Karmic assemblages
and the network society

a PhD research proposal
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Karmic assemblages and the network society

a. Abstract

Buddhist culture is diverse and yet it has unity. Throughout the Buddhist world, the concept of karma shapes the social assemblage of countless communities with remarkable flexibility. It seems very interesting to me that, together with the rise of a network society that redefines notions of community, production and the self (Castells), network era versions of the concept of karma emerged in highly popular ICT mediated communities of Western origin like Slashdot or Reddit. What do the offline (from the monastery to the village and the metropolis) and virtual versions of the term 'karma' have in common, and what sets them apart? Can we define the properties of the karmic social assemblage? Its actors, its network, its currencies, its diagrams and modes of production and exchange? Is a kind of karmic arrangement, albeit unnamed as such, spontaneously emerging in other realms like 4Chan, Anonymous, Couch Surfing, Wikipedia and countless other iterations of altruistic internet communities? A deep understanding of karma as generator of the social will help future developers and theorists conceive a new fabric for an internet that fosters social wellbeing. To develop a sophisticated model of the karmic assemblage and its components I propose Actor-Network Theory analysis based on information gathered through Participant Observation and content analysis methodologies (the latter in the case of web-based communities that revolve around image remix practices) in Buddhist communities and digital realms that incorporate notions of 'karma'.

b. Introduction

By now there is little doubt that the Internet has brought dramatic changes to human society on a global scale (Castells), and that probably more radical transformations are yet to come (Kurzweil). Whether these changes are for the best interest of humanity and the planet or for intensifying exploitation, hegemony and ecological disaster is at the center of recent academic debate. The fruit of this critical debate, I think, should be the ability to generate emancipatory ideas and projects from a position of deep understanding of what is at stake. While some scholars raise criticism by analysing the evolution of the Internet as a means for the deepening and widening of commodification, hegemony, exploitation, surveillance and control (e. g. Hassan, Lessig, Zittrain), others point with optimism at the potential for change embedded in the technology (e. g. Stallman, Bauwens, Boillier, Benkler). There is yet another view that systematically contests the expressions of optimism by translating the assumptions in which they are based into Marxist terminology, a critical reading that declares that 'free culture' is ultimately 'free labour', and a new form of capitalistic *rent* (e.g. Terranova, Vercellone, Pasquinelli). Across the academic field, however, there is a nearly unanimous call to find *alternatives* to the current system that has spread poverty, brought ecological disaster, and dis-articulated the rich cultural heritage of communities around the globe, and to make them succeed before it is too late.

This research project seeks to participate in the becoming of these *alternatives*. By exploring existing practices and social arrangements based on Buddhist cosmology, it seeks to articulate a new set of themes for network practices and debates. A central observation here is that 'technology is not necessarily computers' (CFBST, 2010), so it is really the *social technology* that is in dire need of sophistication, in need of subtle and daring approaches that results in autonomous, ethical and happy societies and individuals. I propose to invert the flow of knowledge, to understand knowledge that have been deligitimised and made peripheric by colonialism, as the source where true alternatives for the construction of contemporary reality lie.

A very interesting example of ICT mediated community that uses a notion of karma is

the website *Reddit.com*, a community platform hosting over one hundred thousand communities on every conceivable topic and more than two *billion* pageviews per month. Members of Reddit communities provide the totality of the content either by linking to content considered interesting in other sites or to their own creations. Reddit lengthy comment and debate usually exceeds the weight of the content. As it evolves, Reddit has developed evolving ethos and culture of its own, including a distinctive iconography and particular shibboleths. It is to a certain degree an example of networked *autopoiesis* (Geyer and van der Zouwen, 2001 p. 7) that emerges from a certain configuration of the network, after reaching what DeLanda calls a *Machinic Phylum* (Landa 1991, p.7). Reddit uses 'karma' as an index that hopes to reflect overall contribution to the community by each user. Although 'karma' is an aspect of its social configuration, the whole system consists of multiple interconnected strata of information in addition to karma (like votes, trophies, page position, etc). Moreover, 'karma' in itself is composed by 'comment karma' and 'link karma'.

Understanding the relationship between this specific configuration and the unique altruistic ethos palpable in this community, as well as similar understanding of other cases of digital native use of the term 'karma', will provide material for comparative analysis vis-a-vis social configurations based on the Buddhist tradition. Altruism in Reddit usually results in action. For instance, numerous Reddit members recently decided to make charitable donations based on the number of votes received from other members (and, therefore, based on the amount of karma produced), while saying 'make me regret this' or 'clean my wallet'[1]. What role exactly does the notion of karma play in this kind of phenomena? How can deep understanding of karma for New Media produce global generosity and help consolidate diverse and transformational instances of autonomous P2P production and exchanges in the real world?

The two research lines that I propose would be: first, to explore diverse Buddhist communities and thereafter propose and sophisticate models that describe the elements, structures and flows that define these karmic assemblages. Second, to map the field of technological karma-based phenomena of Western origins like ICT mediated communities and video game virtual worlds. Third, a critical comparative

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[1] See Appendix 1

analysis based on this twofold research: the traditional and the new, the religious and the technological, the metaphysical and the virtual, the organic and the mechanic. Through an understanding of their relative economics, aesthetics and politics it will be possible to better illustrate the merits and shortcomings of current ICT mediated 'digital karma', as well as the potential and incompatibilities of karmic themes to structure alternative social formations. Potentially, this new notions of digital karma can be the seed for a software art project that proposes deeper ways in which New Media articulates social change. In other words, the transformational potential of rich digital karma can be the key to a significant evolution of digital media: the further step that 'web 3.0' requires to achieve radical and global emancipation.

To better contextualise the project, a brief introduction to the notion of the *karmic assemblage*, a concept that emerged from my masters thesis at The University of Melbourne will be provided next. A basic understanding of this notion, which is still in a rather elementary stage, is the starting point for further research.

b.1 Basic concepts for the karmic assemblage

I use the term *assemblage* as defined by Actor-Network Theory (ANT). *Assemblage* understood as a network of human and non-human actors (or actants) where all actors exercise agencies in the production and reproduction of a certain process (Latour, 2005). ANT is important to this research because the notion we seek to explore, the *karmic assemblage*, is composed of subtle (and yet endless) weavings of cause and effect, or *feedback* (Wiener 1965), that encompass the human and the non-human determining their future state. Karmic assemblages include radically diverse sets of actants like buildings, symbols, animals, electronic devices, protocol, mental objects, and even (in traditional communities) karmic residues from past lives. It is important to look into these phenomena armed with a gaze that allows all of the action to be seen and acknowledged. Therefore, as a methodological approach that is open to a multiplicity of definitions and redefinitions of its subjects, ANT provides a robust and yet endlessly flexible framework for the study of these notions, notions that are meant to exceed the realms of the material and, within that excess they even exceed the cultural.

My thesis project was concerned with detecting the themes that motivated generosity in Buddhist communities as a means to articulating initiatives for decommodification in network production. For this I proposed an Actor-Network Theory (ANT) analysis of a project started by Theravada Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka called 'Life for the Cow and a Hand for the Family'. The project consisted in saving cows from the slaughterhouse by raising funds from the community to buy cows that were destined to be slaughtered, and then giving the cow to a poor family that could use it for farming and milk; significantly, as a result of the process the cow is seen as a new member of the receiving family. This case provided a good example of decommodification (of the cow) through collective action. An ANT analysis of the motivations and agencies of the actors involved resulted in the notion of the karmic assemblage.

As a concept, the karmic assemblage is a social phenomenon based on a flexible set of principles, an ontological commons upon which a group of people forms, develops and acts and that fosters collaboration, altruism and happiness. It is guided by a unique inversion of economic principles, and it shows flexibility to work in diverse situations. To illustrate these basic principles I created a series of graphs about the Sri Lankan Theravada karmic assemblage. The first one shows how the practice of giving (dana) is in itself productive. Giving achieves production by transforming the material (like money or food) or the immaterial (like time or attention) into merit, which exhibits certain properties of the commodity but is strictly personal and confined to the immaterial mental realm.

merit productivity principle

step 1

A gives B a small amount of something from the material realm (this includes energy or time).

Mind Realm

Material Realm — A giving B

step 2

If the gift is offered with good motivations and in a good way to a worthy receiver, a large amount of merit is produced! Profit is accrued in the mind realm of A. Note that there is NO exchange

Mind Realm merit

Material Realm — A giving B

result

Because the mind realm is regarded as as real or more real than the material, merit production results in significant and sustainable systemic growth. Both parts profit, too.

A´s wealth goes from ● to ●

B goes from 0 to ●

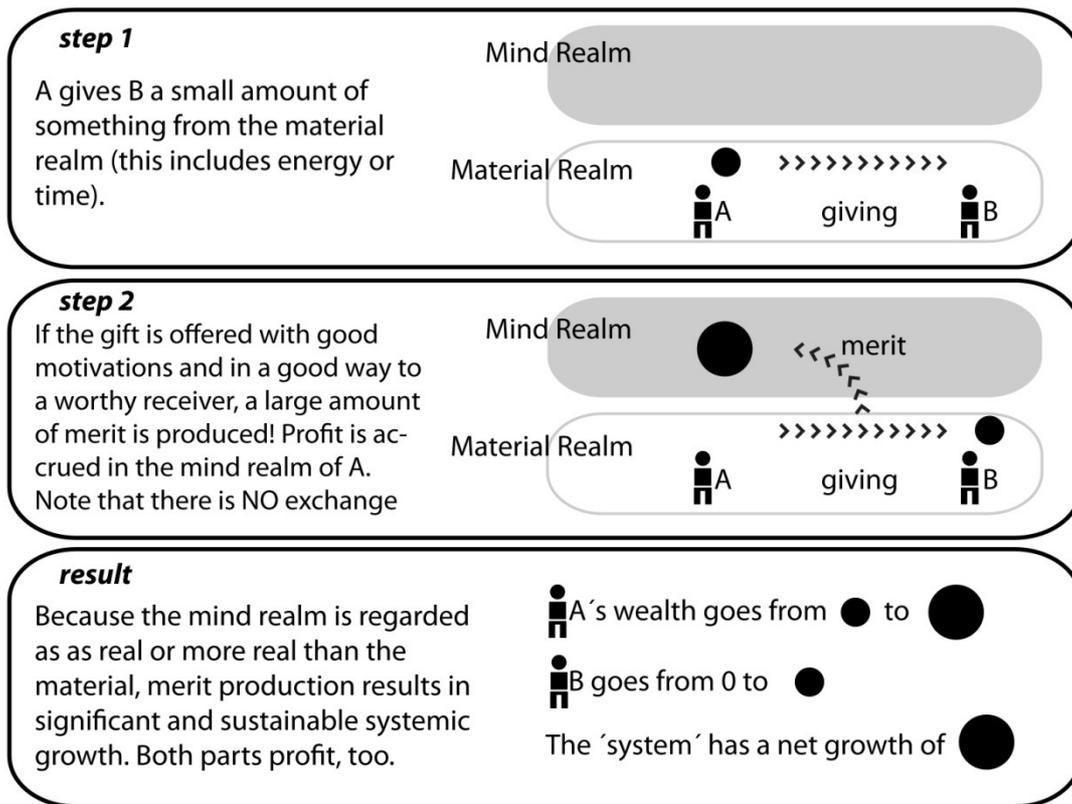The ´system´ has a net growth of ●

Fig 1: Merit Economic Principle

This shows how merit production effectively inverts the principle of Marxist theory that places agency in the commodity as '*a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants' (Marx, Capital Volume 1)*. The merit economic principle shows that incorporating the mind into what is real results in the surprising (for the outsider) realization that giving is actually a more profitable activity than taking or receiving. However, the graph is an oversimplification of a quite complex operation where many factors play their own unique roles; for example, the correct mental disposition is essential; giving with an improper mental disposition renders the whole act useless. Indeed, Buddhist texts specify how there are many de-meriting motivations to give, like giving with the intention to offend, to bribe, etc.

The following diagram is useful to further understand the internal engine of the karmic assemblage, and how rather than presenting a model for static repetition it works as sort of spiraling dynamo, an intrinsically teleological process that aims to reach radical emancipation.
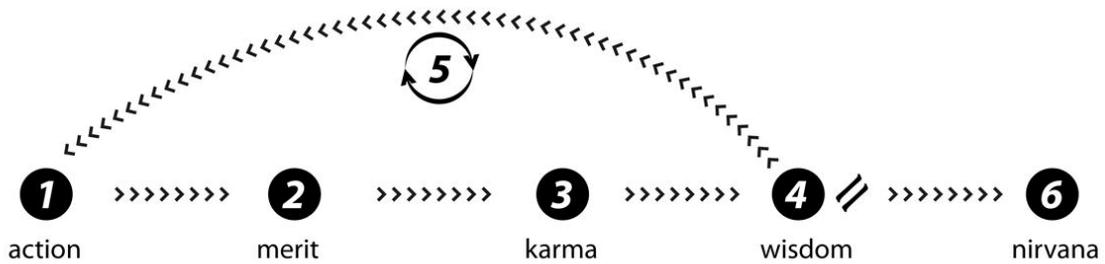
Agency and Process (the mind realm)

1 All action (including mental action) that cleans the mind from attachment leads to merit
  Giving with the correct disposition, among other practices like meditation, produces merit

2 Merit liberates the mind from attachment, thus providing comfort to the mind. It leads to good karma.
  Like the body, the mind needs food for its well being, so as much as possible merit must be produced.

3 Karma is the overall condition of the mind, good karma is a satisfied mind. It is the vehicle
  understanding reality, wisdom.

4 Understanding leads to more happiness and an enhanced overall sense of well-being.

5 Every time the process is repeated new attachments are shed and the mind can reach further stages of wisdom.
  Going back to action and merit making means going further in the path, not starting again.

6 When liberation from all attachments has been achieved the final goal of nirvana is attained.

The journey metaphor:

Nirvana is the destination, karma is the legs that get you there, merit is the food for the trip.

Fig 2. Karmic dynamo

From here, the challenge is to think of how New Media can be shaped after merit economy. Experimentally, I have translated the basic principle of merit into a formula. The formula itself is probably deeply flawed, but what is important is an idea: that the Buddhist system, karmic assemblages and merit economies, might be abstracted and translated, using mathematic and algorithm experimentation, into information-era social systems that express the Buddhist insights that foster generosity, collaboration and happiness.

Let's take, for instance, the following statement: "Even if one gives a small amount with a heart full of faith one can gain happiness hereafter. The alms given consisted of a little rice crust, but as it was given with great devotion to an eminent Arahant, the reward was rebirth in a magnificent celestial mansion"

What this statement tells us is that the merit-generating power of a gift is determined by the receiver's merit (i.e. field of merit) and the qualities of the givers mind, and that the gift itself plays a minor role in the final result. Therefore:

$$m = g^{(e+c)}$$

m = merit
g = gift
e = receiver's merit
c = giver's mind quality

These terms belong to different realms: g, the gift, is a material quantity, while m and c belong to the immaterial realm of the giver's mind and e to yet another realm: the receiver's mind. This multidimensionality is a key characteristic of merit economies; and the vital operation to organise production while transcending materialism. Buddhist ontology is a complex system that thoroughly explains existence through a delicate mesh of entangled taxonomies that encompass the whole universe, time, mind, and matter. The challenge is to translate this multidimensional system into new digital currencies, network protocols, social networks, software art, guidelines for P2P production projects[2], etc. These translations would express this entangled ontology in ways that generate altruistic practices and discourage accumulation and exploitation, fostering social cohesion and wellbeing.

The P2P 'third mode of production' as theorised by Michel Bauwens, informed by the karmic assemblage as a practical and philosophical framework can enable, as Bourdieu puts it, *'universes in which people have an interest in disinterestedness and generosity'*. An articulated overlap of the karmic assemblage and the network society is in this sense pregnant with the possibility to build a global future where societies oriented towards wellbeing as opposed to accumulation thrive.

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[2] 'P2P specifically designates those processes that aim to increase the most widespread participation by equipotential participants' (Bauwens, 2005)

These concepts, developed in my masters thesis, are the basic framework to pursue further research. I expect to further develop these concepts as the PhD research is conducted. Especially, the complexities of merit and the relationship between karma and merit need substantial exploration and are likely to result in extremely valuable insight for the problem of collective production in the context of New Media theory. Also, the PhD project seeks further understanding of how these concepts, which are currently limited to the individual, shape communities and result in collective action.

c. Literature Overview

c.1 Empires

I will localise this project in the field of New Media theory by going from wider to literature that is more specific. Therefore, I will start by describing network theories concerned with power, globalisation and its impact on societies, to arrive at more specialised debates concerning specific areas within P2P theory.

Perhaps the most thorough study of the global transformations brought by ICT is *The Rise of the Network Society* (Castells 2010). Castells' overarching gaze goes wide and deep, moving his lens from large to small, looking first at larger global phenomena, and going all the way to the individual and its subjectivity. Two aspects of his research are more interesting in the context of this proposal. First, *multimodality*, observed in the transformation of mass media (especially news organisations) into Internet-based media, and the symmetrical but opposite rise of *mass self-communication* through means like blogs, social networks or` P2P technology. This does not mean, however, the automatic demise of capitalism in the hands of mass self-communication because, on the other hand, 'networks are appropriate instruments for a capitalist economy based on innovation, globalisation, and decentralised concentration' (ibid. p.502). And second, the principle of *flexibility*: 'Not only processes are reversible, but organizations and institutions can be modified, and even fundamentally altered, by rearranging their components' (ibid p. 71). *Flexibility,* in the sense of its hability to enable something altogether different, is the network property that needs to be put to test. Thus, this proposal thinks in terms of assemblages in the sense that if the net is in reality flexible enough, a more desirable social assemblage

can be not only theorised but successfully implemented.

Hardt and Negri's trilogy *Empire*, *Multitude* and *Commonwealth* (2000, 2004, 2009) complements Castells with a neo-Marxist-Foucaultian-Deleuzian analysis of capitalism and globalisation as multilayered networked power. Their central concept is *Empire,* defined as the current regime for the exercise of biopower in a global scale, 'a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule' (Hardt and Negri, 2000 p. xii). *Empire* is a world order that is neither fixed to a center nor spontaneous, and has no territorial limits. Power, Hardt and Negri contend, flows globally through a centerless network of transnational institutions (such as the IMF or the UN), governments and corporations that seamlessly governs the world. Networked information technology is seen as the means for biopower to 'directly organize the brains' (ibid p. 23).

Robert Hassan and Michael Strangelove, respectively, describe empires of speed and empires of mind, building on the notion of Empire. Most notably these two approaches describe empires *within*, the intensification of colonising of increasingly vast areas of the experience of life regardless of the geopolitical location of the subjects. Ontological colonialism of time and mind. In *Empires of Speed,* Robert Hassan (2009) explores a new dimension in which Empire operates. Through network technology yet another kind of empires, temporal empires, expand through the globe establishing a uniform time experience that dominates all other modalities of time experience: those socially constructed outside capitalism. 'This Empire', Hassan suggests, 'generates its own form of temporality, a 'network time' that is a qualitatively different form of time from its technological predecessor, the time of the clock' (ibid. p. 67). Further, the clock itself also needs to be understood as the spearhead of an 'empire of time', albeit the one characteristic of the *previous* incarnation of imperialism: 'the idea of time as represented in clock time is an abstraction that is deeply embedded in our culture and has a long history. It is based upon a mechanistic and materialistic view of the world that has its roots in the very origins of Western thought' (Hassan, 2003 p. 17).

Michael Strangelove, in contrast, argues that the net *per se* carries the seed of cultural liberation from *the empire of mind,* or capitalism, understood as a belief system fueled

by desire manufactured to produce consumers (Strangelove, 2005). Essentially echoing Benkler's view of a web that "provides an outlet for contrary expression and a medium for shaking what we accept as cultural baseline assumptions" (Benkler 2006, p. 278), Strangelove decretes 'the Internet exhibits a bias towards decommodified expression' (ibid. p. 43). It follows that 'the unparalleled flood of decommodified cultural production within the Internet strongly suggests a breakdown in capitalism's ability to channel individual productive activity into the utilitarian needs of the market economy' (ibid, p. 231). While optimism is always important, it can be dangerous when premature. Does the Internet really have an intrinsic anticapitalist *bias*?

The pitfalls of new media become sobering by extending the analysis beyond the novel agencies of the individual, and into all the other actors that are actually involved in the phenomenon of networked communications. All user behaviour, in the first place, is modulated by software of some sort that shapes the conditions of the interaction, effectively legislating beyond contestation what can and what can not happen. Code is Law (Lessig, 2006). The hardware itself is now mostly solidified consumer culture. While the traditional PC does exhibit a certain libertarian ethos, the latest generations of networked hardware have increasingly evolved into commodity purchasing devices, like the iPad, remotely managed by their manufacturers (Zittrain, 2008). Moreover, manipulation of the content of cyberspace is a lucrative business exploited by a booming industry dedicated to SEO (search engine optimization), viral marketing, astroturfing, and even 'truth' production by hijacking platforms like Wikipedia. The semiotic revolts of fringe cultural activity are swiftly recuperated for exploitation by corporations, just like Western powers openly seek to co-opt the web powered revolutions in the Arab world to extract new profit from market expansions. The virtual realms credited for this production of 'freedom' are highly controlled pseudo-public spaces: 'The online world contains almost no spaces that are genuinely public. Instead, it is made up almost entirely of spaces that are either overtly or covertly commercial. The latter of these we might term "pseudo-public" spaces, where there is a disconnect between users' perceptions of them as public and their actual private nature' (Johnson, 2010). The real autonomy-fostering potential of social media is dubious at best: realms like Facebook or The Huffington Post are actually highly profitable advertisement driven corporations whose business model is not very

different of that of traditional mass media: selling an audience to advertisers, but with the disturbing difference that what is being sold now is not just eyeball time but whole online personas (Rushkoff, 2009). Behaviour that conflicts with the golden principle of the 'market' (e.g. nudity) results in exclusion from the community. The agent of censorship is no longer the police but the brand. Developers who cater for Apple's software outlet customers know that real cultural fringe is out of bounds, basically because the marketplace needs to be sanitized on behalf of the profits of a greater audience; any culturally significant attempt at 'thinking different' means app rejection and lost work. Even the 'The Pirate Bay - Bit torrent' duo, resilient to regulation by design, is mainly (if we look at the top downloads list at TPB at any time) a network for distribution of mainstream movies, and therefore of the Hollywood celebrity-system driven ideology (Pasquinelli, 2008).

All these criticisms are important to debunk the dangerous myth of the intrinsic good of the Internet. Critical thinking leads to more potent action; these criticisms reveal the dark side of the infinite malleability of the Internet, or, as Castells puts it, its *flexibility* (Castells 2010, p. 71). The point of this research project is to think about ways to harness that flexibility to overcome the exploitative trends by theorising a rearrangement of the actors at play in a deeper level. This research project aspires to contribute to the successful engagement of these threats by embodying the spirit of Sean Cubbit's exhortation in the opening pages of *Digital Aesthetics*: "This book is dedicated to more than refusal: to the building of alternatives that owe nothing to the structures of domination. Nothing less is worth fighting for" (Cubitt 1998, xi). This project aspires to 'more than refusal' too, looking at knowledge that 'owes nothing to the structures of domination' as the only way to build real alternatives with deep foundations.

Drawing from John Kenneth Galbraith, Strangelove introduces the notion of desire as central to the capitalist *empire of mind*. 'It has long been recognised that, along with the production of goods, capitalism also produces the desire to consume', (Strangelove 2005, p.23). However, right after identifying this central problem, the encounter with the metaphysic drives Strangelove to capitulation: 'Desire is an intimate part of human condition. Indeed, there is a distinct tendency among religions to equate the absence of desire with the divine and the enlightened. Needless to say, such a state is seldom

attained' (ibid.). What is particularly relevant in Buddhism, in this sense, is its thorough examination of the nature of desire to propose an effective method to deactivate its causes. If anything, the Buddhist approach is to demystify desire by deconstructing it as a hindrance of the mind, rather than to stop at the disempowering belief that 'desire is an intimate part of human condition', an extremely useful belief at the core of capitalism. Desire and commodities feed each other in a devastating spiral that threatens the planet and, by definition (because to desire is to lack), makes no one happy (Bodhi, 2000). Therefore here the analysis of the commodity departs from Marxist materialism in the observation that desire is a *mental object* (Sujiva, 2003). Buddhist non-materialism rather than relying on idealised deities, actually consists in acknowledging the reality of mental objects as not essentially less real than physical objects and thus, in a very Latourean way, examining their agencies in the mind and consequently in the material world. *Decommodification* must therefore be the result of a collective ontological operation that in this context could be understood as providing relief to the material from the heavy burden of attached mental objects, and the mind from the burden of desire for the material.

c.2 The P2P movement

I have argued elsewhere (Mendoza, 2011) that Cold War era narratives of the apocalypse were so extraordinary that created a breaking point in the logic of power that allowed for the invention of the Internet. A critical analysis of the history of distributed digital networking and the TCP/IP Internet protocol suite shows how the Internet is indeed alien to the evolution of the Western episteme and its historic race towards increasingly sophisticated control. This argument contradicts Alexander Galloway's theory of 'protocological control' (Galloway, 2004; Galloway and Thacker, 2004). The quality of seemingly endless malleability the Internet exhibits (at least until this point) has, because of the context of context of global materialism and exploitation it was incepted in, resulted in the tendency towards commodification, exploitation and co-optation described in the previous section. However, this malleability means that it can also act as the force that opposes those trends. 'Endless expansion and reconfiguration' are for Castells the unprecedented political properties that signal qualitative transformations.

> *"while networks are an old form of organisation in the human experience,*
> *digital networking technologies, characteristic of the Information Age,*
> *powered social and organizational networks in ways that allowed their endless*
> *expansion and reconfiguration, overcoming the traditional limitations of*
> *networking forms of organisation to manage complexity beyond a certain size*
> *of network." (Castells 2010, p. xviii)*

The Internet itself therefore disturbs the preexisting political arrangement. Indeed, we can 'begin to make out a new kind of political agent: the network itself' (Cubbit et. al., 2010). Perhaps a metaphor can be attempted: the net is a state, mind is the territory (because cyberspace is semiotic rather than existing in server farms), code is law and protocol is the constitution. The question is: what is the currency? One of the possible outcomes of this research project focused on the karmic assemblage is insight into multidimensional currency systems (or a single web-wide exchange system) that better articulate human value and relationships within (and without) the dramatically different entity that is the web. Benkler, among many others, describes the network as a critical economic and political agent; the defining factor for radical global transformation.

> *"It seems passé today to speak of "the Internet revolution." In some*
> *academic circles, it is positively naive. But it should not be. The change*
> *brought about by the networked information environment is deep. It is*
> *structural. It goes to the very foundations of how liberal markets and liberal*
> *democracies have coevolved for almost two centuries" (Benkler, 2006 p. 1).*

The P2P movement has the goal of rethinking *everything* in view of the structural singularity, and to thus reassemble *everything*. Michel Bauwens, one of the most active scholars in the movement, assesses the significance of P2P in the terms of what we could call a *grand narrative*:

> *"As political, economic, and social systems transform themselves into*
> *distributed networks, a new human dynamic is emerging: peer to peer (P2P).*
> *As P2P gives rise to the emergence of a third mode of production, a third*
> *mode of governance, and a third mode of property, it is poised to overhaul our*

political economy in unprecedented ways" (Bauwens, 2005).

Understanding P2P as a 'third mode' carries teleological implications that are worth examining with a mixture of distance and optimism. The definition above is also important to understand that P2P is not confined to technology-mediated interaction. It is a 'human dynamic' that 'specifically designates those processes that aim to increase the most widespread participation by equipotential participants' (ibid.). Therefore, it is a framework that can be in theory applied to all human activity.

The main academic critique of P2P comes from Autonomist Marxism theorists like Terranova, Pasquinelli or Vercellone, for whom the 'Free and Open Everything' dream is naive. Terranova articulates how, often, 'free' really means 'free labour' (Terranova 2003). Pasquinelli argues against Free Culture by questioning profit symmetry of the offline and online realms. 'Free' content actually has production costs (time and energy, at least), costs that instead of ever being recuperated by the producer, are exploited by parasitic actors like Google who profits for all online activity. This, in neo-Marxist terms, constitutes cognitive capitalism. Pasquinelli's concerns are valid, but his proposal of *sabotage* (Pasquinelli, 2008) is weak at best. Sabotage is never a strategy, but a tactic. Nathaniel Tcakz articulates a similar critique of the critique: 'Rather than framing political action as a tactical engagement with an all powerful foe, political action is increasingly returning to and rediscovering the practice of living differently, of creating alternatives(...) But it is also part of the larger peer production or P2P movement, whose aim is anything but tactical' (Tcakz, 2011). Yet there is truth to the observation that there is no such thing as costless production, just as it is true that computers consume energy and physical mineral resources. This is why it is important to study *offline* practices, like those of Buddhist communities. Practices that acknowledge the weight of reality: it is only by recognising that we are living in revolutionary times, *but only to a certain degree*, that we can make the best out of them. What I mean by this is that the deeper strata of what it means to be human, the *thing* that the universe is made of, the facts and mysteries of birth, suffering, illness and death, will remain unchanged and should not be overlooked as we think about future societies.

With that framework we can better start to think in terms of the realities that the P2P

movement needs to acknowledge. P2P theory is an all encompassing field with capilarities concerning every possible aspect of society. Within the vast project that is the P2P movement, scholars like Franz Narhada specifically discuss the concept of *demonetization:*

> *"Money relations are relations of abstract equality, where individuality doesn't matter. (...) It comes at a high price, money taking over social relations before we know it. So demonetisation is the process of (re-) transforming social relations into acts of conscious creations."*
> (Narhada, 2011)

Ideas of demonetization are in this sense a central part of an eventual systemic transformation. However, in the context of this research proposal terms like 'currency' and 'monetary system' are used with reluctance for lack of more suitable vocabulary (and of space to develop a better one), because flows in karmic assemblages should be understood as exceeding in many different ways the realm of the financial. Several projects that aim at demonetisation are being deployed. Probably the two most interesting projects in this sense are: a) Bitcoin (bitcoin.org), an already operational distributed digital global currency that does not rely on any central authority, and b) Metacurrency (metacurrency.org), a project that seeks to enable communities to create currencies that offers the tools for different communities to create exchange systems based on different definitions of what is valuable, and acknowledging multiple dimensions of value.

> *"What we are claiming in the meta-currency project, is that the seemingly different social phenomena of monetary exchange, eBay reputation points, grades, coupons, airline-miles, etc.., are similarly expressions of a common pattern. They are all:*
>
> *formal information systems that allow communities to interact with flows"*
>
> *(source: Metacurrency website)*

This definition goes to the core of the research concerning karmic assemblages,

whether online or offline. Also, it provides a promising avenue towards an understanding of digital karma as a 'formal information system that allows communities to interact with information flows'. In this sense this research project seeks to attain a nuanced and thorough understanding of the flows at play in Buddhist communities and how they move between material and immaterial dimensions, but also to understand those very flows in online phenomena that, like Reddit or Wikileaks, increasingly outcompete governments and mainstream media in shaping the contemporary world.

d. Research Problem

Problem Statement. This research proposes to examine and compare practices within realms that are informed, at least to a certain degree, by the term 'karma'. Therefore the set of realms to be studied will be both of traditional Buddhist origin, and of contemporary/digital Western origin.

Research Questions. This research addresses several questions that include (but are not limited to) the following:

- What do the offline and virtual versions of the word 'karma' have in common, and what sets them apart?
- What elements define the karmic social assemblage? Its actors, its network, its currencies, its diagrams?
- Which digital phenomena (websites, video games), if any, exhibits similar characteristics to the karmic assemblages of traditional Buddhist communities, and to what extents?
- What would exercises of translation of the karmic assemblage into digital realms require?
- What potential applications does the karmic assemblage hold for the network society?

The project consists of three main parts: *analog karma, digital karma*, and *bridging the gaps.* The first two constitute the research component of the project, and the third includes a comparative analysis of the gathered information followed by conclusions on how to express rather than simulate karma within the network society. These

guidelines would then be used to formulate one or more projects that are consistent with the findings.

It is important to note that the analog/digital categorisation is only proposed here as a means to organise the research process. Because 'analog' karma is a cosmological concept, by principle it is not suspended when a person's activity takes place through technological mediation. Nor does 'analog' karma become 'digital' when the Dalai Lama tweets. Conversely, website or video game developers make no claim of transcendence of karma beyond their digital karma driven environments, neither users expect it to.

I'd like to illustrate the nuances beyond the divide with an example. The Sri Lankan monks that organise the project described in the introduction have set up a Facebook group to announce the cow-saving events to the community. The interesting thing is that, as they explained to me, even if you don't have money to contribute you can still earn a small amount of merit by posting positive comments in the group's page. The accruing of merit itself exceeds the Facebook ontology (i.e. it is not 'digital karma'), and yet the platform is recognized as a legitimate field for merit production. What karmic assemblage-driven projects can do is to follow structures that facilitate the expression of karmic ontology through the agencies of the actors involved. This is in a way what the cow-saving monks do, and as a methodology it can be translated into the more heavily mediated environments of the contemporary world.

Research Structure
Analog Karma (Participant Observation, ANT analysis)
      Self and Mind (ontological structures)
      Monk-Lay Communities (social phenomena)
      Analysis
Digital Karma (Content Analysis, ANT analysis)
      Online Communities (social phenomena)
      Video Games (ontological structures)
      Analysis
Bridging the gaps
      Comparative Analysis

d.1 Notions of Analog Karma

This project seeks to understand social structures that operate under a particular ontology -a karmic ontology. This, I contend, could have a positive impact in the conceptualisation of alternative environments for collaboration, whether *environments* means protocols, software, virtual space, real space, or even currencies. For this reason, research should be more intensely focused on understanding the real-world (or analog) concept of karma deeply and its social manifestations. This knowledge will *then* be brought into the field of new media theory.

The meaning of karma, like the meaning of Buddhism, is not the same in every place and every time. The evolution and expansion of Buddhism during twenty-five centuries is one of the richest cultural processes in the history of mankind. Understanding the concept of karma means here an understanding of the more stable themes through time and space, as well as the proper understanding of what makes special each of the main *flavours.* It also means understanding the ontology as well as the social phenomena it gives place to. One of the most relevant notions that emerged from my masters thesis is that the karmic assemblage defies some aspects of the Maussian theory of gifts. In fact, the name 'karmic assemblage' defines the social arrangement where the gift is actually detached (nirvana is the liberation from all attachments) from the giver, leaving behind a certain kind of karma, which is beneficial but does not belong to metaphysical aspects of the thing given. In light of a subtle understanding of gifts a critical review of theories of giving should be developed. These theories include Mauss' *The Gift* (1954), Bataille's *The Accursed Share* (1988), and Derrida's *Given Time (1992)* among other works and should be *studied* vis-a-vis Buddhist literature where karmic exchange systems are discussed in detail like in Bhikkhu Bodhi's *Dana: The Practice of Giving (1990).*

The resulting analysis will be informed, complemented and debated with the help of

sociological, historical and philosophical literature available in the field of Buddhism. From the canonical scriptures (like the Pali canon) to the work of modern ontologists like Stcherbatsky (1962 and 1970) and contemporary sociologists (e.g. Walsh (2009), Bodhi (2000), Kieschnick (2003)), a model of the karmic assemblage that accurately reflects the complex and sophisticated social realities that it informs, might emerge.

d.2 Notions of Digital Karma

As stated in the introduction, there are ICT mediated communities of Western origin that are indeed powered by digital karma. As we move into online communities like Reddit, Slashdot, or Anonymous, we will examine their 'currencies' and motivations, analysis that will look into their policies and moderation, but also (and perhaps more importantly) into their aesthetics and cultural production: the texts that render visible their deep nature. Self mass-communication is a recent phenomenon that fosters the rise of new trans-national and trans-media languages, and it is also invigorated by those very languages in formation. From early emoticons to 'Lol Cats', these new languages have always blended text and image in unorthodox ways; web ontology is therefore part of the visual arts, and vice versa. In this sense Sean Cubitt's prescriptions for digital aesthetics seem accurate:

> *Digital aesthetics needs both to come up with something far more interesting than corporate sites, and to act critically to point up their insidious blandness and global ambitions. Subversion of the dominant is inadequate. In its place, it is essential to imagine a work without coherence, without completion and without autonomy. Such a work, however, must also be able to take on the scale of the cyborg culture, a scale beyond the individual, and outside the realm of the hyperindividuated subject. By the same token, aesthetics must move beyond the organic unity of the art object and embrace the social process of making.*
> *(Cubitt, 1998 p. 142)*

Internet memes are indeed an embracement of 'the social process of making' in contemporary networked societies. Because of this, the text/visual objects that are memes, are the *stuff* that flows, and ultimately condense the shape of the assemblage

that produced them. Therefore, the study of these digital karmic communities in this proposal is focused on its aesthetics, and how they are shaped by factors like moderation policies, community guidelines, chat logs, and (of course) their karma systems.

Finally, it is also interesting to explore karma systems in contemporary video games. In contrast to online communities, karma based virtual worlds in games do not serve as the locus of production. Rather, the interesting aspect of karma-including game environments is their ontological structures. A good example is what we could call the *affordances* structure in Fallout: New Vegas. By interweaving several layers of gameplay generated information like reputation, titles, health, money, old money, skills, perks, karma, etc., an ontology emerges. With 'an ontology' here I mean a sense of meaningful existence. This sense is then the motor that drives the player into performing highly complicated tasks within the virtual world, or in other words, into production. These multidimensional affordances systems in gaming can be read, to a certain extent, as homologous to the multidimensional exchange systems proposed by the Metacurrencies project described earlier, as well as to the karmic assemblages in Buddhist communities. Therefore, the second part within the study of digital karma in this project is concerned with the ontological structures of karmic video games.

The image from the movie V for Vendetta in the cover of this proposal can be read as a visual metaphor of the potential for alignment of analog and digital karma. The Guy Fawkes mask is by now, thanks to Anonymous, the *de facto* symbol of Internet resistance; clips from the movie have been used for numerous 'official' Anonymous videos. During this specific scene Natalie Portman's character, Evey, goes through an experience that leads her to deep detachment and resolve – a radical experience crafted by V, the anarchist, that resembles in many ways processes of attaining Buddhist enlightenment. In the height of the scene, as she realizes her mission in life under the rain, she looks like a novice monk. The Wachowsky brothers did not intend the coming together of Buddhist and Internet iconography in this image. It retroactively results from the identification of Anonymous with the revolutionary anarchist sentiment that V incarnates. The persona of V matches closely the Anonymous ethos: a lack of identity that translates into multitude, radical libertarian anarchism that fights the repression of the nation state, sophisticated yet bizarre

aesthetics in text and imagery, combative aggressiveness coupled with romantic delicacy, and a sense of ethics that seeks to soar above that of the well adjusted. His ways are kind, playful and ruthless like those of a Buddhist master –the role he plays in Evey's awakening. In this way, the image can be read as a metaphor for the current dynamics of the world and the network: Out of kindness and through playfulness Anonymous, and other networked collective intelligence entities (like Wikileaks), also seek to ruthlessly take a humanity in denial through the harsh days of reckoning required to achieve enlightenment.

However, it seems that the use of the word 'karma' in online communities and video games is not the result of formal philosophical consideration, religious motivations, or organized political planning. This in my opinion only makes the phenomenon much more interesting: as a spontaneously emerging trend it is more likely to be a sign of a larger cultural reality than if it came from neatly designed policy. What do programmers exactly want to express with digital karma? When and where was it first manifested, by who and how, and with what mindset?

e. Methodology

The research process in this project will be conducted using the methodologies of Participant Observation (Jorgensen, 1989) and Creative Participation (Dahlheimer, 2008). This will yield the data for ANT analysis (Latour, 2005) of karmic assemblages previously described in terms of analog and digital. Finally, a comparative analysis (Walsh, 1998) of the two ANT-analysis findings will lead to useful conclusions regarding karmic assemblages and the network society.

A note on mess

This project is interested in deeply heterogeneous objects. It tries to reveal the paths that connect them and weave new paths to enable more energetic flows. The research process includes multiple dimensions, temporalities and ontological perspectives. In practice, this means that expectations of a linear process should be avoided. In this sense John Law's incorporation of mess in method reflects the methodological

sensibility of this proposal:

> *"In practice research needs to be messy and heterogeneous. It needs to be messy and heterogeneous, because that is the way it, research, actually is. And also, and more importantly, it needs to be messy because that is the way the largest part of the world is. Messy, unknowable in a regular and routinised way."*
> (Law, 2003 p. 3)

Understanding the research goals and the kind of knowledge sought in each specific case will result in methodological adjustments big and small. This is, I think, a way to approach a research question that leads to manifestations as heterogeneous as gaming is from meditation. Each data resource, is therefore approached through a different methodology.

e.1 Methodology: Analog Karma

Self and Mind (ontological structures)

+

Monk-Lay Communities (social structures)

This part of the research seeks to gain deep understanding of karmic assemblages, how they operate, through what actors and diagrams; to understand its currencies and flows, its physics and metaphysics. It is, however, an open ended goal that calls for what Law calls *generosity* in method, meaning the incorporation of diverse phenomena and techniques into the modeling process. First hand experiences of joining the assemblage with honest intention is essential. Therefore, the research proposed includes Participant Observation fieldwork at monasteries and communities belonging to the main branches in the Buddhist world. This fieldwork is the single most important source in the project. By 'honest intention' I mean participating without mentally wearing the researcher hat, but making the self one more actant in the community, and reflect upon it only at a later stage. It means, in short, to let go of formal research conventions. Taking distance as a researcher, playing the role of the scientific spectator, would make the research irrelevant because the karmic

assemblage is largely based on the cultivation of mental properties and states; these states are at the heart of the notion of 'karma' and must be considered realities to be known as much as physical phenomena. For this reason, the experience of the self (my self) is one of the most important sources when attempting to understand karmic ontology. By placing oneself in the naturally appropriate place for a person/researcher in the assemblage (whatever that could be) and noting the ensuing phenomena whether it is internal or external flows, a network can be traced. For this, then, I propose an Actor-Network Theory (ANT) analysis that starts in Monk-Lay communities, looks at its diverse social phenomena (e. g. everyday life, ceremonies, media, contracts, procedures, architecture), and might include open ended interviews with monks or other members of the community and other means of grasping truth and meaning like photography, sound sampling, etc.

e.2 Digital Karma

The phenomenology of digital karma as described in this proposal is twofold:
A) Online 'karma' found in some ICT mediated communities. They are informed by *something* that shares at least the name with analog 'karma'. To trace these networks we must look at their production, their constant stream of texts and images, but also relationships in process of becoming and of reproduction. What is the ethos of relationships in digital karmic assemblages? How are this realms, through aspects like policy guidelines and interface design, semiotically constructed, and how do this and other factors shape the nature of the exchanges? What is the weight of the disembodiments presupposed by ICT mediation, and what tactics are put in place to overcome or celebrate disembodiment? Crucially, how is *stuff* produced and what role do notions of karma exactly play in such production? The analysis of this variety of digital karma would include, then, textual analysis of comments and imagery, discourse analysis of moderation and participation policy guidelines, website ANT analysis that looks into aspects like user interface, hardware and business model, and open ended interviews with the creators of these karma based websites. It would be indeed of great interest for this research (which is ultimately concerned with P2P production) to compare the notions of karma of a monk and a web entrepreneur.

B) Video Games, which we propose here to read as ontology. As discussed before,

systems of multilayered and entangled affordances articulate ontology within an otherwise meaningless 'space' imagined by a microprocessor. 'The ficctional world is limited by a game rule, showing the intertwining of rules and ficctional worlds. Rules create the game; the fictional world contains it' (Sicart 2009, p. 33) This notion is complemented by Leino's 'gameplay condition' (2009) understood as the existential spaces for freedom within a game and predetermined by the game's system. In my view the role of 'entangled affordances' is to qualify said spaces infusing them with meaning, thus giving a sense of heightened purpose to the habitation of the game world. In this way the 'gameplay condition' goes from generic freedom to qualified freedom. Specific configurations of affordances determine this 'quality of the freedom'. The karmic assemblage in this sense is the strategic configuration of the ethos of the 'gameplay condition' to express a karmic ontology in the game world. The intuition that drives this proposal is that the rule and control imposed by the West (even within the West) are divergent with cosmic reality; to put it in Sicart's video game theory language, the 'game world' and its rules are at odds and we are therefore naturally experiencing all sorts of dystopic consequences. To understand the karmic assemblage can be in this sense to understand alternative rule sets to play the 'game', rule sets that fully expresses the nature of the 'game world'. Therefore, what we can gain from understanding karmic assemblages is insight into rule conformations that can better serve the 'players' of reality. In this context the question is whether the structure of abstractions embedded in Video Games can be studied as a starting point to articulate similar structures into models of real life production powered by P2P systems, and to what extent.

e.3 Bridging the gaps

Comparative Analysis

As a result of separate ANT analysis of the information yielded by the research in the proposed categories of analog and digital karmic assemblages, diverse assemblage models can be compared. A clear picture of their actors, diagrams, flows and currencies will allow us to confront the next set of questions. What are their similarities and what sets them apart? Through what strategies and in what scenarios could they overlap? Can the themes and structures of analog karmic assemblages be

used to inform innovative assemblages within digital realms? Are some flavours of the analog karmic assemblage more fit for certain kinds of project than others?

e.4 Potential Applications

The research and analysis process should yield a rich set of findings in the form of 1.) a thorough understanding of the themes, principles and mechanics of karmic assemblages, and 2.) the potential pitfalls to consider when translating them into new media projects. An articulated overlap of the karmic assemblage and the network society is indeed pregnant with possibility. However, the findings are yet to be found. There are unknown unknowns. It is hard to envision the full scope of the potential for this knowledge before actually knowing what the knowledge consists of, but we can speculate.

Above all, this research should open a field of indetermination, an understanding of a certain kind of structure that can potentially materialise in diverse forms and kinds of media. The pursuit notions of an ethical ontology informed by the main themes of collaboration, autopoiesis, altruism and distribution can materialise in countless unexpected ways.

Hopefully the following list of possible implementations will not seem excessively far-fetched, but rather it will serve to spark the imagination:

- A karmic un-corporation. Castells explains that in the network societies corporations have actually dematerialised becoming networks themselves (Castells, 2010 p. 214). So why can't the network just deem corporations redundant? Is it possible to envision a global, leaderless, self regulated, karmic un-corporation without shareholders, that assesses itself through metrics of distributed well-being, where intermediators in supply chains are no longer necessary, and that labels its products 'made by the people in the www'?
- A pilot in the form of a software art project to be developed online, as an artistic intervention on physical spaces through mixed media, or as a hybrid of both. In any case, this software art project would gravitate around active

participation of the 'audience/user'.

- New theoretical approaches broadening the language of academic discourses of network theories and new media, which seems excessively focused on Western materialist ontology.
- A multidimensional global currency system based on karmic redefinitions of value. Exchange systems that acknowledge the subtle and complex realities that constitute social wellbeing.
- An Alternate Reality Game (ARG) where the 'score' is only known by the mind of the players as they get closer to enlightenment by changing the world.
- A social network with a complex system of meaningful and often tangible incentives to produce action for global change.
- Mash-ups of two or more of the above.

f. Relevant Research Experience

My most significant experience in this kind of research project is my masters thesis project at The University of Melbourne, titled 'Awakening from Capitalism', which is briefly described in this proposal under the title 'b.2 Basic concepts for the karmic assemblage'.

Additionally, in 2010 I conducted another research project at a restaurant located in Melbourne that allows its costumers to decide how much to pay. The objective of the research project, conducted following ANT methodology, was to understand how customers developed the decision to pay in a situation that made it optional. The relevance of this case study to the field of new media studies lies in the idea that voluntary payments could provide a means of subsistence to independent content creators. The resulting paper was titled 'To Feel Like Paying: A visit to the anomaly of happiness', and helped make evident to me the major importance of understanding altruism, collaboration, trust and generosity for the field of new media studies.

I have attended academic conferences in UK, Thailand and Indonesia, closely related to the topics of my project.

At the 'Apocalypse and its Discontents' conference (Institute for Modern and Contemporary Culture, University of Westminster, London) I presented a paper titled 'Life in a Network for Survivors: the Thermonuclear Apocalypse and the Protocols of Freedom', analyzing the impact of apocalyptic narratives in the genesis of Internet protocols.

At the 'Bandung Spirit Conference' in Indonesia I presented a short version of my master's thesis, 'Awakening from Capitalism', presentation that generated great interests from attending academics belonging to diverse fields like political science, business administration, and post colonial studies.

My contact with Buddhist culture through travel through Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia and China (Mainland and Hong Kong) while having these topics in mind resulted in an intense interest in gaining deeper understanding of Buddhist philosophy and practice. This interest is rooted in the perspective of a contemporary, non Western, and post colonial mind. I believe that this is the perspective that will shape the world in the next decades, and that it should be thoroughly explored and exercised in order to materialise our hopes for a more free, diverse, fair, and happy planet.

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Appendix 1

Source: Reddit.com

1 4092 ↑↓ I am filthy rich and will donate $1 for every upvote no limit. Make me regret this! (self.atheism)
(36976|32890) submitted 5 hours ago by throwawaymk (_) to atheism
619 comments   share   save   hide   report   spam   [l=c]

2 3745 ↑↓ I'm part of the 1 percent. I'm inspired by you guys. I'll do $10 for every upvote for 5 hours. NO LIMIT.
(64328|60587) submitted 7 hours ago by 1percentguyintn (_) to atheism
1178 comments   share   save   hide   report   spam   [l=c]

3 1879 ↑↓ I am the .1%. Your influence has spread far and wide. $20 per upvote, 5 hours, no limit. (self.atheism)
(9961|8081) submitted 4 hours ago by lukethenuker (_) to atheism
110 comments (7 new)   share   save   hide   report   spam   [l=c]

4 1604 ↑↓ $5 for every upvote up to $1,000 - then $1 per upvote (no limit) for the next 6 hours (self.atheism)
(5481|3870) submitted 4 hours ago by LongtermThrowaway (_) to atheism
40 comments   share   save   hide   report   spam   [l=c]

5 1287 ↑↓ Got balls? [FIXED] [FIXED] [AM I DOING THIS RIGHT?] (i.imgur.com)
(3857|2566) submitted 2 hours ago by natedern (_) to funny
97 comments   share   save   hide   report   spam   [l+c]

6 2131 ↑↓ Just got Paid. Every upvote i will donate 2 dollars... clean my wallet. DWB (self.atheism)
(11152|9030) submitted 5 hours ago by the__happy_guy (_) to atheism
56 comments   share   save   hide   report   spam   [l=c]

7 2060 ↑↓ Just got a bonus and a raise! Donating $5 for every upvote! (self.atheism)
(9675|7618) submitted 5 hours ago by VanillaMan (_) to atheism
48 comments   share   save   hide   report   spam   [l=c]

8 2283 ↑↓ 4-year Redditor and mostly a lurker. $0.07 for every upvote to Doctors Without Borders. 2 day limit. (se
(15410|13124) submitted 6 hours ago by marlinspike (_) to atheism
39 comments   share   save   hide   report   spam   [l=c]

9 1697 ↑↓ Only $1949.22! (i.imgur.com)
(5999|4300) submitted 4 hours ago by ReducedFat (_) to WTF
603 comments   share   save   hide   report   spam   [l+c]

10 1820 ↑↓ I will donate 20 pesos per upvote! From mexico with love for the doctors. (self.atheism)
(7269|5444) submitted 4 hours ago by ikurumba (_) to atheism
22 comments   share   save   hide   report   spam   [l=c]

11 2137 ↑↓ For every upvote, my girlfriend and I will volunteer one minute at our local homeless shelter. (self.atheism
(10465|8325) submitted 5 hours ago by chipslay (_) to atheism
39 comments   share   save   hide   report   spam   [l=c]

12 2719 ↑↓ Finally giving in to this... $1.00 for every upvote goes to DWB. No limit. (self.atheism)
(24284|21567) submitted 7 hours ago by tehphilosoraptor (_) to atheism
117 comments   share   save   hide   report   spam   [l=c]