself through memberships.

These five values, along with the Coworking Manifesto (2011, see appendix), represent the ways in which the coworking movement are constantly engaged in self-governing and defining practices of what constitutes their

imagined public, in order to differentiate themselves from definitions and practices of ‘coworking’ that they feel are not true to their vision.

### **3.3 Conclusion**

This chapter has situated coworking within historical trends of work and provided more detail into the conditions which allowed for its emergence in the mid-aughts. A product of the broad economic shifts from manufacturing to information management and knowledge work coupled with the exponentially decreasing costs of technology, certain demographics of workers find themselves in a situation where they have apparent choice over the conditions in which they work. Initially, this freedom was mostly in the form of telecommuting within traditional full-time employment roles, as an option for ‘flexibility,’ and as a means of corporations to manage overhead costs. Increasingly, though, the U.S. workforce is comprised of more and more independent contractors, solopreneurs, freelancers and temps—between 20 and 33% (and up to 40% by 2020) (freelancersunion.com: 2015). Although people have the ability to work from home, many have found it is not always the most conducive for productivity. Neither are coffee shops and other pre-existing infrastructure (libraries, community centers, etc.). Coworking emerged as a solution to the independent’s problems; both a space created specifically to cater to the needs of a working individual—wifi, desks, chairs, coffee, printing—and a community which engenders feelings of belonging and sociability. Though the concept of coworking

rose rapidly to significance, its inception was fragmented and the concept was nebulous. However, fueled by the same technology and frameworks that creating the fertile soil from whence coworking sprouted, a global coworking movement coalesced around shared values and practices.

With a more complete understanding of what coworking is, where and how its done, and by whom, the next three chapters look into the why of coworking. Using ethnographic stories from my fieldwork, I illustrate what individuals get out of working alone, together. There is something about the balance of work and sociability that amplifies the effects on productivity that mere access to amenities. Coworkers do not work for the same company working towards unified and singular goals, and hence do not need each other in the same way employees of a singular firm do. However, they are finding they do still benefit from having each other around. It is true that there exists an ideologically-driven movement engaged in creating and negotiating the meanings and boundaries of the coworking framework. There are thought leaders and evangelists who connect deeply to the mission of coworking on an emotional level. In my fieldwork, though, what most struck me most is the pragmatic ways in which individuals use coworking as a vehicle for connection to place and people. As discussed in Chapter 2, coworking spaces function similarly to the corporation both as a site for transformation of culture, as well as a hub of socialization and community for individuals. When doing work requires little more than a computer and wifi connection, physical place almost becomes irrelevant to your labor; however,

place remains crucial to your experience as a cultural being, and coworking becomes a conduit—or node—to connect to a workplace, a neighborhood or a city, and broader communities.

## Chapter 4: The Clubhouse—IndyHall

### 4.0 Introduction: Connection to the Space

*“Where do you work?”* A common enough question when meeting a new person—metonymic for the company you work for—is potentially beginning to lose its meaning. This chapter investigates the ways in which a coworking space provides (re)connection to space for its members—as technology has reconfigured the notion of “work” as *what* you do rather than *where* you go, knowledge workers experience a disconnect from space. “The office,” as traditionally defined, is not only important because of the reduction of transaction costs (Coase 1937) by having everyone in one place, but also where employees develop a familiarity and rhythm which promote a level of efficiency. Furthermore, it provides a centralized location where relationships between employees develop. Think of the importance of water cooler culture. To work in isolation without punctuated breaks to socialize, refresh, and incubate<sup>8</sup>, it can be difficult to achieve any level of productivity. Just because you have the physical means to do work independent of ‘the office,’ does not mean that it is beneficial to do so. Coworking solves some of these, and other seemingly unidentified, issues by re-establishing the ‘place’ of work. What benefits does being present in the physical coworking space actually afford? Through the lens of IndyHall, I look at

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<sup>8</sup> Incubation is defined as a process of unconscious recombination of thought elements that were stimulated through conscious work at one point in time, resulting in novel ideas at some later point in time—Seabrook Rachel, Dienes Zoltan (2003). Incubation in Problem Solving as a context Effect

three broad categories of benefits: networking (broadly defined), knowledge transfer, and habits. These benefits have crossover implications for public and private life, and professional and personal goals. These categories constitute many of the noncommodified cultural flows that pass through the nodes of coworking spaces. As discussed in my opening chapters, a main driver for the coworking movement is the seeking out of community and ultimately, this chapter illustrates what community building looks like at a behavioral level.

#### **4.1 The History of Independents Hall**

In the fall of 2010, I was desperately seeking a project. I needed to balance my anthropological training with my interest in business and entrepreneurship. I was an academic Goldilocks: ideas were either too theoretical with not enough practical grounding in business for my taste, or I was grasping at ways to make the project suitable for a dissertation in anthropology. I almost launched a pilot study into the networking organizations (networks are anthropological, right?) in Philadelphia targeted at young professionals. I say almost because it lasted naught a week. On the last night of the annual 'State of Philly' event series organized by the Young Involved Philadelphia organization, I happened to sit next to Dana. As mentioned in Chapter 1, we chatted about what brought us to the event (her boyfriend was a journalist for the online Technically Philly publication).



"So what exactly is a business anthropologist?" I had begun calling myself that before I even knew what I meant by it. As I stuttered through examples of what a business anthropologist *might* do, rather than what one was, her eyes began to light up.

"If you're interested in all of that stuff, have you heard of IndyHall? You'd love it."

Independents Hall, IndyHall for short, was Philadelphia's first coworking space, and the longest continually open coworking space in the United States. It lives right around the corner from the historical Independence Hall in Old City, and has been in the neighborhood since 2007. The community has been housed in three different physical spaces. First, a small space on Strawberry Street. Second, one—then two whole floors of a historical building on North 3<sup>rd</sup> Street (see more about the neighborhood in Chapter 6). It was a wide open space, black and tan Ikea table-desks organized into clusters throughout, with a flurry of people sitting and standing at the desks staring at computers, drawing on tablets, and intermittently chatting. The industrial interior had exposed ducting, painted concrete floors, and a wide wood and iron staircase cutting into the floor above. Art was everywhere. The front walkway serves as a pop-up gallery, hosting shows from local artists, but there is hung artwork throughout, and the walls and whiteboards, are highlighted with bold black designs. It had a masculine vibe, even if welcoming and vibrant. Under the stairs are a mass of parked bicycles; upstairs there were always people in the kitchen: drinking coffee, reheating

lunches, cooking dinner for that night's 20-person potluck (well, that was usually just Kara). The space also had two conference rooms, couches scattered throughout, and a few nooks to get away to take a phone call.

In 2016, the community had to move a third time—both due to rising rents and a growing membership base. IndyHall's current home is in the Colonial Penn building, its most corporate iteration yet. Luckily, the new building was around the corner, on the same city block. Better still, the management company allowed a custom build out of the space, allowing Alex to or

As you walk through the space, people peek up from their screens to see if you're someone they know—even if not you will usually get a smile. During my tenure as den-mother (more on that later), I'd field the same two questions over and over. *Is this an art gallery? What company is this?* And my answer had to be *Well, both. Sort of. Let me explain...*

The idea for IndyHall started out as a mild obsession with coworking for eventual founder, Alex Hillman. In his personal blog, he first discusses the concept in August, 2006—within the first year of Brad Neuberg coining the phrase (Hillman 2006). Over the next two years, he built up a community, starting with a presentation on Sep 16, 2006 at a barcamp (similar to an unconferences) called creativecamp.

“And there, in the middle of those sessions, and in front of nearly 3 dozen participants, I made my pitch. I explained coworking to the crowd. I explained the benefits it provides, the self-sufficient community it creates, and shared my overall passion for bringing the idea to Philadelphia. The response was...well...incredible. Watching reactions of people from all

different industries, walks of life, interests, backgrounds, etc, all get interested about this idea was amazing. and not just interested, but quickly passionate as well. One participant, Lauren Galanter, even suggested an AWESOME name for the space: independents hall.” (Hillman 2006)

Throughout 2007, Hillman and other organized a series of meetups to discuss coworking in Philadelphia, and the possibility of an eventual space for their community. May 4, 2007 was the inaugural Philadelphia Jelly, dubbed the Cream Cheese Sessions, that served as the basis for the group of charter members who would ultimately work out of IndyHall. There were eight on-site participants and about a half a dozens drops-ins via their chat channel on campfire. Initial positive feedback helped fuel momentum: “I felt so much more productive working in an independent yet collaborative environment. I could focus on my work, but draw inspiration from the random moments where we’d all stop briefly and chat about an idea or concept” said one participant that day (Hillman 2007).

As more meetups happened, Alex and then partner Geoff DiMasi began seeking out physical spaces to lease for the community. Alex created a coworking t-shirt to generate funds to put into an account for the future IndyHall, and sent out surveys to those on the IndyHall listserv to solicit input about what was important to potential members in a coworking space, and began developing use cases, and by the end of July was beginning a membership drive. Prepaid memberships helped to fund the opening of the first space at 32 Strawberry Street in Old City Philadelphia, in addition to a \$10,000 personal loan from Alex that was repaid by membership dues within two years. IndyHall 1.0 at 32

Strawberry St was 1500 square feet with a mezzanine and one conference room. At the opening on August 13, 2007 there were two full-time members, four lite members (3 days/week), and twenty-three basic (1 day/month) members (Figure 12).

In February of 2009, IndyHall created a post for a Town Hall meeting to discuss the future of the space:

“We’ve come a really long way in just a year and a half. We’ve connected with so many new people in so many new ways, and welcomed lots of new friends to our community. The physical space, the clubhouse, for IndyHall has been at 32 Strawberry Street for 18 months and recently we’ve found ourselves running out of desks.” (Hillman 2009)

Very quickly they gathered consensus on the need to move and found a space less than a quarter of a mile away: the second floor of 22 N3RD Street, which would house IndyHall v2.0 (and eventually 3.0). In addition to square footage, they gained a full kitchen, a second conference room, and a balcony facing N3RD Street. Their move in date to the new space was less than two months after the Town Hall, April 2009. The financing for this expansion came from a \$30,000 personal loan from another member, Jason, which was paid back within three years. At that point, membership numbers had grown by 131%: now there were twenty full-time members, four lite members, and 43 basic members. This new space is where I first encountered IndyHall seven months later in November. It is where a lot of its practices began to gel and become codify. It is where, as they grew, they began to develop the systems and processes needed to keep the space running smoothly for members. And it is where it cemented its

place as the longest running independently owned coworking space in the United States.

IndyHall's next step in its growth trajectory didn't take it far. Version 3.0 was an expansion into the first floor that doubled its square footage to accommodate the now 153 members (33 full-time, 9 lite, 105 basic, and 6 6-pack members), 128% growth in almost three years. The new ground floor space brought challenges and opportunities that were addressed in several town halls and on all of the community's online channels. With the ground floor address, they gained street access, that increased potential foot traffic, but also increased security threats that the space previously did not need to consider.

Being on two floors meant they needed to build a staircase between the floors, but more importantly they needed to consider—for the first time—how to maintain community cohesiveness when all members aren't sitting within view of each other. They worried about separate “upstairs” and “downstairs” cliques forming that would diminish the benefits of coworking's accelerated serendipity: luckily the kitchen and coffee stayed on the second floor, so almost everyone was moving between the floors a few times a day. The ability to open to the street also meant an ability to connect with the community more easily, and that connection took the form of a public art gallery managed by Sean Martorana. The space would redo the gallery space every few months with a new individual artist or

themed (often with many works by IndyHall members) group shows that would open during Old City’s First Friday events.<sup>9</sup>

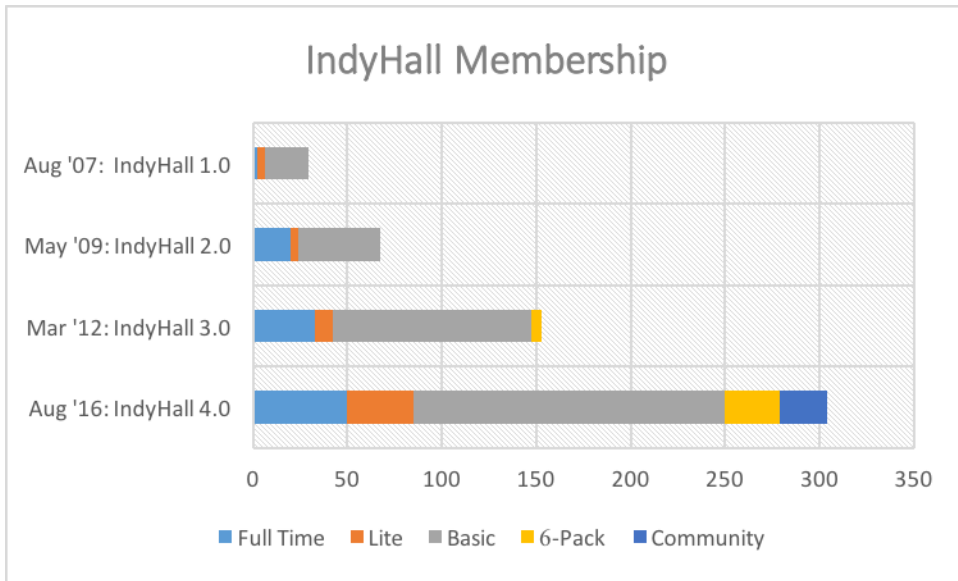


Figure 12: IndyHall Membership over time

The time came again for the space to move when in 2015 Alex received news that the rent at 22 N3RD Street would become prohibitively high at the end of their next lease. He began a search, facilitated by real estate and City of Philadelphia expert-members. At this point, IndyHall was a known institution in Philadelphia, and as such, various organizations and neighborhoods were trying to woo it. Alex documented almost every step and conversation he had, every community discussion was distilled into key takeaways that were then shared publicly for further input. It was a long, iterative process until finally the space

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<sup>9</sup> On the first Friday of every month, art galleries in Old City open their doors and offer refreshments (complimentary or for sale) from 5 to 9pm to encourage arts patronage in the neighborhood.

found a home in an unlikely building: The Colonial Penn Building at 399 Market Street (an arduous 600ft trek door to door from 22 N3RD St, Figure 13).

The Colonial Penn Building is the most corporate, conventional space IndyHall has ever been in, and it took months of construction and working with a very understanding building management team to customize the 16,000 square-foot suite on the third floor of the building to IndyHall’s tastes and needs housing now 304 members (50 full-time, 35 lite, 165 basic, 29 6-pack, and 25-community, or “online only” members). As usual for this community, it was a group effort to design, decorate, and move into the space. Moving date was August 19, 2016—nine years and three days after Indy moved into its first space at 32 Strawberry Street—and marked a new era of maturity and evolution of the community and space that make up IndyHall.

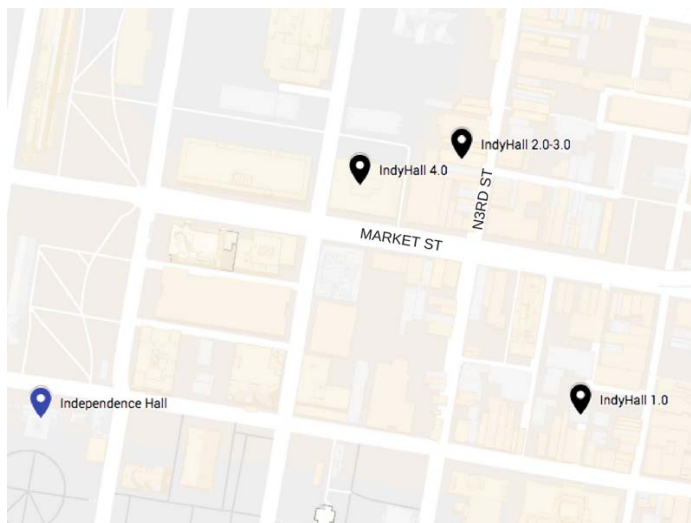


Figure 13 IndyHall locations

## **4.1.2 Binders Full of Women: A note on Gender in Coworking Spaces**

My first few pages of field notes were littered with references to how out of place I felt as a woman.

*IndyHall October 2012: white dudes in their 20s and 30s—messenger bags—macbooks/apple.*

*Barcamp 2012: 90% of the people here are men, but 3/4 of the organizing committee are women.*

*IndyHall 7/15/13: 10am 2 women here. 11:15 3rd woman walked in. 1pm 5 women.*

It's not that women were invisible in these spaces. They were outspoken and confident. But they were so overwhelmed in numbers by men. Interestingly, Halloween proved to be an insightful look into this dynamic. One of my favorite television shows is *Mad Men* in large part due to its setting during one of my favorite eras for women's fashion. I collect pieces that represent this period, high-waisted pencil skirts, cinched waists and full skirts, mid-calf length dresses and skirts. When the Halloween party's theme, the Internet, was announced, I knew I had to represent [r/OldSchoolCool](#)<sup>10</sup> with a 60s inspired secretary (loosely based on Christina Hendricks's character in *Mad Men*).

A few weeks into my tenure as den mother coincided with the annual Geekadelphia (a Philadelphia 'geek' and technology blog) and IndyHall joint

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<sup>10</sup> reddit.com is an online community and link aggregator whose topic-based sub-communities are called subreddits, denoted with an "r/" from the corresponding URL e.g. [www.reddit.com/r/OldSchoolCool](http://www.reddit.com/r/OldSchoolCool) is a sub-reddit dedicated to pictures (mostly portraits) from 20+ years ago.



Halloween party. I wore my costume to work that day, as did many people, since we were leaving directly from the Hall to the party at Tattooed Mom's. First mistake. I was feeling great as I walked down the street in my tailored hunter green dress and faux leopard pumps. My hair done up, wearing pearls and bright red lipstick. The first few comments at the Hall inflated my ego a bit, mostly centered on how nice I looked. But as the day wore on, the comments began to affect me in a different way. *You should dress like this everyday. Oh, you're that secretary, suits your position!*

My mentor and predecessor had dressed as Captain America—a superhero—and garnered comments about how it suited him since he was always saving the day in his role as den mother. I had inadvertently pigeon-holed myself as secretary—answering phones and refilling coffee—rather than as community leader and problem-solver (although the position of den mother encompassed all of those roles and tasks). Of course, no one was trying to be condescending or objectifying. They thought they were being complimentary, which to an extent they were. My sensitivity, no doubt, was heightened due to the fact that the Hall was still a predominantly male space, that their gaze made me feel as though my choice of costume fundamentally changed their perception of me and my role within the community. Surely no one ever thought of Adam as a secretary? For days following the party, I was a bit unsettled.

This experience harkened me back to the year before when I was mostly participating in the community through Basecamp<sup>11</sup>. The previous year's theme hadn't been without controversy. Mustaches. The general idea was to come dressed as your favorite mustachioed character from popular culture. However, the women of the community (at this point a still small percentage of membership) felt that it was an exclusionary theme. It required, in the words of one member, "women to assume male identities to be included in a social setting that is already an overwhelming male-centric space." This sparked a debate about recognizing the subconscious practices of the community that may make it more difficult for women to feel engaged and welcomed. Their efforts towards self-awareness and reflexivity struck me. I had been trying to find critical angles for my work, only to discover they were already trying to address gender issues—whether successfully or not.

So early into my fieldwork, these experiences raised a lot of questions for me. I began to very carefully consider my wardrobe for fear of what types of attention it would attract, and how it would represent me to others. *How do other women feel entering the space, and participating in community events? When do women feel excluded, how are they made to feel included? Who is creating these inclusive experiences?*

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<sup>11</sup> Basecamp is an online project management (and makeshift community management) platform that operates mainly by creating a list-serv and forum. More on this in chapter 5.

Communities have varying levels of participation and leadership, and it can help to visualize these levels as concentric circles radiating out from the central leadership<sup>12</sup>. This is no different in coworking communities. There are large numbers of people in the outer circles of coworking spaces: people who use the space occasionally (or never, or used to but moved on), but like to stay connected to what is going on, attend events, and participate virtually. Closer to the center are those who work from the space regularly (if not everyday), don't necessarily engage in after-hours events, socialize much inside or outside of the space, and are mainly involved due to the pragmatic usefulness of the workspace. Next come those who are committed to the coworking model, whose work, play, and networks are centered around the space. The final two circles are small, comprised of those who initiate events, plan activities, help to maintain the space, orient new members, and are seen as leaders within the community (the most central of which being the den mother and founder).

Whereas women are outnumbered by men at IndyHall in absolute terms, interestingly, I saw them participating in the central circles of community organization at higher levels of representation than as a percentage of total membership. A large number of the social activities associated with the Hall could be attributed to women leading the helm, or at least having a large role in planning. A clothing swap was put together by Nicole; Night Owls Wednesday

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<sup>12</sup> This visual model was discussed at a lunch with Alex Hillman and Adam Teterus.

Night dinners were instituted and cooked by Kara; Karina created a Philly Food Lovers potluck, bringing together bloggers and chefs from around the city; the wildly successful Philly Give&Get was the brainchild of Lansie (*see Chapter 6*); the creator of the IndyHall Binder Full of Women also started a poetry reading at the space—Red Sofa Poetry; and many other smaller instances of community organizing could be traced to the women of IndyHall.

#### **4.2 Why be here?**

Much like paying for a gym membership, a coworking space provides resources that could very well be obtained by the individual. With just a treadmill or rowing machine, a power rack and barbells and plates, plyo boxes, and a few kettle bells, you can get an intense total body workout. You can even do with much less. All of that equipment can cost you from nothing to a couple of thousands of dollars, but gym memberships range from \$10-\$200+ a month (from Planet Fitness to Crossfit or Pilates), and there's no guarantee you'll use it. In fact, gyms count on you using your memberships much less than you do (Smith 2014). Even after years of training for various sports and general fitness, with the supplementation of youtube videos, I have the know-how to construct my own work outs, schedules, and nutrition plan. And yet, I still pay over a hundred dollars a month to be a member of a gym. Why? There is research that suggests the physical perks of working out with other people because it can be motivating just being around other people working towards fitness goals; some

people think that by shelling out money monthly, they'll obligate themselves to not waste money; and there are those who just don't have personal spaces that are conducive to working out; and some people just like the other perks of membership, like the smoothie bar, the sauna, or the towel service (Feltz, Kerr & Irwin 2001). But of course, there is something fundamentally *social* about wanting to workout in parallel to other people. Gyms aren't the first such phenomenon and coworking isn't the last, or even the latest: the so-called "sharing economy" has made social many investments and activities that have historically been private, such as car ownership (Zipcar, then Uber and Lyft), lodging (Airbnb), or even tools for fixing things around the house (West Philadelphia Tool Library). So what are people not getting from working at home, the library, or coffee shop—all relatively free options (not taking into account the price of a latte these days)—that they do get from coworking?

As discussed, coworking provides the infrastructure for getting things done. Desks, chairs, wifi, printing, conference rooms, coffee, and sometimes a kitchen for making lunch. But more importantly, coworking provides the space for interactions, both micro- and macro-, explicit and subconscious, for increasing productivity, sociability, and overall connectivity to people and place. Broadly speaking, the phenomenon that produced coworking spaces—and other mixed 'publics' or communities—has been described as 'accelerated serendipity.' Steven

Johnson, in a 2010 RSA animate <sup>13</sup>(bringing together aspects of several of his books), investigates the ecosystems that produced unusually higher levels of creativity, or innovation. He posits that the most common way for breakthrough ideas to manifest is through the incubation over time and collision of “half hunches.” That is, one person has half of an idea, but the other half is residing in the mind of someone else. To produce high levels of innovation, you must create systems that allow for those individuals to connect in substantive ways so that those half hunches can produce whole ideas. The coffeehouses of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment, or the Parisian salons of modernism, provided such environments where ideas could be exchanged and transformed at a higher frequency than usual. Coworking recreates similar environments, with individuals from diverse backgrounds and experiences—interacting in substantive ways when they would normally never cross paths.

#### **4.2.1 Networks vs Friendships**

*Flyclops*

“Friends? Gross assumption.”

I’ve known the guys for more than seven years, but finally sat down with them at National Mechanics for lunch to make sure I had the details right about how Flyclops came to be. The trio that forms the leadership of this small mobile

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NugRZGDbPFU>

game development company is a surprisingly strong node of the IndyHall network.

Of course they would try to throw off my hypothesis. “I dislike Parker. I find his existence offensive,” Dave yelled into my phone recording the chat. Dave is one of the founding members of IndyHall (there is some debate over whether he was the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> member to join). After moving in with his girlfriend, getting engaged, and buying a condo, he got laid off. At an interview at WebLinc<sup>14</sup>, Jason (the owner of Weblinc), commented that it didn’t really seem like Dave wanted the job.

“You’re right, I’m not sure I want to work for anybody, except myself.” Dave left the interview, went home and decided to work on his own—working from home lasted about six months before he got antsy. At the time, Dave was writing a blog on alcohol, and one night was meeting up for drinks with a Denver-based team developing an app called “BarDiver” who were passing through Philadelphia. They mentioned they were headed to a party and Dave decided to tag along: it turned out to be the launch party for IndyHall which was opening the next day. “I just joined that night.”

The first time I walked into IndyHall in fall of 2010, I exited the elevators (the N3RD St location had not yet expanded downstairs) and was greeted to my left by a chipper man in his 20s, Parker, then den mother. He showed me around

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<sup>14</sup> Another N3rd Street core tech-focused organization, in the same building and having the same owners as the bar National Mechanics, see Chapter 5.

the place and asked me to wait for Alex on the couches. Parker was a transplant to Philadelphia via Houston. He had gone to school in Pittsburgh and received his undergraduate degree in Psychology (and had lived in Philadelphia for a while after graduation before heading home), and was looking for a way to get back to Philadelphia—and self-described himself as “having no marketable skills, but was willing to give his time.” He googled “cool internships Philadelphia” and came across a post by Alex looking for a new den mother. Alex remembers inviting him out to see IndyHall from one line in his application: *“regardless of my potential employment status with IndyHall, I know it is a place I must experience.”* Parker showed up in a suit and with resume in hand: Alex laughed at him for the suit and never looked at the resume.

Parker, as den mother, spent a lot of time having conversations with people: back then, there were many fewer members at IndyHall, and there was more down time to just ask questions and chat. As he started to feel more confident and began building a portfolio of freelance illustrating and artwork he developed, he’d start to talk to members about potential careers moves he wanted to make. While Parker now praises Dave’s natural ability to teach and take time out of his day to discuss anything Parker had questions about, Dave remembers not wanting change, and how he would jokingly try to keep Parker (his “\$200/month personal secretary”) down whenever he heard him talking about working for himself, or doing something other than making sure there were paper towels: “Hey! I hear dreaming! Stop it!”



Jake joined Indy not long after Parker became den mother. At that point he had launched two smartphone games—one more successful than the other. At a new member happy hour, Jake and Parker were talking about how Jake was looking to make more games, but needed to get out of the house and find people to work with. It was at a similar happy hour, where Parker pitched an idea to Jake for a path drawing game—similar to Flight Control—that ultimately became Brainarang, that the two worked on together. Parker said he could do the art, although at the time he was still teaching himself Photoshop and Illustrator to do vector graphics. The two would work together after hours. Parker's first 'magic moment' of building things was when he'd give Jake images he had drawn, and Jake would make them move on the screen. Though Brainarang made no money, it was valuable in that they learned the two liked working together.

A critical inflection point came when Parker, while he was still den mother, was giving a tour of IndyHall to someone who seemingly just wanted to hire people for a project, rather than join the community. He wanted someone to create an internal game for his company. Parker said, "well, my buddy and I can do that." He negotiated a contract for \$7000 (big money to him when he was making \$1000/month—he forgot about splitting it with Jake and paying taxes), and told Alex that he needed to find a replacement, because he was going to step out and become a member to work on the game development full-time. Jake and Parker started contracting together, and started coming to the conclusion that

they wanted to figure out a way to make games full time. That's when they got the idea for their game, *Domino!*

During this time, Dave was working on a few different projects. He was the backend developer and partner for a site, HireAnEsquire (a legal staffing agency, also run out of IndyHall), doing consulting for Damage Control (another Indy success story), along with his Two Guys on Beer podcast with Johnny Bilotta (another early member of the coworking space). He was looking for another project to work on “to burn off some steam,” so when Parker and Jake needed someone to work on the backend, he volunteered, even though they couldn't pay him. *Domino!* started to make enough money to be sustainable for the three of them to work on Flyclops full-time, and hire a fourth team member.

The team worked from their own pod of desks at for almost a year, asking IndyHallers to help with testing in exchange for beer on occasion (Figure 14). Indy is not a coworking space that is built for large teams, though, as the convention is for pods to be mixed between full-time and part-time members. At the time, Arcweb and MyClin were also taking up several of their own pods, which sparked a discussion about how to work with growing teams without betraying Indy's core operating procedures. All three companies ultimately “graduated” to their own office space—nearby on N3RD Street, of course (see Chapter 6).



Figure 14: Flyclops Game Testing night at IndyHall

### *Micro-interactions*

Sometimes micro-interactions, such as the ones that brought the Flyclops guys together, can ultimately make drastic impacts on individuals' lives.

Networking is potentially one of the most nebulous and overused buzzwords in the business world. What does it mean to network (verb)? How strong or weak is your network (noun)? Who attends networking events (adjective)? Everyone knows it is important, though. Networks maintain the connections which can propel projects, ideas, companies, or individuals forward. I began this project, as mentioned, trying to understand organizations whose sole purpose is to create networking opportunities for young professionals. Those opportunities, or

events, always felt awkward, artificial and superficial—even for someone like myself who prides herself in her ability to meet and connect with new people. I wondered what substantial benefits such types of networking could produce. Interestingly, it was precisely one of those events that altered my course in the direction of coworking. However, these events were tailored specifically to make professional connections, they were narrow in scope and audience, and were characterized by a flurry of handshakes and business card exchanges. In that period, I had dozens of highly engaging and interesting conversations, I met many people from whom I could benefit professionally, I collected (and handed out) hundreds of cards. And yet, I remember only one person—the woman who suggested I look into this “coworking thing.”

Coworking, by providing an ongoing, persistent environment for interaction and engagement with new people, creates a different kind of networking, one that is more organic and deep. It may take bumping into someone in the kitchen ten times for small talk before you remember their name and what they do without any reminding. By human nature, even people who do not come in to the space everyday develop favorite places to sit, and over time become familiar faces. A smile and a nod here, a wave there, and then eventually you are eating lunch together and discussing your work. The small, incremental interactions, can and often ultimately result in friendships—some of these friendships, of course, prove to be useful professionally, though some do not. One member told me that “the fact that I don’t only know about their coding projects, but also their hobbies and

interests, means that if I do end up making referrals or job suggestions down the line, I can do it in a more knowledgeable way.” The conflation of micro-socializing with professional networking results in very rich connections within the community.

In fact, these micro-interactions can be the sign of a healthy coworking space. Though I did not formally study other coworking spaces, through my work I have been in quite a few. Almost immediately you can sense a difference in cultures. A space may be full of people, have all of the amenities needed, be beautifully appointed, have a full calendar of formally organized social and professional development events, but still find itself struggling with member retention. By paying attention to the frequency of micro-interactions you can spot diagnose the robustness of the community: *are people greeting each other? Are they pausing to chat when they grab coffee? Is anyone standing around each others desks catching up on their weekend? Or is everyone simply coexisting as siloes within the space?* A member of a corporatized coworking model decided to join IndyHall—a full hour away from his home (without traffic) in Delaware for just these reasons.

Adam (community manager) told me about his conversation with the member when he signed up, “They know that he does X as a job and don’t know anything else about him. No one gives a shit and no one asks. After one and a half days here, he feels like he’s at home, but he can get work done.”

Further, there exist mechanisms through which explicit professional networking can take place, although still within the milieu of social relationships rather than strictly work-related. For example, within IndyHall’s internal communication platforms, there exist channels (literally, in the case of Slack<sup>15</sup>) for posting job listings, or inquiring about any potential job leads. Although the suitable candidates may not see the listing directly, the fact that people know each other closely and through friendship have an invested interest in others’ success, means that the messages can get relayed through multiple individuals—ultimately connecting individuals with opportunities. A conversation at lunch with Rob about my younger sister’s living situation—that she was unhappy in Florida in a job unrelated to her major—weeks later prompted him to send me a message when he saw a post in Slack’s ‘gigswap’ channel about a company at IndyHall looking for a graphic design intern. She ultimately got the job, and moved to Philadelphia. Small connections like these are everyday occurrences, and are a direct result of the informal interactions where people get to know each other’s full time work, side projects, hobbies, families, and wider social circles.

#### **4.2.2 Habits and Space**

*Lanternfish Press*

Amanda and Christine both ended up as freelancers, albeit in very different fields.

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<sup>15</sup> Slack is a private, online chat platform through which members of IndyHall communicate at an informal level. See more in Chapter four.

Christine's background was in academic philosophy, but rather than looking to teach, she went into publishing after graduation in New York for a few years. She wanted to find a way back to Philadelphia, and that way back was through freelance editing. "Doing that out of my house lasted about one month before I was like 'I'm gonna go crazy!'" Christine recalled, "people were not meant to stay inside their houses so much." She had worked out of coworking spaces in New York, so she was not new to the concept when she set out to find a space. I gave her a tour on a rainy January day in 2013, she immediately joined, and spent most of her time in the space getting her freelance editing business up and running.

Amanda studied political science, history, and Chinese language as an undergrad. But after teaching 7-12<sup>th</sup> grades in New York state for a few years and then moving to Philadelphia with her husband, she started making letterpress wedding invitations in her basement (because it was fun!). But beyond the house renovation projects to give her some distraction, she was "going insane inside my house." Through a colleague of her husband's, Amanda learned of IndyHall and first visited on a lunch break from her volunteer work at the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences.

Both women had similar reactions to first walking in to the space, though those experiences were separated by several months: thinking along the lines of "yup, this is good," and deciding to join before even finishing the tour—they just thought it'd be poor form to not let the tour guide finish. On Amanda's second

day at IndyHall, Christine was giving a presentation at Show N Tell about her editing business, and got a fairly lukewarm response (“People are very unsure about what an editor actually does”) until at the very end she started talking about the novel she was working on and its invented language. “All of a sudden everyone sat up and asked, “Tell us more about this crazy made up language!” It turns out that Christine and Amanda shared not only an interest in made up languages, but also Tolkien, amateur violin, and speaking Chinese. “You just can’t have that many weird things in common and not get to know each other,” Amanda remembers. They started having “Chinese Lunch” together, and became fast friends.

Christine was looking to expand her business, and installed the Adobe Creative Suite onto her computer. In playing around with layout and design features, she described her thought process as “hey! This is fun! I can make things! Amanda, want to make a book?!” Amanda had been looking also to expand—to push her creative skills more (beyond wedding designs—she wanted to draw her own things, not for other people). They created a Kickstarter<sup>16</sup> campaign over the 2013 holidays to fund their production of a Sherlock Holmes collection (material that was in the public domain): Amanda would illustrate, and Christine would edit and create the layouts for the printed volume. They were

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<sup>16</sup> Kickstarter.com is a crowd funding site



amazed by the level of enthusiasm and willingness from the community (they posted to IndyHall boards as well as other local communities) to financially support a project which they felt was not fully thought out at the time: they received almost double their initial \$4000 funding goal. They were able to make their book, print it and launch the book by the end of May 2014, and start a new publishing company.

### *Rhythm and Motivation*

Both Amanda and Christine started out looking for a place to work. Home was maddening: working from the basement—or the kitchen—was nonproductive and it was unsatisfying to be alone all day. In the end, they found much more than they were looking for (a new business venture and partner), but they still use the space for their original, if slightly updated personal freelancing work. It is often in search of motivation and habit-forming that people seek out coworking spaces. They have networks, they have a home-office, but they lack either the discipline or the appropriate physical space to be productive. Many people's first reaction to the idea of coworking is to question whether anyone actually gets anything done—if the idle chatter is too distracting to be productive, if the fact that people are friends and no one is in charge can create an environment where it's difficult to work. However, in order to be successful, a coworking space must be an environment in which people are productive: they are paying for their membership from the outputs of their work—they have to be productive in order

to afford it. If a coworking space does not enhance their outputs, it is not worth the investment.

Productivity is often a result of cultivating the habits that are conducive to getting work done. When you work in a traditional office, your boss expects you at your desk at a certain time, there are meetings and lunch breaks that set the rhythm of work. Everyone around you is working towards complementary goals (the good of the company). At the end of the day, you go home. When you work for yourself, or in a flexible work arrangement, or with a small group of peers (as is the case for start ups with very flat hierarchy)—it can be difficult to set those rhythms for yourself. It's just as easy to program in your pajamas as it is in regular clothes; no one is expecting you to show your face at any specific times; you're setting (and trying to maintain) your own deadlines; wow, that laundry is really piling up. As it turns out, for many the freedom can be stifling. "It is so hard to keep schedules that you set for yourself when there's no one else around," related one woman in our interview. Even with a designated workspace—like in your home, or a space you like in the library or coffeeshop down the street—operating in a vacuum can result in reinforcing poor habits that ultimately mean you're not working effectively.

A coworking space has its own rhythms. They may be different from 'the office,' in that most freelancers and entrepreneurs rarely get started right at 9am, though I was rarely the first person at IndyHall when I got there to open up at 8:30am, and I was definitely never the last person there, no matter how late I left.

The rhythm of IndyHall is actually an overlay of many different rhythms. Harmonies. Of course there were the few early birds, the space is bustling by 10:30am, and by 6pm it's starting to thin out again. By joining a coworking space, a member can find which one of these syncs most closely to their own natural work rhythms, and use others to help set their pace. Depending on the time of day there are ebbs and flow of chatter and activity, sometimes there are people standing at each other's desks troubleshooting and discussing potential projects, chatting over coffee in the kitchen, or taking a break on the couches. Other times—save for the music over the speakers—the only noises throughout the space is the tapping of keyboards and clicking of trackpads. It is in those rhythms, that an individual can begin to set up the habits they need to be productive. You begin to arrive at the same time as certain people, grab your coffee breaks in unison, plan on lunch, and head out for happy hour. In between those times, are when you are able to gain the focus and momentum that you need. Beyond the implications of habit forming on productivity, though, are how it impacts sustainability as a person more generally. When you are stressed about not having been productive 'enough' during the day, as an independent worker without an "end" to the workday, it is all too easy to not allow yourself the space to stop working into the evening. Rather than blocks of psychologically productive time punctuated by periods of rest and recovery, in my interviews I saw that independents find themselves going through extended cycles of

emotionally draining non-productivity, where they are tired but don't feel they deserve complete breaks from their work.

As I mentioned in my introduction, there is another force at play when it comes to the productivity you experience within a coworking space. *Everyone else* is working hard. You can feel the concentration around you. It is almost embarrassing to spend any substantial amount of time and not get things done. There's a normalizing force within a coworking space that balances out the social aspects. Alex has a tattoo of an initialism on his arm, that also appears randomly throughout the space and in conversation: JFDI—Just Fucking Do It. Ultimately, people are there to get things done; they have decided they would like to do it in a informal, community environment, but they still want and need to do it. It can be deeply motivating—much as in the case of a public gym—to be surrounded by people accomplishing their goals and producing results.

#### **4.2.3 Knowledge Transfer and Shared Problem Solving**

*Lenda*

Elijah was living the kind of entrepreneurship life you would expect in a movie. He went to college close to home even though he knew it wasn't what he wanted: he needed to prove to himself he could do it. After a year in school and a summer of a co-op (externship) at an options brokerage firm that he hated, he dropped out and moved to the Philippines to startup a web development company. He knew from online forums that the Philippines were friendly to

starting a business and to American expats, specifically. He could sub-contract work for cheap, and live really cheaply, too. He approached it from a learning perspective: he'd look for job postings that required skills he didn't yet have, but wanted to learn. After getting the job (by saying he had the skill already), he'd essentially get paid to learn something new. Little by little, that's how he built up his toolbox. After four months, of what he called "detoxing from what [he] thought he was supposed to do," and figuring himself out, he moved back to the states with a leg up in his field—with new skills, and a network of Filipinos he could source work to. He wasn't making much money, though, and lived out of a backpack: couch surfing and sleeping in his old college's common spaces and showering in the bathroom sinks. Every few weeks, he'd go home to his mom's for a few days to wash his clothes. Three months later, his friend asked if he wanted to go in on a boat with him—an old one from the 1970s that was docked in a Philadelphia marina, leaked on his face when it rained, had an electrical fire while he was on it, and from which he had to walk ten minutes to "use the washer, dryer, shower, and pee." But it came out to \$170 a month for rent, and it was something that he had worked for.

Eight months into this routine, he finally started breaking even, and then making enough money to justify spending some. He said, that in the beginning, "entrepreneurship was depressing, lonely, and awful." One day, he was working from a Starbucks, and decided he needed a place to work and people to be around; after googling a bit, he found IndyHall, and scheduled a tour for that day.

He immediately signed up and tripled his billing his first week in the space. I was den mother at the time, in 2013, and did all of his community onboarding—the living on the boat tidbit always made him stick out in my mind. His first day, he happened to sit next to Jason.

Jason had found IndyHall after moving to Philadelphia with his wife who had been accepted to graduate school in the area. He googled<sup>17</sup> “shared space” and “office share,” knowing he wanted something similar to the coworking space he had been at back in California. The stack of bicycles parked right inside, along with the art all over the walls immediately sold him on the space. “These are my people,” he remembers thinking. At the time Elijah joined, he was working on two mortgage companies, one that focused on B2B (business to business) and was more established, and his startup that took up most of his time and was B2C (business to consumer). This second company, GoRefi, emerged from his nine years experience in the industry which highlighted the many pain points he saw with his different clients. He set out to create a simplified online platform that cut out the typical middleman (a trend seen elsewhere in financial services). He’d never built software before, and worked hard with his co-founder (remotely in San Francisco), to cross the red tape in the form of licensing and government agencies in order to get the company off the ground.

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<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, had he asked his childhood friend’s fiancée, Nicole, she would have told him about Indy, as one of her graphic design teachers and (then) future employer was founding member Johnny.

On that first day, the two immediately bonded over their travel through Asia, and quickly transitioned into the work they both did. Their first conversation lasted three and a half hours. Jason described it as “just like old friends catching up. We probably annoyed the shit out of everyone around us” (one of the codes of coworking is to be mindful of the noise you’re making). Over time they gave each other feedback: Elijah getting help on taxes for small businesses and notes on the platform that Jason ended up using in building GoRefi. They recognized synergies, but there was never any explicit intention to ‘work together,’ rather, a friendship formed out of mutual interests.

Eventually, Jason moved back to San Francisco when his wife graduated and was not finding opportunities in her field. Six months after saying goodbye to Jason at his sendoff party, Elijah got a call from his college roommate (still in school) who was going to work at Goldman Sachs for one of his coops. “Need a roommate?” and with that, Elijah was moving out west. Even though the two made efforts to meet up, they never actually saw each other again until another IndyHall member—Adriano—was in town for work and reached out to the two of them. Adriano does event filming, and needed people to “pretend to be videographers for a day” and of course get free admittance to this email design conference. Both jumped at the chance to help out an Indy friend, and it was there that the two reconnected. Most of GoRefi’s—now Lenda’s—technical work had been contracted out to another IndyHaller named Jason, but he was moving on and Lenda needed help on that side of the business.

“You know I can do all of that stuff, right?” Elijah reminded Jason. They decided to sit down with the company’s other founder to have a more serious discussion the next week. At that meeting, Jason explained that they had no idea what they were doing on the tech side.

He told Elijah, “and we can’t pay you, because we don’t have any money.”

“Sure, and look, I’m a 5/10 on the dev side, but I’m willing to learn and bust my ass.” Elijah signed on as the company’s Chief Technology Officer (CTO), and the new team hit the ground running. After successful rounds of funding, the Lenda team is currently growing (in a coworking space out in San Francisco), and has launched in several test markets.

### *Just Ask*

Jason, Elijah, and Lenda show how in coworking spaces like IndyHall, one of the most tangible benefits of working alongside others of different backgrounds is the inevitable knowledge transfer that occurs from proximity. Jason knows mortgages; Elijah, tech. The two probably would never have met in another context. It was only one of many (and maybe one of the biggest impact interactions) I witnessed and heard about during my research. I couldn’t even begin to catalog all of the personal experiences I had with learning something new in unintentional ways—never mind when I was explicitly asking for help to solve problems. Requests shoot out across the email lists and in Slack throughout the day and night: *How do I make coffee (Figure 15)? Can anyone help me with...? Does someone have experience using...? I’m having trouble figuring*



*out...* The community becomes an internal wikipedia of how-tos and best practices. Much in the same way firms are more and more looking outside of their internal departments—via crowdsourcing and alliances and partnerships—coworking spaces facilitate connects for individuals and startups to ‘outsource’ their problem solving. These inquiries range from technical knowledge related to programming and coding, design and communication, learning software, and setting up business systems all the way to personal needs around childcare in the city to where to buy a bike for commuting. The informal skill-sharing that occurs is extensive and an inextricable piece of the coworking puzzle. This body of shared knowledge is largely uncodified (though various attempts to do so have been made in the past and are currently in the works), living instead mostly in the minds of the current members of the coworking space. Although email chains, forum discussions, and chats are searchable, it is often more efficient to re-ask questions rather than search through past posts which may not be 100% applicable. A slightly more formal mode of knowledge transfer occurs, at IndyHall, at monthly “Show N Tell” where a few members will discuss a project they are working on, their general field of work, or other interesting tidbits. I presented my dissertation proposal at a Show N Tell shortly after passing my oral exams as a way of publicizing my research to the community and being transparent in my methods, aims, and questions.



Figure 15: How to make coffee sign at IndyHall

What is even more interesting, though, are the micro-interactions that have substantial or unexpected impacts. Take for example a story I heard from a programmer, who was writing new code for a client project. He had his typical programmer set up—two screens, with black background and color-coded text across the entire pixelated real estate. A friend of his stops by his desk to chat about their plans for the weekend and catch up on the projects their working on. His friend glances over his shoulder at the screen and casually mentions that he may want to revisit a section of code. He indeed had made an error, that potentially could have cost him hours of time searching for why the program was not running properly. Or, when a woman was overheard complaining to her pod

mate<sup>18</sup> that she had been on hold for 3 hours with an airline trying to get a refund for a flight canceled due to a snow storm. “Have you heard of GetHuman.com?” A guy calls over from the next pod. After a quick Google, she realizes she can use the website to have the airline call her back when she’s up in the queue—after entering her information, she gets a call from the airline 2.5 minutes later, while she’s still on hold on her other line.

These chance encounters and collisions between people who need information (whether they know it or not), and those who have it, is something that is not replicable in a totally public environment—such as a coffee house or library—because there is neither the implicit permission nor the channels through which to engage. The man offering up [GetHuman.com](http://GetHuman.com) did not yet know the woman on hold, yet, by virtue of both being members of IndyHall, an environment which encourages ‘helping out,’ he had permission to suggest a solution to her problem, and similarly she had a framework through which to accept it. An encounter at a coffee shop would potentially yield very different results; firstly, he may not be compelled to speak up, for fear of being accused of eavesdropping, secondly, the woman may not be in a psychological space that is accepting of help from a strange man—often cross gender interactions among strangers are tainted with suspicions of ulterior motives. Although coffee shops are often filled with conversation, there is very little that occurs between

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<sup>18</sup> Desks at IndyHall are arranged into pods of four to five table/desks, with a mix of permanent desks and desks for non-full-time members.

strangers, and even less conducive to person-to-person knowledge transfer given its norms of silence and independent inquiry.

### **4.3 Conclusion**

This chapter has examined how coworking spaces function as a connection to space for knowledge workers for whom ‘work’ has become what they do rather than where they go. The physical space itself can be viewed as a clubhouse, where the general benefits of networking, habit forming, and knowledge transfer can occur. All of these benefits have applications in the public and private spheres of members lives. Friendships are formed that extend beyond the space and working hours, habits are developed that impact not only productivity but general psychological well-being, and knowledge transfer occurs that encompasses professional and personal development. As such coworking spaces act as a liminal, third place, that merges both the public and private personas and needs of its members in its mission to build community. It is in this community-building role specifically that it supplants the corporation in its members’ lives and becomes a node within broader cultural flows. Elemental to culture is the process of social learning. Coworking spaces are primarily concerned with individuals learning from each other in order to facilitate the strengthening of connections between people in its community building project. As evidenced in the stories in this chapter, individuals bring with them their own cultural artifacts: experience, skills, knowledge, processes, habits. It is in the mixing with

others that new cultural flows, both commodified and non commodified, are exported freely from the space.

## **Chapter 5: #Coworking—Online Community**

### **5.0 Introduction: Connection to Community**

It is clear that the impacts—or flows—of a coworking community extend beyond the walls of the building itself. But how are those flows carried through space? I originally set out to look at coworking as a global social movement, tracking its influence on corporate and public structures, its interaction with tech and freelance communities, and understand its broad-sweeping ideological mission. All of these things are important in coworking, but not what I found as fundamentally impactful. What I found instead was how coworking spaces functioned to connect people, to specific (interest- and professionally-based) communities and places. These connections, though, were not wholly face-to-face, nor even localized. Much of the interaction that occurs internal to coworking spaces, with their neighborhoods and local communities, and with the global tech and coworking communities were through online media. This chapter looks at the myriad different media through which coworking flows move and are transformed: blogs, Twitter, Google Groups, Instagram, Slack, Basecamp, GroupBuzz, Facebook, and others. It also reviews the ways in which anthropology has treated online communities, and the blurring borders between online and face-to-face communities. Finally, I look at coworking in the context of the public, and specifically as a recursive public.

## **5.1 Online communities and their blurring borders**

In the last twenty years, the rapid growth of the internet has spurred the intensification of online interactions of spatially dispersed groups of individuals of varying common interests and goals. These groups are characterized by a wide range of traits, and serve an equally varied number of purposes. They range from small groups, coming together for short periods of time around specific topics, to complex, virtual worlds comprised of thousands of participants and millions of interactions. Online collectivities may share interests in: exchange in market goods or knowledge; sharing humor; simulating face-to-face activities such as dating; or advancing political agendas. Anthropology has traditionally referred to these Internet-based groups as online communities, though the scope of interactions and technologies included in this label is somewhat ambiguous.

The difficulty with studying online communities is not only the often transient nature of community members, but also the rapidly changing technological environment. Early researchers dealt mainly with webpages accessible only from desktop computers. The introduction and near-ubiquitous use of laptops, tablets and smartphones in developed areas (and the rise of smartphones in developing nations) have created not only quantitative, but qualitative changes in how people interact in online communities. In fact, in the past few years, social media, including popular platforms such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Reddit have become increasingly intertwined with everyday life. People are nearly constantly connected to their online

communities, mobilizing different platforms in concert with one another, each a different expression of their online lives.

Anthropologists have long struggled with the notion of 'community' as a theoretical and analytical tool. Online communities pose various new methodological and conceptual challenges, where no coherent focus or approach has yet to emerge. The following sections examine anthropological literature on the classical community, online communities, and discusses possible directions for the field.

### *Community in Anthropology*

The term community is one of the most ubiquitous in anthropology, and yet--or possibly because of this fact--it is also one of the most imprecise. Historically, community referred to a group of individuals who were bound to a specific location (Hawley 1950). Communities were seen as ordinary, stable, and small-scale localized collectives. In particular, anthropologists focused on rural villages, parishes, and counties, as well as urban enclaves such as neighborhoods and quarters (Rabinowitz 2001). Later, it came to refer to a unity stemming from shared sense of identity or feelings of sameness--a state of mind that was not geographically bound (Bell 1974). However, for the traditional ethnographer, this second category of community proved problematic in its ambiguity: the difficulty in identifying affiliation or membership to communities for participants, much less researchers, often rendered the term meaningless through its indiscriminate application.



However, prior to the 1980s there was little rigorous attention paid to the term in anthropology: sociology took the lead in theorizing the community. Sociology's preoccupation with community took the form of analyzing differences between informal community structure and rigid organizational structure, as well as paying attention to the problems associated with the indeterminate boundaries of communities (Gottshalk 1975, Azarya 1984, Hillery 1955). There were several community studies, including Warner's (1941, 1947) work in Yankee City, the Lynds' (1929) Middletown, and Conrad Arensburg's (1965) research in the 1950s and 60s, with an emphasis on ethnographic fieldwork: these volumes were not purely sociological, much like the attention to broad sociological issues in the works of Cohen (1982, 1985), Frankenburg (1965), and Hannerz (1980).

Early anthropology had a tradition of studying small-scale groups whose links between culture, society and bounded space were unproblematically assumed, which may explain the lack of intent to analyze the concept of community. A tradition of community studies was slow to develop, despite several key works in the 1950s and 60s that explored the relationships between culture and community (Redfield 1955, Marriot 1955, Stein 1960). A more earnest interest in communities emerged in the 1980s. Two developments seem to have sparked this shift. Firstly, the sustained attention given by sociologists in the 1960s and 70s to communities as an analytical and theoretical category, one that privileged meaning and solidarity over physical contact. Second, at this time, there was an increasing willingness among anthropologists to study societies and

cultures at the core and margins of Europe. This created the necessity to develop an analytical toolbox to deal with the challenges of such sites.

Cohen's (1982) edited volume highlights the relationship between localized rural or urban communities and wider affiliations and identities, not the least of which is related to the nation-state. The first half of the equation examines the processes through which people develop a sense of belonging in a community; the remainder of the volume questions how individuals simultaneously develop and express through practices a sense of identification with the realm beyond the local (Cohen 1982). According to Rabinowitz (2001), the contribution of Cohen's work is two-fold. It proposes that the community must not be studied as a structured social organization, but rather as "an arena where experience is ordered, partly through a 'local' culture" (Rabinowitz 2001: 2388). The subsequent local identity is constantly engaged in interplay with broader cultural formations, processes, and signals. Furthermore, Cohen (1985) highlights the importance of borders: it is near and across borders that individuals engage with symbols, and make "comparisons (and sense) of appearance and reality, likeness and diversity, similarity and difference" (Rabinowitz 2001: 2388). The project of 1980s anthropology of communities arose, no doubt, from the seminal work of Benedict Anderson (1983) on nationalism in *Imagined Communities*. The emphasis of work in this period (and since) on imagination and other abstract experiences as idioms shaping identity and agency persists today as scholars grapple with the complexities of transnationalism.

The turn towards critical anthropology recognized the connections between the predilection toward looking at ordinary, 'everyday' routines, and practices, and depiction of communities as both ahistorical and apolitical (Malkki 1997). The field had, until this point, taken for granted the existence of particular communities, with the implicit assumption that people had always been part of stable, permanent and localized groups. Malkki (1997) seeks to rectify the situation through her work on transient groups of randomly united people, accidental communities, as coined by Barbara Meyerhoff (1975), in instances such as Woodstock and refugee camps. Arjun Appadurai (1996) further crystallizes the concept of community as an analytical tool by emphasizing historicization, contextualization, and a processual approach. This is increasingly important, Appadurai asserts, in a context that is dislocated, transnational, and diasporic (Rabinowitz 2001).

### *Development*

It is from this troubled tradition that the anthropology of online communities emerges. In a realm that is concurrently local and global, 'real' and 'imagined,' bounded and boundless, the issues of the anthropological concept of community are put under the microscope. The advent of the internet was initially met with hopes of its revolutionary potential (Benedikt 1991, Gore 1991, Negroponte 1995). The initial surge of Internet research hailed its equalizing power, although this often seemed to parallel popular hype rather than analysis (Hakken 1999). In particular, Rheingold's important 1993 *The Virtual*

*Community* identified the Internet's "capacity to challenge the existing political hierarchy's monopoly on powerful communications media, and perhaps thus revitalize citizen-based democracy" (Rheingold 1993). Castells (1996) asserted that these technological advances represented a new Age of Information, a view echoed by others (Lyon 1988, Webster 1995). Although there have been successes of some Internet-based social movements--the Zapatista movement in the 1990s and the current use of social media to publicize movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring--this early research seemingly underestimated the power of states to control access to information and media (Wheeler 2001). Further attention has been paid to the ways in which offline power relations and constructions of gender, race and racialized discourse, and socioeconomic divides play out in an online context (Escobar 1994, Gray 1992, Kottak 1996, Pfaffenberger 1988, Robins 1999, Burkhalter 1999, Ebo 1998, Kolko 2000).

As the excitement was tempered, anthropologists began to theorize how the Internet both reproduced (and at times, exaggerated) offline power structures, ideologies and social dynamics, while allowing the anonymity that gives rise to new conceptions of individuality (Agre 1999, Hakken 1999, Escobar 1994, Gray 1992). As with all Internet related research, the initial thrill of the seemingly endless possibilities of identity formation (Turkle 1984, 1995; Haraway 1993; Morse 1998) gave way to more nuanced understandings. Agre (1999) points out that "so long as we focus on the limited areas of the internet where people engage in fantasy play that is intentionally disconnected from their real-world identities,

we miss how social and professional identities are continuous across several media, and how people use those several media to develop their identities in ways that carry over to other settings” (Agre 1999: 4).

Similarly, recent research has moved away from debates about the real-ness (versus imagined) of online communities, in recognition of the counterproductive nature of creating false dichotomies between online and offline. It has now been widely accepted that individuals are managing multiple identities and roles across variety of cultural contexts (Morton 1999, Christensen 1999, Morse 1998). In much the same way boundaries are important sites of production in classic community studies, the boundaries between offline and online reveal how offline social roles and existing cultural ideologies are played out, and sometimes exaggerated, in online communication. Along these lines, a rich area of research emerged at the turn of the century concerning the development of online communities within offline geographical contexts such as American teenage dating practices in chat rooms (Agre 1997, Hamman 2000, Correll 1995). And while attention has been paid to how online groups can center around offline ethnic and national identities, it must be recognized that “online groups may be significantly different to their offline communities,” and the multiple ways in which an Internet user may privilege different identities in different interactions (Morton 2001: 4). This work focuses on collapsing the binary by drawing parallels between online and offline community formation and functioning as well as communicative practice (Lave 1991, Hamman 2000, Ess 2001). In order

to move beyond the online/offline dichotomy, Wilson and Peterson (2002), put forth the notion of contextualized identities, as a tool for understanding these phenomena. They suggest, as other have, retreating

“from cyberspace and virtual reality into geographical, social spaces, to address a variety of issues such as the ways in which new participants are socialized into online practices; how gendered and racialized identities are negotiated, reproduced, and indexed in online interactions; and how Internet and computing practices are becoming normalized or institutionalized in a variety of contexts” (Wilson 2002: 453-454).

To fully understand online communities, researchers must understand the offline social, cultural, and historical processes involved in the global flows of information, and the development, diffusion and acceptance of new technologies. Miller and Slater (2000) view Internet spaces and technologies as “continuous with and embedded in other social spaces” that “happen within mundane social structures and relations that they may transform but that they cannot escape” (Miller 2000: 5).

### *New Work*

Miller and Slater’s work has greatly influenced more recent work in online communities: by emphasizing that they are part-off, rather than apart from, everyday offline contexts. It can be argued that the main contribution of recent research, is the framing of online communities as virtual places embedded in other cultural processes. Scholars have shifted from looking at “the Internet” to looking at specific platforms or spheres of activity. Tom Boellstorff’s (2008) innovative ethnography is situated completely in the world of Second Life, a 3D

online virtual world where users create avatars (characters) to act out everyday lives. Boellstorff challenges Miller and Slater on their assertion of embeddedness by looking only at “in-world” relationships and behaviors, though he recognizes that not all online contexts are set up to be “distinct domains of human being” that can be studied outside of online contexts (Boellstorff 2008: 238).

Subsequent research on online worlds (mainly massive multiplayer online role playing games, MMORPG) such as World of Warcraft, follow Boellstorff’s departure from traditional ethnographic methods wherein his work took the perspective of ‘living in’ these worlds (ErkenBrack 2009, Golub 2010).

It is important to note that the online communities and Internet practices of today only vaguely resemble those when anthropology first began to study them. Online practices are becoming more and more embedded in offline life everyday, and the distinctions between the two are equally becoming increasingly less useful as an analytic framework. While a direction that blends the part/whole community approach of Cohen with the most recent work of Kelty (2008) is promising, Postill (2008) posits that moving away from notions of community and networks altogether will strengthen research in this developing field.

## **5.2 Participating in Online Communities**

*Everyone’s name badge has their twitter name on it.* I wrote this note in November of 2010 at Philly Barcamp, the first unconference I attended after beginning to study coworking. Alex Hillman of IndyHall had mentioned it to me

when describing what Coworking Europe would be like before I impulsively decided to fly to Brussels to attend three weeks later. It was obvious that Twitter was important to how the attendees saw and wanted to represent themselves. An hour into the unconference I took my cardboard name plate out of its plastic sheath to scrawl my Twitter handle under my full name. Even though I knew that I had tweeted maybe 5 times in two years, I felt more out of place by having the empty space beneath my name.

Three weeks later in Brussels, it was cemented in my mind that tweets and hashtags would be an important part of connecting with and understanding the coworking community. Over beers the second day of the unconference, one of the German attendees asked for my twitter handle. I sheepishly told him, with the disclaimer that I did not use it much. He erupted into uncontrollable giggles. Through his laughter, “three years and 10 tweets?!” I clicked on the notification that he had followed me, to see his profile: several dozen tweets that day. It was as though he didn’t know what to do with me if I wasn’t active on the social media site.

I took seriously the transparency and collaborative nature of my research approach. During my tenure as den mother, I maintained a tumblr—@MaddieCoworks—and publicized it to IndyHall members, along with my Instagram that chronicled my adventures in managing the space while concurrently doing interviews and making observations (for example, Figure 16). It was no runaway hit: my followers were confined mainly to IndyHallers.



However, through the use of appropriate hashtags (mainly #coworking and #indyhall) I was able to grow my follower base to include the official handles of numerous coworking spaces in the U.S. and abroad. Moreso than the audience I was able to attract, through micro-blogging on tumblr and instagramming (and having all of this pushed to my twitter—which Sean M. taught me how to do), I was able to participate in the online networks that were so vital to the constituent population of IndyHall. A byproduct of maintaining my own presence on social media helped me to learn the norms and behaviors by which everyone else was operating. This level of recursivity—that I was simultaneously being observed by the very people I was aiming to observe through my research, and that I was able to observe their observation (through likes, shares, retweets, and responses)—situated me within the flows of the community, and gave me a unique perspective that merely following others’ social media threads would not have.



Figure 16: Sink full of dirty dishes

## **5.3 Recursive publics**

### **5.3.1 Habermasian Public Sphere**

#### *The Public Sphere and Recursive Publics*

In his seminal piece, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas (1962/1991) discusses the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere--tracing the concepts of “the public” and “public opinion” through history (mostly in Britain, France and Germany). With the rise of a capitalist economy and the transition from a household economy, a new population of bourgeois intellectuals arose (an automatically reading public) that created a critical sphere, a group of individuals that made up a public whose function was to be critical of the governing body. Benson (2009) explains, “both contributing to and reflecting broader social changes, the emergence of a small-scale bourgeois ‘public sphere’ of coffeehouses, salons, and small political journals challenged the principle of traditional feudal rule and brought into being a new basis for authority: the consensus emerging from the public’s open-ended, critical argumentation and debate” (Benson 2009: 176).

While Habermas’s argument in this early piece is deeply rooted in historical processes, many scholars have extracted aspects of his theory to apply to the broader consideration of the public sphere.

#### *Coworking and the Public Sphere*

The discourse espoused by coworkers (space owners and other participants, alike), reveal parallels with the bourgeois public sphere. While many scholars focus on the political implications of the development of the bourgeois public sphere, it is important to note the original catalysts for its formation. The public sphere was not initially a political one. It was the “‘capitalists,’ the merchants bankers, entrepreneurs, and manufacturers...[who were] the real carrier of the public, which from the outset was a reading public” (Habermas 1962/1991: 23). It was these individuals who came to fill the role between society and state. Common interests/characteristics (to the exclusion of others) among them—property-owning businessmen—is what brought them together in the first place. The exclusivity of this group is precisely what allowed for a public sphere to develop; however, Habermas acknowledges that the mere involvement of private persons (albeit a small subset of the population) in matters of the state, opened the door for the inclusion of others over time. Coworking can, to some extent, be seen as a revival of this specific form of the public sphere: while coworkers are varied in age, profession, industry and gender, they do share commonalities. The coworking movement arose to fill the need for independent working people to be around other knowledge workers. The discourse within coworking spaces pertains not only to the particulars of any given coworkers’ employment/projects, but also to general trends in industry. Coworking provides a sphere in which workers can feel connected to what is going on in the world. As with the coffeehouses and salons, where “the ‘wealthy shopkeeper’ visited the

coffee house several times a day,” institutions such as jellies and coworking spaces are a place for business people to drop in to see what is going on (Habermas 1962/1991: 33). From this core group of public persons, a space for rational-critical discussion can develop.

Beyond a mere space (be it physical or virtual) for the meeting of business minds, “one critical feature of the bourgeois public sphere is the availability of public media for carrying on and informing public discussion” (Schudson 1992: 152). The Habermasian public sphere—comprised of a reading public—was developed and grown not only through the discussion among the people in a particular coffeehouse, but that these debates were connected across space to some extent through the promulgation of journals and other forms of press. Trade journals and literary text were the first forms, which were eventually joined by political journals as the public sphere began to politicize. Over time, the press “shift[ed] from a ‘conversation’ model to an ‘information model’,” a change that Habermas believed demoted the public sphere from an “autonomous public sphere of political reasoning and discussion” to an easily manipulated public that merely consumes rather than produces debate (Schudson 1992: 152, Benhabib 1992:85). The discourse within the coworking communities begins to shift public media back towards a model of conversation. In coworking, there are several main modes of cross-space communication: blogs, Twitter and wiki pages/discussions. While all of these channels serve different purposes in these publics, they share common attributes. The accessibility and lack of central

control seem to define the ways in which coworkers communicate. **There is no authority in charge of regulating or disseminating the information.**

Anyone wishing to participate in these channels has the opportunity to, and “public participation is at the center” of Habermas’s public sphere (Hohendahl 1992: 102). Participation does not only mean active content creation, but also mere browsing on the Internet or comments made on others’ content. The blog format is specifically applicable to the idea of a conversation model of media.

The blog (short for weblog) has been around since the late 1990’s, and refers to either a type of website or a part of a website that is comprised of serial entries that (sometimes) allow for other users to comment. There is no entity that has real authority (in the U.S.) to censor material on the Internet, and specifically, blogs. This makes the freedom an individual has in articulating and circulating their message virtually limitless.

With respect to coworking, blogs serve a variety of purposes. Blogs are used to broadcast home-office shares and jellies, as well as advertise events hosted by coworking spaces. In addition to the blogs of particular spaces, a new group of community blogs, which deals with the topic of coworking generally, has sprung up. These include posts from individuals around the world, usually mediated by a few people who manage the blog. Blogs are “news” sources as well as sites of social interaction. They are a place for facts as well as opinions. For the majority of spaces, blogs—as a part of their website—serve as a primary means of large-scale communication with their community (of members and

supporters). Coworking spaces also use blogs to help define their identity to their would-be audience. The subject matter covered, the tone of the posts, the size and activity of the commenter community, regularity of posts and a myriad other things all hint to what a coworking space is all about—the culture of their blogs tries mirror the culture of their space. And these things are beyond posts that explicitly describe, “what it’s like at...” the coworking space. In Warner’s 2002 piece, he discusses the temporality of a discourse’s circulation and concludes that the Internet lacks the periodic nature of a public’s discourse because it does not “unfold...through time,” (69). However, blogs are periodic in nature and also work into their structure a means of interaction with its publics. Blogs reach beyond even their creators’ imagined audiences, as the internet allows for people to accidentally stumble upon blogs and become a part of the discourse’s public. There are targeted audiences, of course, but the real audience extends far beyond those individuals.

According to Habermas, a public sphere, “through the vehicle of public opinion... put[s] the state in touch with the needs of society” (Habermas 1962/1991: 31). Beyond the organizational features (composition, communication, etc.), a public sphere serves a role as the intermediary between society and the state. Does coworking fit this criterion? Just as the coffeehouse’s role evolved over time, I believe that coworking is beginning to fulfill a political role. Freelancers and other independents have vested interests in the

communities in which they work. As such, their interaction with the state is likely to put forth the needs of their communities, as they interpret them.

A lively coworking community, one that extends beyond the theoretical and physical boundaries of “work” space and time, is a characteristically Habermasian public sphere. It seems apparent that the coworking movement, in both the United States and in Europe, is beginning to develop features that extend beyond its original purpose: to create a work environment that caters to independents without a dedicated workspace or collaborative community. Just as common ground brought together a new bourgeois in the seventeenth century, common needs and desires draw coworkers into a public sphere. As coworking gains momentum beyond the large cities of the U.S., the relationship with local governments may become more dynamic—an average-sized coworking space (a business itself, helping to incite further economic activity) would have a larger economic impact, and hence more political influence, on a smaller economy than in a large, metropolitan area.

### **5.3.2 Recursive Publics and Their Tools**

Chris Kelty’s approach to online communities and publics looks at internet practices and their practitioners in the context of Free Software (that he identifies as a movement), which he distills into four key practices (sharing source code, conceptualizing openness, applying copyright licenses, and co-ordinating and collaborating) and a fifth ‘meta-practice’ (Postill 2010): arguing and discussing

the other four practices. It is upon this meta-practice (which I discuss in the context of coworking as the metacultural framework) that he bases his evaluation of Free Software as a movement and develops his notion of ‘recursive public’ defined as:

a public that is vitally concerned with the material and practical maintenance and modification of the technical, legal, practical, and conceptual means of its own existence as a public; it is a collective independent of other forms of constituted power and is capable of speaking to existing forms of power through the production of actually existing alternatives (Kelty 2008: 3).

He emphasizes that the community goes beyond mere online/offline distinctions, and represents a more fundamental global reorientation to knowledge and power. The coworking movement, both within the context of individual, local spaces and the global metacultural framework both operate as one of Kelty’s recursive publics. In individual spaces, coworking members are “vitally concerned with the practical and maintenance and modification” of the physical (Chapter 4) and virtual platforms (below) through which they operate; furthermore, their civic engagement (Chapter 6) constitutes their participation in the legal and practical means of its own existence as a public.

Town Hall and Reboot are two mechanisms through which the IndyHall community actively maintains how it operates and interacts internally and with the city/neighborhood. Town Hall is a once or twice a year face-to-face forum where community leadership (Alex, Adam, and current den mother), present an update on what is going on (membership and revenue, costs, new initiatives), and



solicit feedback on “how we’re doing” as well as open the floor for new ideas for ways to make the community operate better internally and with its external stakeholders. My first town hall was when the community was considering expanding into the first floor of the Daniels Building. Alex and Geoff discussed all of Indy’s finances, membership waitlist, and rationale for why the expansion may be a good idea. They were far from having made up their minds at that point. It was an interesting look into where authority lies (distributive, but with Alex as the gatekeeper/final word), and how decisions are made (by consensus). Alex and Geoff still had questions around how to fund the expansion, and what ideas the community had for using the two street-level entrances they would gain (a pop up store, community bar, art gallery, classroom?). Another major concern was security, and what would happen with a street-level entrance. Up until that point, Indy was on the second floor of a building, that required a buzz in from the intercom, a ride up the elevator, and a greeting immediately from the den mother. A question on every tour that I answered was about security: there were hundreds of thousands of dollars of high tech computers, monitors and accessories in plain view, with nothing locked down, and people leaving their valuables at their desk regularly. A set of lockers existed, but were usually used for things like gym clothes, and the locks on them were mainly for the purpose of claiming one as your own. The system in place was dubbed a “neighborhood watch,” in that everyone around your desk made sure no one who wasn’t you was nearby without a clear reason (Figure 17). In the nine years of Indy’s history,

there had only been two cases of theft, and both were attributed to a lack of relationship development that helped to reinforce the 'neighborhood watch' system.

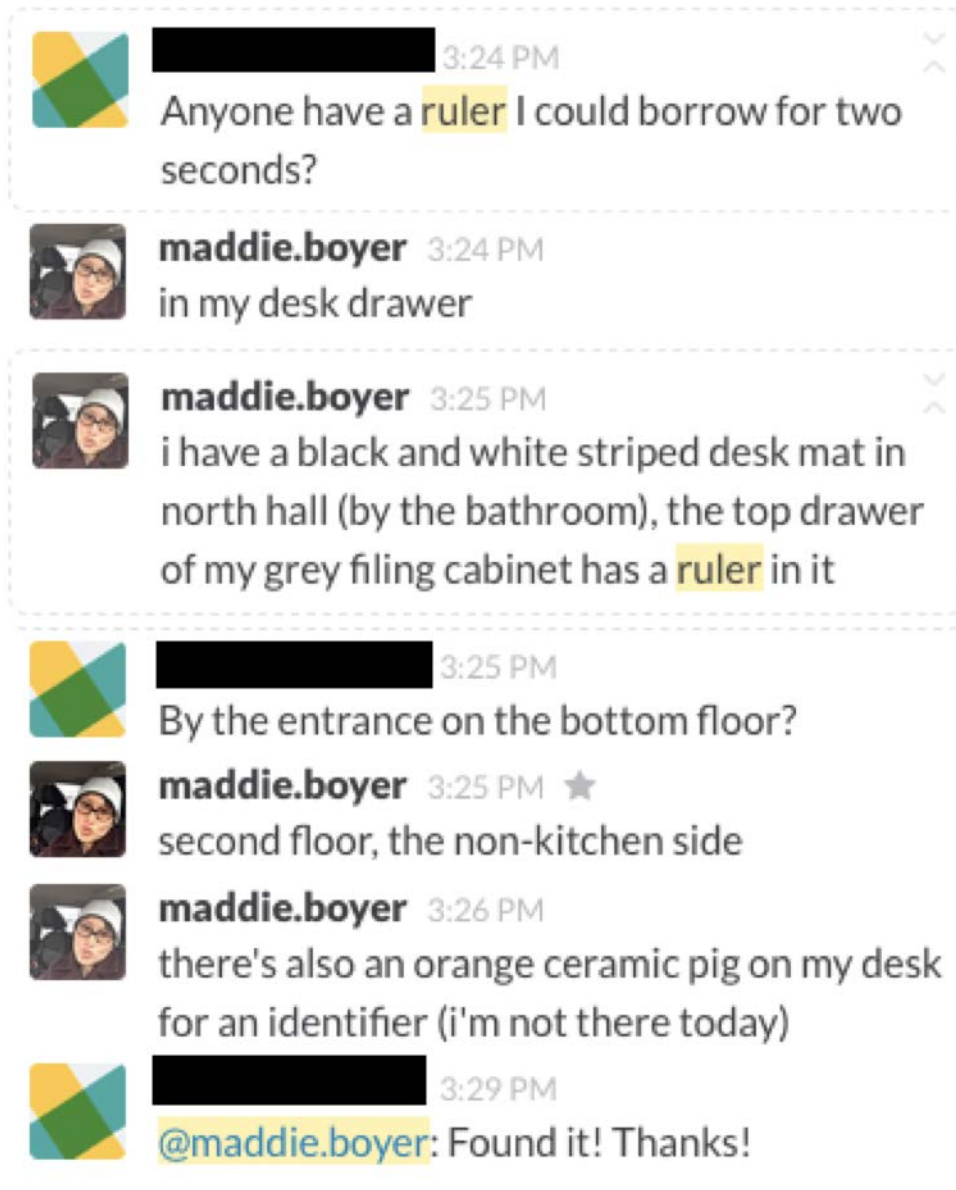


Figure 17: Slack Exchange  
Two minutes after this exchange, I got a message through Slack from another member making sure the person who had grabbed something from my desk had permission to do so.

Reboot is a semi-annual weekend project where the whole layout and function of the space is essentially up for change. It includes a deep clean (whoever volunteers and shows up), a spring cleaning-type purge of clutter, sometimes painting, installation of new tech (one year it was the Nest smart thermostats, another time it was remotes for the lights), and rearranging of the desks and other spaces (like the lunchroom, open classroom). While this is a formal time for experimentation, tweaks and modifications happen continually during the year (see JFDI, Chapter 6).

At the metacultural level, coworking activists create and maintain blogs, wikis, interactive maps of coworking space locations, youtube channels, and hashtag campaigns (usually #coworking or some variant, but also for specific unconferences). The continual debate around best practices, values and goals are mediated through these platforms that are transformed in the process of using them.

### **5.3.3 Software and Platforms**

Key to the notion of a recursive public is the development and maintenance of the frameworks through which the public operates. Over the course of the four years I have been involved with IndyHall in my various capacities, the platforms and software through which the space and community operates have gone through several iterations. When I first started as den mother, the on-boarding process for new (and potential) members was as follows:

(1) If they scheduled a tour online, I received an email telling me when, and I would have to add it to the shared calendar

If they decided to join:

(2) Add member to Basecamp for forum/email discussions

(3) Add member to Campfire chat for real time conversations

(4) Add billing information to Zoho (Customer Resource Management platform)

(5) Add member to the shared Google Spreadsheet used for attendance (to keep track of when people spent days in the space for billing purposes)

(6) Add member to door security software (built by an IndyHall member) for door code

(7) Send member email confirming all of the above steps.

By the time I was leaving my tenure, Alex and another external partner had built custom software for the management of coworking spaces, which they called Lobby, built in Ruby on Rails—an open-source web framework—to consolidate payment information (that integrated with Stripe, credit card processing software), and attendance. Within the following year, the Basecamp platform was replaced by GroupBuzz—another custom-built (by Alex) community forum platform. Campfire was replaced by [hall.com](http://hall.com) and then later by another platform, Slack (see Manjoo 2015) Lobby was ditched for a Wordpress-powered member site: [hello.indyhall.org](http://hello.indyhall.org) (Figure 18). IndyHall was constantly testing systems, seeking feedback from the community, and making adjustments.

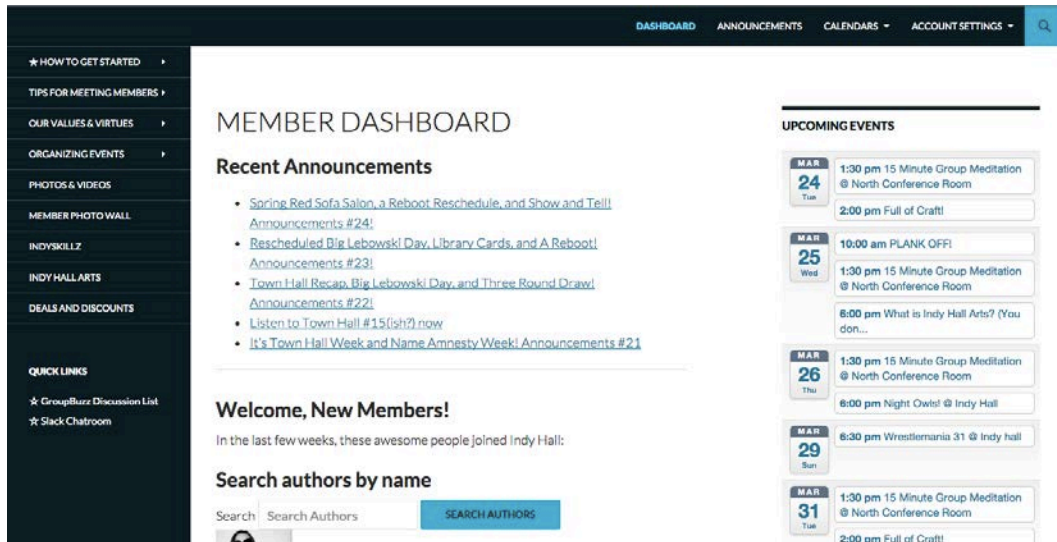


Figure 18: hello.indyhall.org

## *GroupBuzz*

GroupBuzz most closely resembles a traditional online forum. Rather than sending direct emails to the community, the forum serves as a place to post longer announcements, requests, questions, updates, or stories (Figure 19). Members of IndyHall can then control the flow of information themselves: they can set notifications to send them an email with every new post or only a daily or weekly digest; they can set to follow (email notification) every comment or update on a specific post of interest; they can set no notifications and only browse content when they sign in to the platform directly. It acts as the community board where members can pin up anything they want to share with others. Further integrating all of their systems, Alex and team set up an automation that pushes a post to the main Slack (the next tool described below) channel, to alert members of new content.

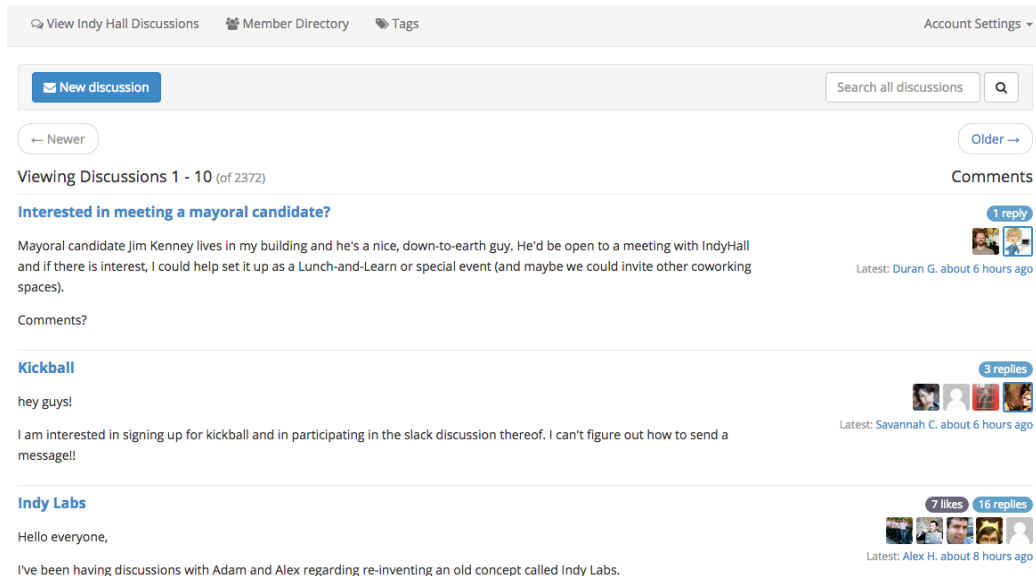


Figure 19: Groupbuzz

## *Slack*

Your first impression of a coworking space may belie the level of interactivity. It looks like everyone is quietly working on their own computers, their own projects. But in reality there is a lively scene where there is constant bustle. Chat apps serve a crucial role in coworking spaces: it allows for constant interaction (mediated by individuals' own bandwidth and work loads), without 100% distraction from their work (Figure 20). Members can peek in to different conversations to catch up on what is going on with everyone; to share links to photos, memes, and articles to spur discussion; to ask a simple question of the group that does not warrant creating a new discussion topic in GroupBuzz (the #lunchroom channel is a place to pop in around lunch everyday to see if anyone is going out). It creates an opportunity for those who join as “community

members,” but never actually use the space (the live far away or work from a traditional office), to feel connected to a community even though they are not co-located. Its flat structure—anyone in the “team” can create a new channel—encourages participation from everyone in the community. “Share your knowledge, habits, and skills with other IndyHillers! To get started, post 3 things you want to learn and 3 things you're happy to teach,” was the channel topic Lydia set for #indyskills, after realizing the potential to share talents with each other in a low friction way. In this way, Arjun offered to help me learn Excel automation processes, which ultimately saved me over 4 hours of work on a certain consulting project—*every time I ran the project*. I have nothing to offer on his list of requests, but he trusted that someone would help him out and that I could pay forward the favor by teaching someone else something they wanted to learn (my only talents are self-defense and dancing, and oddly enough people were interested in both). Importantly, Slack breeds familiarity with low-level risk. A member can get to know other members through the chat room by reading through past conversations, browsing channels and looking at individuals’ profiles (which contain a photograph)—all before speaking to them in public.

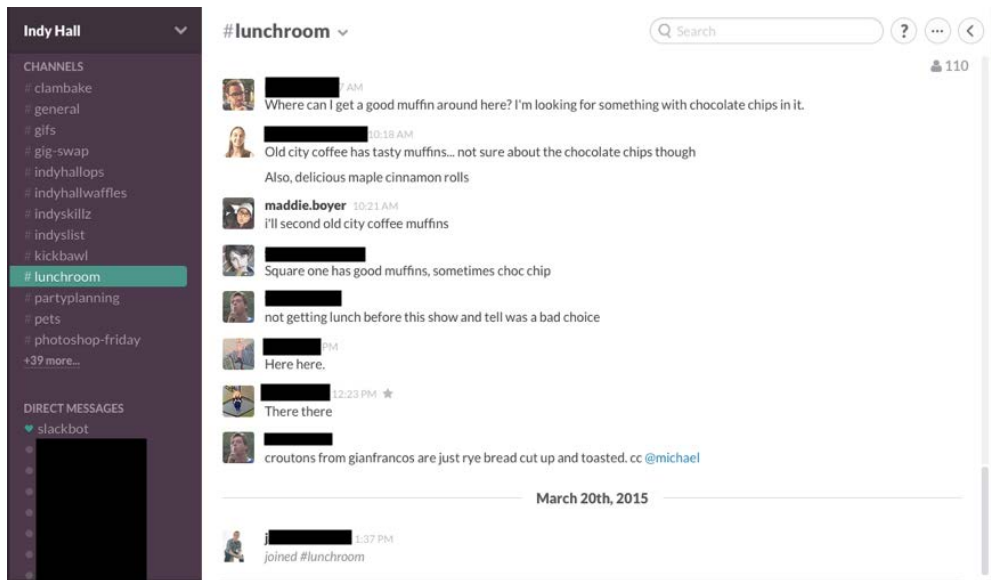


Figure 20: Slack

### *Purpose*

“We’re doing all this work to automate, so we can spend more time being human,” Alex closed with this statement at the end of a screencast video explaining how using Zapier (automation software), Gravity Forms (online form submission integration), and Trello (project management software) to streamline processes. The point of the automation was to make sure people (and the tasks associated with them) didn’t fall through the cracks between steps. That is, if someone signed up online for a tour, and then rescheduled (but never showed up), someone could easily see that and follow up personally. Or if a member’s credit card was rejected, creating a new ‘card’ on Trello, allowing someone to follow up to see if there was an expired card, or to make sure the member wasn’t having any financial difficulties—and if so how IndyHall could work with them to



keep them around. After seeing all of the new platforms and how they worked together, I joked with Alex that even I could have been an effective den mother had I those systems during my tenure.

Beyond the platforms used by the coworking space for the coworking space, the tech community that often make up a large portion of many coworking spaces are involved in creating and shaping these platforms more generally. Eric creates Application Program Interfaces (APIs) which are protocols, routines and tools for different programs to “talk” to each other (like Zapier or Gravity Forms). Tim built an app that allows site visitors to draw out what they believe the boundaries are of different Philadelphia neighborhoods (highly contested, constantly changing constructions), and then the program creates a heat map average that reveals the conflicting perceptions of space. Dave Zega helped launch a program, ElectNext<sup>19</sup>, that created, baseball card-like cheat sheets for politicians that are included at the bottom of news stories where they are mentioned on the web with the aims of creating a more informed electorate. Members of a coworking space in Kenya created an app that allowed citizens to document and geotag instances of police brutality and other abuses from their cellphones (through text messages, or media rich messages), creating a transparency that influenced the behaviors of the government—particularly around voting integrity. Coworking spaces help to

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<sup>19</sup> eventually acquired by Change.org and rebranded as Versa

develop the social and technological structures through which individuals can interface with the state (more on civic engagement in chapter 6).

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

This chapter reviewed the ways in which online, virtual media facilitate the cultural flows both within and between coworking spaces, as well as between individual members and others. Again operating at two levels: the coworking space manages the online community of its internal membership through its use of connected software and social media and negotiates its place within the global coworking community. Meanwhile, individuals are engaging with each other and other, non-coworking related virtual communities via their personal social media accounts. All of these interactions are fed back into the node as cultural inputs. Critical to its position as a node within broader cultural flows is the recursive nature of how these systems are built and tweaked over time to reflect the current membership and its needs, as well as developments in technology that are occurring outside of the coworking sphere. And finally, members are able to convert their interactions within the coworking community into cultural outputs via virtual media: instagrams, tweets, blogs, and software (all of which can be either commodified or noncommodified).

## Chapter 6: N3rd Street—Local Ties

### 6.0 Introduction: Connection to City

In 2009, when I first googled Independents Hall the same night as my conversation with Dana, I found IndyHall's "About Us" page, which read as follows:

Sharing desks and offices isn't a new concept.

It's a good thing that at Independents Hall, [coworking](#) isn't about sharing desks.

Independents Hall (now affectionally [sic] known as IndyHall, to save the sanity of the local delivery guys) is just a few blocks from its historic namesake in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Much like the nearby historic building, the IndyHall **community** helped changed the face of Philadelphia. By putting a **community's** best interests first, we've created a work environment focused on openness, collaboration, **community**, sustainability, and accessibility.

IndyHall is not about the desks. The desks are a vehicle for being a more effective worker and a more active contributor to your city.

Coworking at IndyHall isn't just for technology people. Our **community** is comprised of designers, developers, writers, artists, entrepreneurs, scientists, educators, small business owners, telecommuters, marketers, videographers, game developers, and more. The common thread is this: we all know that we're happier and more productive together than alone.

With its roots dating back to late 2006 and the meeting of its founding partners, Geoff DiMasi and Alex Hillman, in spring of 2007, coworking at IndyHall has become a focal point for the quickly growing creative & entrepreneurial scene in Philadelphia.

Beyond helping the local **community** coalesce, the IndyHall mantras and models have become a common reference point for coworking initiatives around the world, while its founders and members dedicate a great deal of time to participating in their sister cities' **community** growth as well.

As the IndyHall **community** continues to grow, it expands past the walls of its office space. The **community's** collective energy has produced events, products, fundraisers, inspiration, and continues to prove that Philadelphia is a great city of innovation.

We're not done growing, because our **community** won't let us be done. Too much potential is still unrecognized in Philadelphia. Your potential.

We encourage you to come experience IndyHall yourself, which remains the best way to understand what we're really about. The more you are willing to give to this **community**, the more you will get back in return.

Welcome to Independents Hall.

A Coworking space and **community** in Philadelphia.

This is how Philly does coworking.

It was explicit from the beginning that IndyHall found its Philadelphia location to be intrinsic to its identity. It wasn't a coworking space that happened



wasn't until I was a part of everyday conversations (and in in-depth interviews) did I realize how coworking created an experience of city citizenship for its members.

This chapter looks at the ways in which IndyHall creates out roads and meaningful connections with their neighborhood and city. I chose four places and stories that most strongly represent the different pathways IndyHall creates for its members to connect to Philadelphia, though there were myriad more small contact points with the city and broader regional community. I begin with the most social—the neighborhood bar—and continue with the arts, philanthropy, and conclude with more explicitly political civic engagement. It is through coworking that workers without explicit “place”—due to the flexibility and transience of their work—are able to make sense of their belonging. Whereas the online community facet of coworking places a coworking space as a node within national and global cultural flows, this chapter looks at the how it operates as a node within local flows.

### **6.0.1 N3RD Street**

In Philadelphia, there is a segment of North 3<sup>rd</sup> Street that runs from Market Street (in the Old City neighborhood) in the south to Girard Avenue (in the Northern Liberties neighborhood) in the north, known as N3RD Street—pronounced “nerd.” Over the past fifteen years, this area has become a hub of innovative activity. In 2014, there were "more than 30 tech ventures located

around N3RD Street, over 45 marketing/branding/design companies, and even more entrepreneurs in varying industries. Adding to First Friday art gallery openings, activities such as N3RD Street Farmers Market, N3RD Street Gamers, and N3RD Street Runners have helped to organize and engage the community” (City Council 2014). N3<sup>RD</sup> Street conceives of its identity as a community of diverse thinkers and draws connections to its neighboring landmarks: the Liberty Bell, the National Constitution Center, and of course, Independence Hall (IndyHall’s namesake). In fact, they champion Ben Franklin as the original American nerd. Community leaders believe that through formal recognition and fostering and supporting the growth of this corridor, “Philadelphia [could] strengthen its case as a hub of innovation, [and] N3RD Street works to set an example for how Philadelphia can strive not to be more like New York or San Francisco, but instead to be a better version of itself” (City Council 2014). In March of 2014, a campaign spearheaded by Alex Hillman and Jarv.us (software company) cofounders Chris Alfano and John Fazio culminated in city legislation adding the moniker to the official street name. Shortly thereafter, much like in the city’s Gayborhood, Avenue of the Arts, Chinatown and Mummies Row, special street signs were put up (Figure 22).



Figure 22: N3RD Street Sign (Levesque 2014)

It is this neighborhood that served as the backdrop to my fieldwork. Over the last eight years, I have attended innumerable events, happy hours, birthday parties, cookouts, art show openings, game nights, and other gatherings in this neighborhood. It is through my participation in these activities that I was able to fully appreciate the role IndyHall played as a node within the community. Even at events that I'd attend as part of my personal life, I'd run into IndyHall members, or come to find that it was organized by one. People, including the then Mayor of Philadelphia, Michael Nutter, would reach out to Indy and other N3RD Street flagships for insight and collaboration for new philanthropic, civic, arts, and other community initiatives. IndyHall itself grew out of the seedlings of this community identity, yet grew to become a central figure in its story, actively shaping its future. The following ethnographic vignettes are a small selection of the interplay between the neighborhood's cultural flows and IndyHall. They show

how external cultural inputs from individuals (of course, influenced by residency in Philadelphia) are combined and reconfigured within the space in order to create new things that are then redistributed to within the local community.

### **6.1 Part of the Neighborhood: National Mechanics**

“If I had to name two buildings that had the most influence on the direction of my life—it would be IndyHall, and National Mechanics.”

It could *almost* be any other bar nearby, but probably not. National Mechanics shares a building with, and is owned by another techie staple of N3RD Street, WebLinc. Part of its DNA was creating a place in the neighborhood for their employees and other young professionals to hang out in the evenings. Not that you could tell it’s a tech hangout just by walking in. It looks just like any other bar, save for the Mario Kart tournaments. Countless evenings were spent at National, every Friday, I would be pestered to head over with everyone to happy hour. Philly Jelly week was hosted there. Karaoke at National is one of Alex’s (and many other members’) favorite events. It is where I made a lot of the connections that eventually led to interviews, introductions, and long-weaving stories about how everyone in the room was connected somehow.

In fact, National Mechanics was one of the first iterations of Indy as a coworking space—it had free wifi (which, at the time was still not as ubiquitous as it is today), probably due to the particular owners’ preexisting tech background—and the upstairs neighbors were already acquaintances and friends of the



founding IndyHall crew. They would come work together at National Mechanics during the day, and unwind with beers and food in the evenings while socializing with other people from the neighborhood. Everyone at Indy knew all of the servers and bartenders (one of the bartenders was a girlfriend of a member for a while), several of whom were also local artists who showed their work at Indy.

The first meeting I had with Adam was a lunch at National Mechanics, where he explained to me the role of den mother, which he likened to a video game where you're trying to keep up with catching falling plates. I conducted many of my interviews over lunch in one of the booths made from converted church pews. At my first happy hour I was grilled with questions about what an anthropologist is, what I would be doing at Indy, and if they could tell me their stories. Talking over beers was one of the ways I built trust, and began to see how much more than a shared workspace IndyHall was to the community. It was the same process for everyone else. New members were initiated not only by making coffee when the pot ran out at the hall, or replacing the toilet paper, but also through their participation in the 'non-work' side of coworking, and the majority of that happened at National Mechanics.

## **6.2 Locally Sourced: JFDI**

Alex's forearm is boldly tattooed with it. A cork board leaning against the wall has pushpins arranged into it. Silkscreened posters are covering a table drying with it printed across them. *JFDI. Just Fucking Do It.* The phrase has

been used in corporate settings by my consulting clients as a way of describing a top down culture, where the “how” is less important than the “what” or the “when.” *JFDI because I said so*. It was so interesting to me to be heard it used in this way, because my first exposure to the phrase was through IndyHall, and the meaning was almost exactly the opposite.

JFDI at IndyHall is a way of giving people permission to take chances and take ownership of the space and community. You don’t need to ask anyone for permission, if you have an idea, JFDI. This mentality fosters an environment of experimentation, and has yielded many of the now staple aspects of IndyHall: the annual reboot where members try out new floor plans while giving the space a deep clean; Night Owls and their accompanying community dinners; Show N Tell lunches; the jukebox, which is how music is now controlled by a Mac Mini server that anyone can access, rather than centralized control by the den mother; the B-team lunch crew who go buy and read comic books together once a week; N3RD Street Market, a farmer’s market started by my successor den mother, Karina; the Awesome Jar, a jar where people put money whenever they see someone at Indy doing something they deem awesome—the money collected goes to local charity Philabundance; and many others.

*@indyhallarts*

One of these landmark JFDI results was the emergence of @indyhallarts. Sean—IndyHall’s Artist-In-Residence (though the title wouldn’t be official until 2015—started out in an advertising agency right out of school before branching

out on his own to start a company that did branding, identity and full marketing suite work for small- to mid-sized businesses. Eight years later, he wanted to focus on his own art and brand, rather than everyone else's. At that time, his brother Dave<sup>20</sup> was already a member of IndyHall, and started pulling him out to happy hours at National Mechanics and other events. By 2008, IndyHall was in its N3RD Street location, but there was nothing really on the walls. Kara asked Sean to bring in some work for a POST (Philadelphia Open Studio Tours) at IndyHall, and he hung several of his paintings. He never took them down, and Alex urged Sean to bring in more of his work to hang up, or to paint on the walls. Sean stopped him "if you give me the green light, I'm gonna go fucking nuts." Alex's response was tantamount to *JFDI*.

While he was one of Indy's first members that was outside of the 'tech' wheelhouse, he felt he never thought of it as 'just' tech. He noted that Randy—a scientist—was here long before he was. To be fair, Randy was working on a new program for chemists (still within the tech wheelhouse), and used Indy as a respite from his academic digs. But Sean affirms that to him, Indy

"was always this place of 'everything.' I may have been one of the first full-time artist/designers....[but] there's business in art. If you want to be successful in art, you have to sell your work. In order to sell your work, you need to market yourself. In order to market yourself you need to understand the business and financials behind it. Take away what you're doing—whether you're a coder, a writer, a scientist—and we're all the same person. There is business at the back of our passions."

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<sup>20</sup> of Flyclops, Chapter 4

Following the JFDI mindset, Sean would ask himself questions about what was needed in the space. *Plants?* Gave him a chance to do something new and paint pots. *Better conference rooms?* He took down the curtains blocking the glass walls and used paint pens to create a mural to visually separate the space. By 2013 more artists were joining the space, notably Mike Jackson, who was initially tentative about putting his own work on the walls because he didn't want to step on Sean's toes. Eventually, though, Mike began to display his work—even beginning to paint a large mural at the entrance (Figure 23). It was Mike who had the initial idea to brand @IndyHallArts as such.



Figure 23: IndyHall Mural by Mike Jackson. Photo credit: Sam Abrams Photography

The mark of local artists on IndyHall is unmistakable—the space is a living canvas, with murals on the walls, hanging art mobiles, paintings and photography hung throughout, even sculptures here and there. When IndyHall expanded downstairs, Sean, Mike, and five other local artists painted a 50' mural on a temporary wall in one night. The expansion into the first floor created another opportunity for Indy to expand its connection to local artists, and the neighborhood more generally.

In the early 1970s Old City Philadelphia became host to a thriving arts community as old industrial spaces were reimagined as artists' lofts, art galleries, design firms, architects and performance groups. The neighborhood hosts "First Fridays," from the early spring through fall. Once a month, galleries, shops, wine bars, restaurants, and other small venues open up their doors for passerby's to come in and look at art. It is a huge draw for the neighborhood, and the streets are packed from 5-9 pm as people hop from art show to art show. The first floor entrance of IndyHall provided the opportunity for them to participate in the action. The first show put on by IndyHall Arts was a solo show of Sean's work in September of 2012. This required negotiation with the community about security, moving people's desks and belongings for the event (though not an entirely new concept, just a new scale), and getting volunteers to help run the event. The event was packed, the beer from the keg of local brew was tapped by the end of the evening. I mostly had stair duty—making sure no one went upstairs who wasn't a

member or accompanied by one. Reed took photographs—and he has photographed every IndyHall First Friday event since, sharing his albums on Group Buzz for everyone to see. Others took shifts manning the bar and helping Sean manage purchases of his artwork.

On Wednesday March 25th at 6:00pm, we're having a discussion/ conversation to answer the question...what is IndyHall Arts? What can we do, together?

So a quick intro for those that don't know me, I am a full time artist/ designer that works in many many mediums most being acrylic and ink paintings. I also organize a lot of the IndyHall Arts events and work with other artists to find ways that they can make creating their full time job.

IHA has grown so much since I joined about 4 years ago when I was one of very few artists here. We have done over 13 gallery shows, poetry readings, fashion shows and concerts. Holy shit, like I said IHA has grown a lot.

So what is IHA? I know what I think it is, but I (we) want to hear what your impressions of the arts here at IndyHall are, what you would like it to be and anything else you have to say. YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE AN ARTIST TO JOIN US!!!

It would be nice to hear from people that are artists full time or hobbyists, people that appreciate the decor, people that have no idea what I am talking about. If you are interested we would LOVE to hear from you. Your participation will only help make us stronger, help makes us more inspired and help us open up more to those that want to be involved.

Can you join us?! We will be meeting Wednesday the 25th at 6:00pm in the classroom area for an open discussion.

I really can't wait to hear what all of you have to say or questions you may have.  
Truly Inspired,  
Sean

*-A message from Sean on the GroupBuzz inviting the larger community to participate in the future of IndyHall Arts*

In the two years since its inception, IndyHall Arts has grown to include other art shows, poetry readings, fashion shows, concerts, built a dark room

behind one of the conference rooms, started up a silkscreening workshop, and created a titled “Artist-in-Residence” position, the mechanics of which Sean and other Indy members are currently debating (how long is the position? How do they choose the next one? What benefits and responsibilities come with it?).

### **6.3 Philanthropy: Philly Give&Get**

Lansie Sylvia had worked for years in the non-profit sector, as a consultant. She came to work at IndyHall through a friend when she was living in the city, but working with a company out in the suburbs—on days she didn’t commute or have client commitments, she’d come in to night owls. Around January of 2013, she was beginning to contemplate why all of the charity events she was attending were so unfulfilling. She was at an annual charity event for an organization which she had been involved with for several years when she remembers feeling excluded: “They had an auction and they started the pricing of the auction at \$1000. I was sitting there—it was maybe the third year I had been to this event—and thought, ‘I’m really not enjoying myself here.’ I wasn’t actively being harmed, but I didn’t feel part of this community. I didn’t spend a ton of money with the organization, but I was a subscriber.” As a philanthropy insider, she understood the importance of thinking about the next generation of philanthropy, and how to engage younger audiences. This particular event was ostensibly for this demographic. It was an art organization coming up on its tenth anniversary, everyone on the board was younger, and considerably “hip.”

“If even *that* organization was getting it wrong, then maybe there’s something wrong with the design.” That’s when she was beginning to have the rumblings for thinking about a new kind of philanthropy. What about auctions is good, and what is bad? The good news about auctions is that most people will give you stuff: “If I called LaColombe, and told them I was working for whatever charity and running an auction and asked for a \$50 gift certificate, they’d probably say yes.” But when you’re attending a lot of events, she was seeing a lot of run of the mill items: a haircut, dinner at a popular Philadelphia restaurant, tickets to the theater. She wondered if that was the best that could be done. “I can just go get a haircut, why would I bid, unless it’s a deal?” But since the goal at charities are always to raise as much money as possible, of course the winning bid is never below face value—so there is no real incentive to bid. “I realized the charity auction was ripe for hacking.” The ‘items’ that always went for the highest amount of money were experiential, but usually they started at \$1000, effectively cutting out a majority of attendees. Usually it was a board member (someone already invested in the organization and giving a lot of money) ultimately bidding on these high ticket items: no one was brought closer to the organization, no greater sense of community was formed, and Lansie thought there needed to be a way to reconfigure the process.

Around the same time, her consulting company was trying to redo their website, and were looking to hire an SEO (Search Engine Optimization) consultant. She realized quickly, though, that she had no way of knowing whether



the consultant the bids she was looking at were proposing the right tactics, or how to evaluate if the bids were fair, because she herself didn't know enough about SEO to judge. She googled SEO, but of course most providers don't list their pricing, and articles she found were not specific enough to give her any actionable knowledge about fairness, appropriateness or scope. She also felt that anyone she could talk to that she would potentially hire would try to "sell me the whole kit and caboodle, regardless of whether that's what I needed."

This was a position she was not comfortable in. At the time she had been a member of IndyHall for around four months, though mostly a digital member who was in occasionally during the day or weekly Night Owls. Over Basecamp (the then-online forum for Indy, *see Chapter 4*), she sent out a blast, as was common to do, asking if anyone had any expertise in SEO and would be willing to spend an hour giving her a quick tutorial on the subject. And of course, she'd be willing to compensate the person with a few beers—the currency of choice for small favors at Indy. Fellow IndyHall members and SEO savants, Nick and Zack obliged (ultimately, Zack was someone she ended up hiring, though, not the initial intention). She recalls a really honest interaction, helping her look through the bids and her website and giving feedback on what she needed, what they would charge for certain things, and which bids were overpriced (or over-scoped for her needs).

In going through this experience, Lansie wondered how she could amplify the benefits of such an arrangement. Her initial idea was a sort of date auction that

paired individuals with something to offer (some skill or knowledge) with others who wanted to learn or experience something new (Figure 24). The proceeds of the date auction would benefit a chosen charity organization. Her first pitch to the community was during National Jelly Week, as part of a Lunch & Learn presentation at National Mechanics—Indy’s official bar of choice (see 6.1). Nick (the SEO guy who partially inspired her idea), came up to her and told her he thought it was a good idea worth pursuing, and that he wanted to help. “He offered to make us a real website, which ultimately made us look more legitimate and thought out than we were.” After soliciting some other volunteers to help, she hit the ground running. Recruiting the volunteers whose time and expertise would be auctioned off ended up with a very tech-centric group. Unsurprising, given the networks of most of the people at IndyHall at the time. One evening at Night Owls, Lansie asked Alex for help recruiting non-tech people, knowing how well connected he was in Philadelphia. Instead, he encouraged her to embrace what she had.



Figure 24: Lansie brainstorming names for her charity event in Feb 2013

“You have all of these tech people, why not take the event to Philly Tech Week?” Lansie recalls that in this advice, Alex introduced a whole new way of thinking. She was trying to solve the problem; he suggested turning the situation into an asset. Ultimately, Technically Philly gave Philly Give&Get an audience. Rather than going outside the community to try to sell new people on the idea, she looked first within the IndyHall community to find sponsors. Flyclops (*see Chapter 3*) and Nick’s company contributed (and also connected Lansie to another SEO company that has been a sustaining contributor), IndyHall members, wife and husband duo Susan and Chris, set up the photo booth at a really inexpensive rate (whose high quality photos lent further legitimacy to the event).

Philly Give&Get’s inaugural event was held at no other than National Mechanics (who also sponsored the beer). Tickets were sold online and sold out quickly, given its status as a Philly Tech Week event in April 2013. Philly Tech Week began in 2010 as a series of events hosted by the technology blog/news source, Technically Philly, established in February 2009 by three Temple University graduates (Morrell 2013). Early on in my research, Technically Philly was my primary source for reading about the emergence of coworking in the city. I followed their coverage of new spaces opening up, and of IndyHall’s growth and transformation of the years. A search of their archives—including directory

entries and articles—returns over 8000 results). Since their inception, their startup has spread to Brooklyn, Baltimore, DC, and Delaware.

In 2014, Philly Tech Week hosted 130 events attended by 25,000 people. The unconferences that are such a popular format in coworking, are borrowed from the tech industry: Philly Tech Week solicits applications for events to be included in their lineup, rather than centrally organizing all of the activity of the week. IndyHall has always played a role in Tech Week, from members attending and being involved in panels, to officially sponsoring events, and holding happy hours and after parties in the space.

Give&Get Edition	Outcomes
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Original April 2013</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 50 students to PCAT educational summer camp</li> <li>• \$5120</li> <li>• 250 attendees</li> <li>• 35 local partners and sponsors</li> <li>• 10 experts committed to 30 hours</li> <li>• Nominated by the Philly Geek Awards as best event of the year</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>MAKER October 2013</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• \$7300+ dollars to Scribe Video Center</li> <li>• 250 philanthropists (attendees)</li> <li>• 45 local partners and sponsors</li> <li>• 16 Maker experts committed to 32 hours educating their community (winners of auctions)</li> <li>• 5 new digital media workshops (120 Students)</li> </ul>

Figure 25: Philly Give&Get Outcomes

Give&Get planned a follow-up MAKER edition for fall of that year and then followed that schedule for a few more themed events, including a GAMER edition and a DESIGN edition the following year (Figure 25). Eventually, though, the event petered out as organizers took on different jobs and responsibilities.

#### **6.4 Civic Engagement: How do You solve a Problem like the Internet?**

Participation in local government through volunteerism, engagement with city officials, activism, and election involvement constitute a few of the ways in which IndyHall members were civically engaged. Projects like Code Philly (“making Philadelphia a better place to live, work, and play through technology”) and ElectNext are two projects with heavy IndyHall member participation (codeforphilly.org). Organizations like Girls Who Code teach classes out of the space on the weekend. The mayor of Philadelphia, and certain departments of the city government have frequently toured, and sometimes used the space to work out of. The former Chief Data Officer of the city has been a longtime member of IndyHall. Members of IndyHall explicitly concern themselves with the betterment (by their standards) of their city.

A major issue for the freelancing, independent, and specifically tech community is the reliability and affordability of internet connectivity. The city of Philadelphia has a franchise agreement with Comcast, whose headquarters are centrally located in the city. Due to this agreement, the company has a pseudo-

monopoly (with the exception of limited competition from Verizon) within Philadelphia. Old City (as you may guess from its name) is in the historical district of Philadelphia, and whose infrastructure—particularly fiber optics and high speed data lines—is in need of updating. As such, IndyHall has over the years experienced intermittently slow internet, somewhat frequent outages, and has had a mildly antagonistic relationship with their customer service. Over the course of a year, representatives at Comcast reached out to IndyHall (among other coworking spaces in the city) to try to reinforce relationships and potentially build partnerships/sponsorships. As founder and owner of the space, Alex (and Geoff) absolutely had the authority to broker and accept any agreement with the service provider. However, following a Town Hall in the summer of 2014, Alex sent out a comprehensive message over GroupBuzz explaining the situation, the proposal from Comcast, and his initial thoughts. He put it out there for discussion from the entire community, and explained he would not make any decisions without the input of Indy's members (see excerpts in Appendix).

Dozens of posts poured in from the membership. Most were skeptical of what they might be giving up in exchange for free internet; many were wary of trusting Comcast; some outright opposed any sort of relationship with the service provider. Concerns that were raised included Comcast's corporate citizenship (or lack thereof) in Philadelphia, and how association with them may tarnish IndyHall's own reputation; discussions about the state of education in the Philadelphia School District, and how it would be unconscionable to accept free

internet when the digital divide was so disparate in the city (and suggested Comcast provide free internet to all city schools along with other educational initiatives). There was lively debate that concluded IndyHall should not move forward with any formalized relationship with Comcast at that time.

The following spring, an IndyHall member (lawyer) sent out another post over GroupBuzz explaining that Philadelphia was currently in the process of renegotiating its franchise agreement with Comcast, and that Indy was invited to play a role in the public debate around the agreement (see longer excerpt in Appendix).

**“Three Sentence Version:**

We have a once in a generation opportunity to change Comcast’s relationship with Philadelphia. IndyHall will potentially be playing a special role in this process. We will have a preliminary meeting next Thursday, March 12, at 5 PM, here at IndyHall. Please respond to this post or reach to me if you want to come—we have 5 open spots and will be meeting with some community organizers. Even if you can’t come, reach out to me if you’re interested in future participation.” (Jackel 2014)

Ultimately, IndyHall was included in the discussion because of its reputation within the city as engaged citizens of Philadelphia. Free internet never materialized for Indy. However, after the coworking space moved again in 2016, they were able to engage with a local startup, Philly Wisper, for its internet needs. The East Kensington-based internet service provider (ISP) functions via fixed wireless technology (a satellite on your roof needs a direct line of sight to their towers). Beyond the fact that it is entirely based in Philadelphia, an IndyHall

member and graphic designer did their logo and branding a few years prior to IndyHall engaging their services.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

This chapter took a closer look at the cultural flows propelled by a coworking space, IndyHall, within its neighborhood and city. The coworking space as an entity engages with civic leaders and corporations—like Comcast—on a number of initiatives and issues. Individuals within the spaces are catalysts for philanthropy, sustainability, the arts and other community engagement. Many of these individuals have been civically engaged since before joining the coworking space, but were able to meet new people and collaborate on ideas that may have never occurred without that interaction. IndyHall, as I've argued, serves as a hub, or node, for this activity: bringing people together with varied cultural inputs in order to transform them into different forms that flow out of the space in commodified and noncommodified forms. For example, Philly Give&Get is a noncommodified outflow of the coworking space, whereas the art for sale created for a group show by artists within the IndyHall membership is a commodified flow that is a product of their interaction within the space.

Coworking spaces, primarily exist to facilitate these flows. Even spaces that are more corporatized models recognize the need to engage with their localities. Almost every coworking space I researched, regardless of its form or origin regularly hosts events for local institutions and groups. They may also take on a



role in curating, or creating, their own events and series to attract new membership, sponsors, or recognition. These events run the gamut from paid to unpaid, sponsored or not. Of course, events only serve as an entry point into community engagement. Inviting people in is only one part of the equation: “sending” people and ideas (i.e. cultural flows) out into the local community is what creates reciprocal strong networks. A thriving connection with the local community allows for expansion and the social capital necessary to enable a coworking space to accomplish its goals of bringing people together.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusions**

### **7.0 Coworking Spaces as Nodes in Cultural Flow, Revisited**

Coworking has emerged in the last thirteen years as a reaction to a situation formed by globalization, neoliberalism, and the information revolution. Each of these macro forces contributed to an environment in which knowledge workers were in the need of and the position to find new ways of building community for themselves. The corporation used to fill not only an economic role, but also a role as a hub in the social lives of its employees: coworking primarily seeks to fill the latter gap. This dissertation has shown how coworking spaces, similar to how Urban (2017) has shown for corporations, act as nodes within broader cultural flows. Individuals bring their own experiences, skills, knowledge and tools with them into their interactions within the coworking space that are then reconfigured and distributed from the space in the form of commodified and noncommodified cultural outputs; central to the coworking model—and different from the corporate model—is the porous membrane that allows (some of the) newly congealed cultural products to spread freely. Of course, as individuals in the space are also corporate-esque actors, some of their outputs at the individual level do become commodified as a course of them doing business to support themselves.

I have detailed in the body of the dissertation how the congealing of inputs into new forms takes place via friendship and network building, knowledge

transfer and shared problem solving, and incidentally by sharing space and developing shared habits. These flows occur not only through face-to-face interactions within physical coworking spaces, but through the virtual spaces created within and between coworking spaces. The virtual community plays a vital role in the maintenance and development of a specific coworking community, and the coworking movement more generally. Indeed, the recursive nature of how these online community systems are built and tweaked over time and interact with developments in technology that are occurring outside of the coworking sphere is critical to its position as a node within broader cultural flows.

Every coworking space, as every other community, has its own unique culture that develops as a direct result of the unique mix of founders, individual members, geography, and timeline. Not every space has an Alex Hillman who is so active within the global coworking community; not every space is within a city that has a vibrant tech and civic engagement scene. However, the fundamental format of coworking encourages these flows to happen, it is a space to bring together individuals of diverse backgrounds where the interaction between those members is bound to have an impact on each of them. Unlike in other forms of shared workspace (whose function may more closely resemble corporate nodes, like incubators), the cultural outputs (especially commodified ones) are not the primary concern of coworking spaces. As such, there may be a hundred thousand conversations that merely serve to build a friendship for every FlyClops, Lenda,

or Lanternfish Press that develops. Coworking spaces are vitally concerned, instead, with the process of transformation itself, rather than what those transformations produce.

### **7.1 Coworking, Marx, and Neoliberalism**

Coworking did not appear within a vacuum. Broad social and economic forces, largely driven by globalization and neoliberal policy, created the soil out of which it grew. As one key example, companies have reneged on their long-term commitment to many of their employees: outsourcing entire departments and shifting full-time employees to contracted work (even if the work is ultimately the same). This has put (former) employees in a position where they themselves have had to become their own businesses in order to support themselves. Now in addition to doing the labor they are paid to do, they need to figure out their own healthcare, retirement savings, accounting, taxes, forecasting, budgeting, business development, liability insurance, equipment and IT support. In most cases, they're doing this all on their own. One could imagine this process as yet another inflection point in the alienation of workers from their labor (Marx 2009 [1844]). In this neoliberal turn, corporations maintain the majority of the power in the economic relationship, while workers bear the brunt of not only the productive labor, but the administrative/organizing labor as well. Coworking creates a space where workers can lean on others for support in many of these tasks, while simultaneously having an outlet for their social needs and providing

opportunity for them to reclaim power via the creation of their own small businesses.

Most neoliberal and Marxist theoretical work focus on the negative effects of capitalism. As Ferguson (2009) puts it:

“the Left” has come to be organized, in large part, around a project of resisting and refusing harmful new developments in the world. This is understandable, since so many new developments have indeed been highly objectionable. But it has left us with a politics largely defined by negation and disdain, and centered on what I will call “the antis.” Anti-globalization, anti-neoliberalism, anti-privatization, anti-imperialism, anti-Bush, perhaps even anti-capitalism—but always “anti”, not “pro... In...anthropology... for instance, studies of state and development tend, with depressing predictability, to conclude (in tones of righteous indignation) that the rich are benefiting and the poor are getting screwed... But what if politics is really not about expressing indignation or denouncing the powerful? What if it is, instead, about getting what you want? Then we progressives must ask: what do we want? This is a quite different question (and a far more difficult question) than: what are we against? *What do we want? (166-167)*

The coworking movement, started by individuals affected by these neoliberal shifts, chooses to look to the latter question and try to answer it for themselves. What workers realized they wanted was not to reject the capitalist system wholesale—they are business professionals, after all—but to shape it to suit their desired lifestyles and fulfill their social needs in addition to their economic ones. Coworking members then, are neither anti-capitalism nor anti-neoliberalism, but rather pro-community and pro-civic engagement. This dissertation has put its focus here: on the ways in which people are “making lemonade” for themselves in a system that has not lived up to the deals it has historically made with labor.

## **7.2 Opportunities for Further Research**

This dissertation has begun to lay the groundwork for further scholarship on coworking. Within coworking spaces themselves, it would be valuable to look deeper into divisions and distinctions of experience along gender, race, and economic status lines. This further deep dive into coworking space members' would also create a path to understanding more clearly how membership in a coworking space impacts their experience of work. From my fieldwork, it seems as though coworking members are better off since joining their coworking space than they were working from home or coffee shops. But are they better off coworking than they would be if they weren't in the position to need independently sourced workspace and community? Currently, I believe it depends. For some, the path of working within a corporation (and all of the benefits and restrictions that come along with it) provide a sense of security and direction. For others, that path can feel restrictive and oppressive. Individuals come into coworking spaces with their own histories and goals that impact how they experience their membership: a more critical look at the myriad journeys people take prior to joining a coworking space could yield valuable knowledge into coworking's continued role in the future of work.

One step removed from the spaces themselves to look at their interaction with their environment and the incipient forms of political public engagement evident in coworking spaces provides a rich space for continued research. I believe coworking spaces will begin to play a larger role within their localities as

the movement matures and spaces find their voices. This dissertation is very U.S. centric, and further investigation into international coworking models and history would shed more light into how coworking fits into broader cultural milieu, in particular the ways in which coworking spaces interface as public spheres with different types of governments across the world.

Furthermore, understanding coworking within other recent developments will help to further contextualize and understand its function as a node within broader cultural flows. At times, it may seem to be part of the same trends lending rise to “sharing economy,” that brings to mind tech giants like airbnb, Uber, Lyft, and Zipcar. While it does allow for the distribution of real estate risk (in the sense that each member does not need to sign an individual lease for office space outside of their home), coworking is ultimately less about space and more about community; however, it remains to be seen if this tenet holds as corporate franchised coworking spaces grow within the industry. Related but separate to the sharing economy, the emergence of the “gig economy” wherein more and more individuals’ work is characterized not by long-term employment relationships, but instead short-term independent contract work has definite implications on coworking. I assert the same forces that have created the context for coworking spaces used by knowledge workers are the same ones at play for delivery persons, cleaning staff, drivers, and other more labor-oriented work.

It is important to note here, again, the wide swath of institutions that today claim the term “coworking.” To borrow an analogy oft used by Alex Hillman

(IndyHall founder) the term coworking, used uncritically, is as descriptive as the term restaurant. To use both lets you know generally what you're talking about, but the specifics vary greatly: corporate franchised or independently owned, fast casual or fine dining, and a million variables in between all fall under the umbrella of coworking. Much work can be done here to develop a taxonomy of coworking for both descriptive and analytic ends.

### **7.3 Reflections on the Ethnographic Process**

Ethnography is what drew me to anthropology after my first introductory class to the field with Professor James McKenna at the University of Notre Dame. The idea that it could be my *job* to talk to people, listen to their stories, and figure out what their experiences meant to our greater knowledge of the human condition was everything I could have ever wanted to do. It seemed to me to be such an important undertaking, and I looked forward to when I would be able to embark on “real ethnography.” In the end, the experience delivered on its promises. Learning to observe, listen (*really listen!*), and contextualize was a tough but rewarding process. I came into my project laser focused on the broad high-level implications of the coworking movement—as a new kind of social movement that was going to revolutionize the way work is done. I had grand plans to study coworking spaces across the globe, following networks for evidence of the movements impact.

Only through participant-observation in one community over a long span of



time was I able to fully appreciate the impacts coworking has at the *individual* and *local* levels. The friendships, systems of support, and shared problem-solving were are the true heart of the issue. In truth, it took seeing how coworking impacted my own life to really understand. Throughout the past eight years, my informants have become my friends, whom I have supported through tough times and triumphs, and who have done the same for me. As I poured through my notes, recordings, and photographs, I was struck by the depth of connection created for me: academics are often portrayed as “lone,” in their offices and libraries doing the important work of scholarship by themselves, but my experience in the field was anything but that. The ethnographic process illuminated for me the importance of interaction and the collaboration in the creation of new knowledge.

Of course, the multitude smaller interactions like the ones I was witness to and participant of cumulatively do create an impact on the landscape of work and community and I believe coworking to be playing an ever growing role in shaping the future, via its impacts on a broad spectrum of workers and its burgeoning role in the public sphere. I am uncertain other methods of inquiry (alone) would have afforded me the same insight into this subject matter. I am grateful to the field (and my professors and mentors, specifically) for providing me with the tools necessary to create this work, and embark on new projects as I move forward in my career.

## APPENDIX

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### **I. The Coworking Manifesto**

#### **THE CHALLENGE**

We believe that society is facing unprecedented economic, environmental, social and cultural challenges. We also believe that new innovations are the key to turning these challenges into opportunities to improve our communities and our planet.

#### **THE SOLUTION**

Coworking is redefining the way we do work. Inspired by the participatory culture of the open source movement and the empowering nature of IT, we are building a more sustainable future. We are a group of connected individuals and small businesses creating an economy of innovation and creativity in our communities and worldwide. We envision a new economic engine composed of collaboration and community, in contrast to the silos and secrecy of the 19th/20th century economy.

#### **THE VALUE/THE CODE OF CONDUCT OF THE COMMUNITY**

We have the talent. We just need to work together. Different environments need to overlap, to connect and to interact in order to transform our culture. In order to create a sustainable community based on trust, we value:

- collaboration over competition
- community over agendas
- participation over observation
- doing over saying
- friendship over formality
- boldness over assurance
- learning over expertise
- people over personalities
- "value ecosystem" over "value chain"

This new economy cannot thrive without engaging the larger business, creative, entrepreneurial, governmental, non governmental and technical communities together.

#### **THE FUTURE**

We believe that innovation breeds innovation. We will transform the world culture into one supportive of the entrepreneurial spirit, of risk taking, of

pioneering into the unknown territories as the great leaders of our times. This requires education, entrepreneurship and a large network of creative workspaces. We are reshaping the economy and the society through social entrepreneurship and innovation. Our communities are coming together to rebuild more human scale, networked, and sustainable economies to build a better world. We are the world coworking movement !

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## II. Comcast GroupBuzz Posts

### a. *Alex Hillman:*

Hey everybody!

I'm working on cleaning up the Town Hall notes from last week, but in the mean time, there's one topic in particular that I'm actively working on and would like to open up for discussion.

The mini-version is that Comcast wants to sponsor IndyHall with a WAY faster internet connection, *for \$0/month*. But we're not going to agree to *their* deal terms, and need your help brainstorming a better offer. Read on for more.

And please, read this email completely and carefully.

It's long, I know. It's taken almost a year to get to this point, so there's a lot to share.

**Also, while I'm not saying anything out of turn or that I wouldn't say to anybody's face, I'm not exactly looking to go to the press with this stuff just yet, so please consider what you share and where. I trust your best judgement :)**

First, a few background facts:

1. It's not a secret that in spite of our best efforts, the internet isn't always blazing fast here at IndyHall, and we've had less than awesome experiences in the past with the quality of our Comcast service, including some upstream throttling that we still haven't totally solved.

2. It's also not a secret that Comcast is a "big, dumb company" (Marc's words, not mine). They've hard earned a terrible reputation in everything from customer support to [threatening net neutrality](#).

3. Comcast is also one of the 20 largest employers in the Philadelphia area, including a number of our friends and community members earn their livings working in various parts of the company, many of them making and doing cool things. Comcast is also building another huge skyscraper for something like

1,500 new jobs in the city.

4. At this point in time, Comcast has a heavy stranglehold on Philadelphia's choices of broadband service, especially for business class. In most places, including Old City, there truly are not other options without leaping from \$250/month that we currently pay to thousands of dollars a month for service that's potentially even slower, but "more stable".

Over the last 12 months, I've been getting to know a few of the suits at the top of Comcast's strategic business development group, chiefly Marc Siry and his boss Sam Shwartz. I've been learning quite a bit about how this group of decision-makers at Comcast views the company, both now and in the future. For the sake of clarity, during the rest of this email, when I refer to "Comcast" I'm talking about those decision-makers - Marc and Sam - specifically. Marc in particular has impressed me on several occasions in the last year, showing a candid and clear understanding of Comcast's weaknesses and our community's strengths. He's brought a number of suits through IndyHall for tours, who have all been COMPLETELY in awe of how this community works (and, seeing first hand how crappy the internet connection they provide really is, special thanks to @Eric Steele).<sup>21</sup>

Comcast execs think we're cool. So what?

To cut to the chase (and repeat our lede from above):

Comcast wants to sponsor IndyHall up with a WAY faster internet connection, for *free*.

I'm talking REALLY fast, dedicated fiber, gigabit internet connection. The kind of speed that universities and hospitals get. It normally costs nearly \$10k/month, but IndyHall would get it *for free*.

They also want to sponsor us with cash to upgrade our network to be able to deliver all of that high-speed goodness.

Frankly, the deal in all of its details is generous (even if it also adds up to an rounding error against their \$139 billion market cap).

Uh, wow. What do they want in return?

If you're skeptical, that's good (and healthy). I am too.

Along with the proposal we got for the super fast internet, was a list of things they'd like from us in exchange.

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<sup>21</sup> Eric created a meter to see how much bandwidth he was taking up, just to make sure his usage was not what was slowing down everyone's internet in the Hall.

Here's what their DRAFT proposal includes, for us to provide in return for the sponsorship...

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I've made it clear to Marc and his team that while I want fast internet for our community, we're not compromising our integrity for it.

I've made it clear to Marc and his team how much value we put on trusting each other, and earning (and keeping) people's trust in us.

We've stayed true to [our core values and virtues](#) since the very beginning of our community, our actions and our words are thoughtfully consistent. These aren't just phrasings and attributes of IndyHall - they ARE IndyHall and what makes this community tick. That's not changing anytime soon, and definitely not in favor of a deal with Comcast.

I've said to Marc and the sales team, it's not just that we WON'T agree to those terms...it's that the terms won't get them the results they want.

But, there's the opportunity. The deal terms I outlined above are what comes out of a corporate sales machine, not out of an authentic community. Meanwhile, Marc and his team insist that they *want* to be a part of the community in Philadelphia.

If they're serious about that goal - being a part of the community - lets teach the them how it's done, and make THAT our offer in return.

Lets give them what they really want

I want to red-line everything on their list, and propose options that are not only inline with OUR way of doing things, but more importantly, that would actually help them get results.

I'm asking for YOUR help in brainstorming what we can offer Comcast to help them achieve THEIR goals. The fact that these ideas come from the community (instead of my brain) just further reinforces the example that I think we can set for them.

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The question I think we can help them answer is, "What are the SMALL ways that they can start changing their culture for the better? And what role can the IndyHall community play in that, if any?"

What about the rest of the community outside of IndyHall?

One of the VERY first things I said to Marc was, *"I'm not interested in a deal that only benefits IndyHall. Our community is bigger than these walls. If we're getting special treatment, that offer needs to extend beyond us."*

The truth is that we're the FIRST deal like this, to be done. Comcast has done other broadband sponsorships with a few other businesses & coworking spaces, but those deals look more like the marketing bullet points from above.

Our deal terms will become a prototype deal for other organizations who might not have the resources to come up with their own terms, like we can. Let's lead by example, and also think about how Comcast could help communities OTHER than our own, and what role we can play in that.

Let's Brainstorm

I've spoken to a handful of people since Town Hall and one of the recurring sentiments is, "Comcast isn't going away anytime soon. It'd be better for all of us - including them - if they sucked a little bit less."

So, keeping in mind the 3 groups and their goals in mind, how can we invite them into our world...without ruining our world? What can we do to help Comcast start to suck less, without compromising the values, integrity, or authenticity of this community?

*b. Member Response:*

**Three Sentence Version:**

We have a once in a generation opportunity to change Comcast's relationship with Philadelphia. IndyHall will potentially be playing a special role in this process. We will have a preliminary meeting next Thursday, March 12, at 5 PM, here at IndyHall. Please respond to this post or reach to me if you want to come—we have 5 open spots and will be meeting with some community organizers. Even if you can't come, reach out to me if you're interested in future participation.

**Slightly longer version:**

Every 15 years there is a chance for Philadelphia and Comcast to renegotiate their franchise agreement, which governs Comcast's relationship with Philadelphia as a service provider and as a corporate citizen.

IndyHall has been invited by city officials to take an active role in this process, specifically to (potentially) host a public hearing where community members can voice their concerns as part of the official record. Part of the reason we're involved is because of the overwhelming responses to [this thread](#) from the summer.

We will be organizing and seeking out the input of our whole community for ways to help Comcast rethink its obligations to our city. If this is interesting to you, reach out to @robjackel or respond to this post to get in on the conversation. Also, think about people outside the IndyHall community who would be good contributors at a public hearing.

**FAQ:**

**What is a Franchise Agreement?:**

Comcast, and other cable or telecommunications companies, are required by Federal Law to negotiate franchise agreements in their markets. Because Comcast is given permission to block and dig up city streets to lay its cable, and to reach our homes and business, they have to pay the city for the privilege of using its infrastructure. (The new net neutrality rules may make this even more of an issue for its broadband service).

In exchange, the city gets 5% of cable (but not broadband) revenues, and some services. Other things can be asked for in side letters, including additional funding for educational services, requirements for public access cable and expansion of affordable high speed internet.

**How does the Franchise get renewed/What do we have to do with it?**

At some point in the next few weeks, the Philadelphia Office of Innovation and Technology (OIT) will release its needs assessment, which is a lengthy document explaining the telecom needs of the city. It also includes the opinions of lots of Philadelphia residents about their Comcast service.

Once this is released, OIT will conduct public hearings to get broader public comment on our needs. It looks like IndyHall may host a hearing. If that is the case, many of us will speak at the hearing, but we should also recruit people who we think would be good speaker

**What should we want from Comcast...**

Really, this is up to community members to voice their concerns. A few possibilities though:

- **1) Fund education** – Comcast pays very little in taxes, and our school system is in desperate need of funding. Comcast could provide extra funding for STEM education to help fund the development of its own workforce.
  
- **2) Expand high speed affordable internet** – This is pretty self-explanatory.
  
- **(3) Increase accountability and competition** – Comcast should not make any attempts to prevent competitive services or municipal broadband.

**Where will this be?**

It doesn't make sense to host here directly, as this will be a completely public meeting with some space requirements. We are looking for a venue in old city– it must be public-appropriate, ADA accessible, and close to transit. If you have a lead on a good venue that might work, let us know.

**When will all this happen?**

We're not sure! We are still waiting for release of the needs assessment at which point it will be time. It is not 100% certain that we will be hosting – if not, we should still be part of the mobilization effort. However, we are a likely candidate to host. When we know for sure, we want to be ready to act.

**What's next?**

We'll be meeting to plan next week and to see what other asks people may have of Comcast. It will be small – we're meeting with other activists. As I said, let me know if you want to come.



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