

# cliqueonomics

sava saheli singh

## Editor's Note

This was originally posted to [sava saheli singh's blog](#) on August 24, 2014.

I observe communities. I try to understand what makes communities come together and then cohere, how communities work to include and exclude people, what the parameters of that inclusion and exclusion are, and what effect that might have on people within and without those communities. we can form community around our love of coffee, our emotional response to particular music or tv shows, or our need for cat gifs. we also form communities around social and personal experiences. communities are important places for support, love, and connection. but we know this.

as much as I am sensitive to why communities are formed, I'm also sensitive to who gets left out and why. there are those we should be wary of (like people with malicious intent) but in our zeal to "belong", we sometimes overlook people we might be keeping out because of things we take for granted.

I found myself thinking about this a little more than usual recently because of a couple of things.

a few days ago, [The Digital Ecologies Research Partnership](#) was launched. it has an aptly named website, too: <http://derp.institute/>. the partnership was formed to allow researchers access to data across the social network platforms Reddit, Twitch, and Imgur, among others. this is a good thing – it will help researchers examine and understand social behavior across platforms in interesting ways. I'll be following along with interest. and there's [a good group of people](#) involved – I know some of these people and their work, and I look forward to the excellent stuff that will come from this.

when the partnership was announced, I expressed some reservations about the acronym (ambiguously on twitter (which went off in a slightly contentious direction), more in-depth in a DM exchange with a twitter friend involved with the project, and further in-depth vocally over a pint), not because I don't think it's clever, but because I worry that it adds to a culture that continues to frame an internet we'd like to believe is democratic as a string of inside jokes.

the word "derp" has [meaning and history](#) and can mean different things for different people. and this is all good. but, it's an inside joke, and one that those who get will giggle at, and those who don't might have condescendingly explained to. as a twitter friend pointed out, it could also be considered ableist – something I hadn't even thought of. also, the partnership is an academic endeavor, which is my specialty. and though I love many of them dearly, academics are some of the cliquiest people I know.

there's also been a recent proliferation of [TinyLetter](#) newsletters. to be fair, I subscribe to a couple. I used to subscribe to more but I found myself not reading most of them because of the volume of email I deal with, and there are some I

won't subscribe to because I already get enough of their particular brand of cleverness on twitter. in some ways, these newsletters seem like a nostalgic adoption of an older form of community communication like listservs or usenet; in other ways, they seem like a way to create a more captive audience now that the popular platforms seem to be on the verge of being drowned out by the noise of mass adoption; and in yet other ways, they seem to be a way to create new forms of community, both inclusive and thus possibly eventually exclusive – almost secretive communities, shying away from the discoverable spotlight of open social media and search engine results. in a time when there is much discussion of issues surrounding paywalls and net neutrality they feel, somewhat ironically, like a new form of walled, hidden information sharing.

I won't pretend that I'm not privy to some internet in-jokes, and I'm on the periphery of enough cliques to understand some of them or at least recognize when I'm not in on the joke. and I've certainly engaged in behavior that puts me on the inside and has made other people aware of how they aren't part of whatever little internet circlejoke that I'm a part of. but both these examples have made me more aware of how important inclusivity and exclusivity are in communities, and my role in participating in and contributing to one or the other or both. communities are important – they provide safe spaces for people, emotional and intellectual nurturing, a way for us not to feel like we are alone. but we seem to be creating "clique economies" – exclusive clubs for the special few, the practice of which I will call cliqueonomics.

we're forgetting how we're here trying to create a more democratic space. we're forgetting that we're trying to make a place that is safe and accessible to all. we're forgetting how it felt to be on the outside looking in. those of us involved in creating communities need to remember to talk about who we might inadvertently leave out, else one day, we'll find ourselves left out.

## Notes

- *as I was writing this, I found [Klint Finley's piece](#) on TinyNewsletter that might be of interest.*
- *I wrote [a short paper about online performance and academic identity](#) that might also be of interest.*
- *thank you to [Tim Maughan](#) for input, editing, and help in coming up with the term "cliqueonomics".*



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