

PAULA BIALSKI

A LEAD INTO THE LIFE AND TIMES OF DIGITAL SOCIAL ACTION

Review of: Felix Stalder, *Digital Solidarity*, London, Lüneburg, Mute & Post Media Lab, 2013.

Felix Stalder begins his book with a story. The tale is about the creation of Iceland's post-economic-crisis constitution, which was drafted by a collective of individuals (rather than elected representatives) – reflecting what Stalder feels is

“a new subjectivity [...] made possible by a new sense of solidarity that is not limited to Iceland or Europe, but can be seen to be struggling to emerge, in a wide variety of ways and forms, in many places around the world.”¹

This draft of a new constitution was made possible by a digital solidarity – a sense of togetherness, a collective power felt by loosely-knit networks converging at various moments in order to achieve a collective good, beyond the constraints of traditional institutions. This sense of the collective is – as countless numbers of social theorists explored before him – deeply related to our use of new media technologies.

Indeed, everyone from Henry Jenkins, Barry Wellmann, Manuel Castells, or John Urry did in one way or another, comment on how new media consumption brought out a new sense of belonging, virtual togetherness, and a global sense of community. Yet while Stalder's text does not bring anything particularly groundbreaking to the table, through his straightforward, unpretentious writing style, he offers a novel way of mapping out various forms of community online. He does so by looking at the ways in which methods of belonging shift from an individual to a collective level. The reader gains a sense of the delicate negotiations and motivations of groups and swarms, which are largely

1 Stalder, p. 9.

based on the interplay between the needs of an individual to participate in a social network, and the shape and growth of collective solidarity. While drawing from a number of empirical anecdotes – including the *human mic*, the nature of the *pirate pad*, public speaking *stacks* and other ways the internet enables transparency and participation – the author is able to characterize his definition of the swarm, collective, or assembly.

Stalder starts his definition by stating that there is an emergent new subjectivity: a movement away from McLuhan's *Gutenberg Galaxy*, where reading was ubiquitous, yet done alone and in silence. Through this act of reading, Stalder points out, a single individual was left to her own devices to make sense of the world. Today, on the other hand, subjectivity is collective and contemporary forms of subjectivity are based on interaction, rather than on introspection. Today, we are making sense of the world as a collective, due to the tools of communication that envelop our every act and being.

A claim he makes right at the beginning is that the foundation of individuality is shifting from the private realm to the network. This struck me as I recently came across a new platform called [Wonder App](#), which allows individuals to “discover why they're wonderful” by collecting ‘anonymous’ feedback from one's social network about one's various strengths and weaknesses. Once collected, these friends' comments claim to help you “know yourself better”. It is precisely these types of platforms (which can be as specific as Wonder or as broad in purpose as Facebook) that are fundamental in the process Stalder defines as digital solidarity – which is shifting individuality from the private realm to the network. Through this, he also points out that humans

“are becoming more intelligent collectively because we are developing ways to connect partial understandings productively on a new scale.”²

Throughout the book, the author leads the reader through a number of notions, concepts and transformations, such as the definitions of the commons and the various changes in the (digital) infrastructure that enables individual and collective agency. Readers also gain an understanding of how new digital infrastructures enable not only new forms of informational cooperation but also new forms of financing (like crowdfunding), and material production (shared tools, open hardware manufacturing, 3D printing, etc.).

While a large number of topics such as these are explored in this short monograph, I also came across a number of incongruences. For example, Stalder explains that production, rather than being purely

2 Stalder, p. 17.

commercial (or public), is also becoming social. Yet he then states that production no longer needs to be geared towards the market and its orientation towards exchange values.³ While this is perhaps a utopian vision shared by free-software, open-source and other sharing platforms (such as [airbnb.com](https://www.airbnb.com)), it is precisely the focus on market competition that is the predominant driver of participation in such networks. Later, Stalder also underlines that trust between strangers is another characteristic of digital solidarity – made possible by the individual profiles and the way past behavior is made transparent on such profiles through comments and rating systems. Yet what about websites like ridesharing systems like [carpooling.com](https://www.carpooling.com)? Or anonymous marketplaces such as [gumtree.co.uk](https://www.gumtree.co.uk) or [craigslist.com](https://www.craigslist.com)? In these instances, trust between strangers occurs even without any profile or availability of an individual track record. How does trust and solidarity emerge here? While indeed, “sociability in this new environment is starkly different”⁴, how it is actually different is sometimes left to the reader’s imagination. Although perhaps not the purpose of this text, observations such as these would come alive with a more developed empirical study of apps like Wonder or even Facebook. Perhaps due to the specific character of the essay-like publication-style, Stalder is at times quite shallow in his explanation of digital collectivity – merely scratching the surface of how swarms, collectives, or assemblies actually take shape, or in how they differ from ‘offline’ solidarity, or how they collapse or dissipate into thin air.

Stalder’s text is a good, albeit brief, introduction to the general impacts of social media on individuality, collective action and modes of production. He provides useful definitions of emergent forms of collectivities such as swarms, commons and assemblies, and explores the position of individual subjectivity. *Digital Solidarity* is a worthwhile lead into the ways in which social action takes shape and dissipates through the use of social media technologies.

3 Stalder, p. 18.

4 Stalder, p. 22.