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Social Networks: face-to-face and online ties at OuiShare Fest

Paola Tubaro

The OuiShare Fest brings together representatives of the international collaborative economy community. One of its goals is to expose participants to inspiring new ideas, while also offering them an opportunity for networking and building collaborative ties. At the 2016 OuiShare Fest, we ran a study of people's networking. Attendees, speakers, and team members were asked to complete a brief questionnaire, on paper or online. In addition, the Fest organizers kindly gave us access to backend data from the scheduling app of the event, "Sched". By merging these different sources of information, we aim to see how participants' meetings with each other shape the community — ultimately fostering the emergence of ideas, trends, and topics.

Ties that separate: the inheritance of past relationships

Let us first use our questionnaire, which reports relationships among 445 persons – about one-third of participants. For many, the Fest was an opportunity to catch up with others they knew before. Of these relations, half is 12 months old at most. About 40% of them were formed at work; 15% at previous OuiShare Fests or other collaborative economy experiences; 9% can be ascribed to living in the same town or neighborhood; and 7% date back to school time.

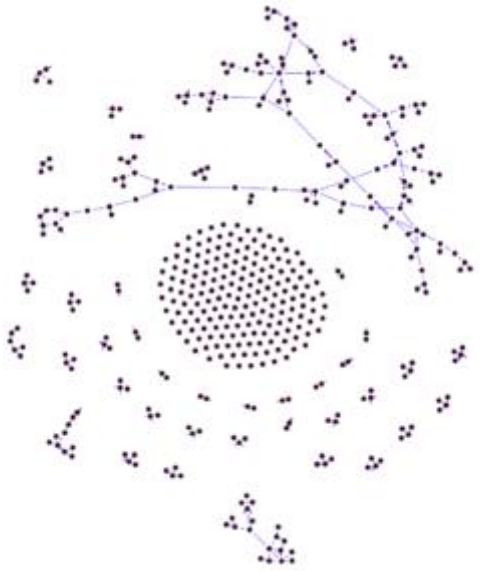

Figure 1 – "catching-up-with-old-friends" relationships

Figure 1 is a synthesis of these "catching-up-with-old-friends" relationships, in the shape of a network where small black dots represent people and blue lines represent social ties between them. At the center of the graph are "isolates", participants who had no pre-existing relationship among OuiShare Fest attendees. The remaining 60% have prior connections but form part of separate clusters. Some of them (27%) form a rather large component, visible at the top of the figure, where each member is directly or indirectly connected to anyone else in that component. There are also two medium-sized clusters of connected people at the bottom. The rest consists of many tiny sub-groups, mostly of 2-3 individuals each.

Ties that bind: new acquaintances made at the event

Participants told us that they also met new persons at the Fest. Figure 2 enriches Figure 1 by adding – in red – the new connections that people made during the event. The ties formed during the Fest

connect the clusters that were separate before: now, 86% of participants are in the largest network component, meaning that any one of them can reach, directly or indirectly, 86% of the others.

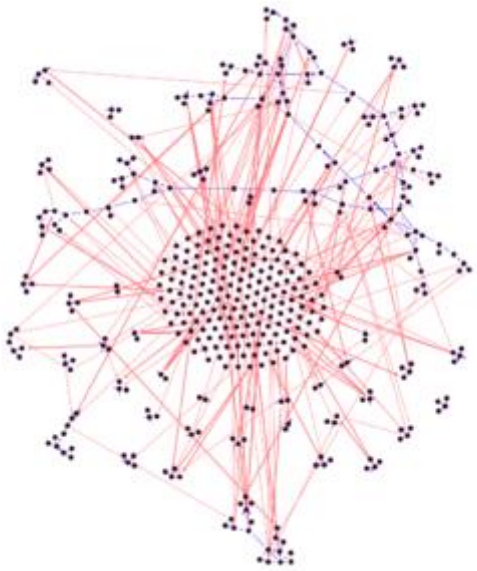

Figure 2: new ties created at the event

Ties that persist: future collaborations

What did people talk about with their old and new acquaintances? Globally, Figure 3 shows that they shared a lot of information about their respective activities. But Figure 3 also hints at a difference: whereas talking about a speaker or a session of the Fest seems to have been a rather common icebreaker topic for people who already knew each other (blue bars in the picture), conversations with new acquaintances (red bars) were far braver in venturing into consideration of future projects and possible collaborations.

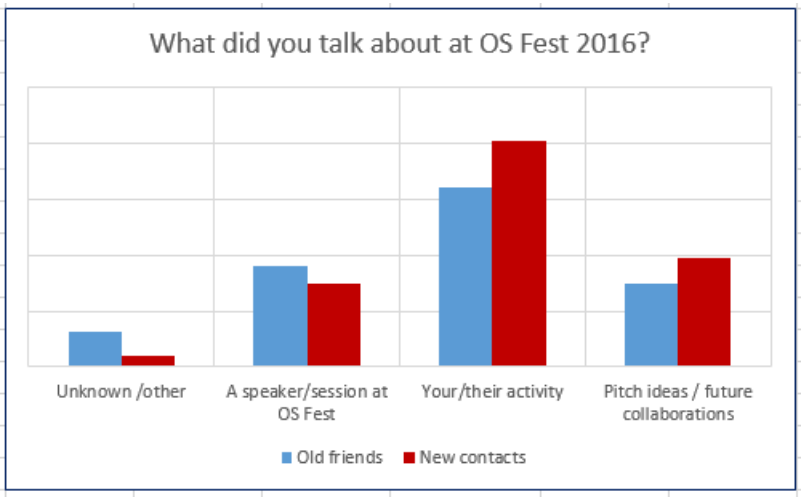

Figure 3: what conversations were about

Indeed, ideas for future projects were a powerful driver for connectivity: most participants to our questionnaire reported a willingness to re-contact shortly some of the people they had met at the Fest, whether they knew them before the event or not. In some cases, this was meant to be the start of some common project. If we add these prospective ties to our graph (Figure 4, in purple color), the network becomes fully connected, with no more isolates and one main component encompassing 92% of all members.

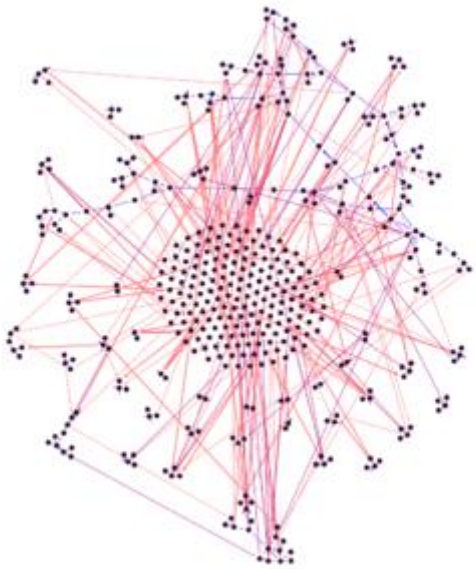

Figure 4: ties that persist after the event

Indeed, ideas for future projects were a powerful driver for connectivity: most participants to our questionnaire reported a willingness to re-contact shortly some of the people they had met at the Fest, whether they knew them before the event or not.

Online networks

The results above are largely due to the temporary co-presence that the OuiShare Fest involves – bringing together participants in one physical place to enable connections in formal situations (sessions) as well as informally (queuing together for lunch, chatting during a coffee break, etc.). Beyond these face-to-face encounters, do participants also connect via social media?

To answer this question, let us turn to online data. The Fest's app "Sched" enabled participants to import their Twitter and LinkedIn connections who were also attending the event. Not everybody used this facility, so we should consider the 258 who did as a sample that helps us indirectly gauge the degree of online connectedness of the whole population.

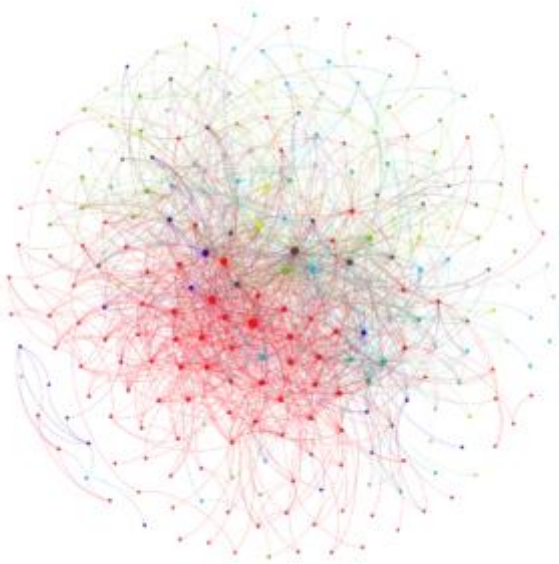

Figure 5: online ties

Figure 5 represents the network of online (Twitter/LinkedIn) ties between participants who used Sched. The size of the units (dots) is proportional to the number of connections, and their color represents the country of residence. The red nodes are from France – where over half of participants came from. Clearly, there is a lot of red in the picture, and many red (that is, French) participants have ties to others who are also red. But because the French do not form a separate network component, we cannot conclude that they willingly refrain from associating to non-French. It is just that the sheer size of the French population is so large that the chances of bumping into another French person are higher than someone from, say, Canada or New Zealand.

Linking to speakers and topics

By attending sessions (keynotes, panels, workshops etc.) at the OuiShare Fest, participants indirectly connect to speakers, panelists, and other thought leaders. 563 participants used the Sched app to organize their agenda, a basis from which we can infer their choices. They had to select from among 139 sessions (not counting meals, coffee breaks etc.) with 258 speakers (also counting panel moderators, workshop facilitators etc.). Speakers could also choose to attend (other speakers') sessions during their free time, and indeed 88 of them did so.

Figure 6 displays the attendance choices of Fest participants, as recorded in Sched. Attendees are represented as small black dots, while speakers (and moderators etc.) are represented as colored dots, where colors stand for the topic attached to the session(s) in which they spoke (or moderated etc.). The size of colored dots depends on the number of attendees they received through Sched.

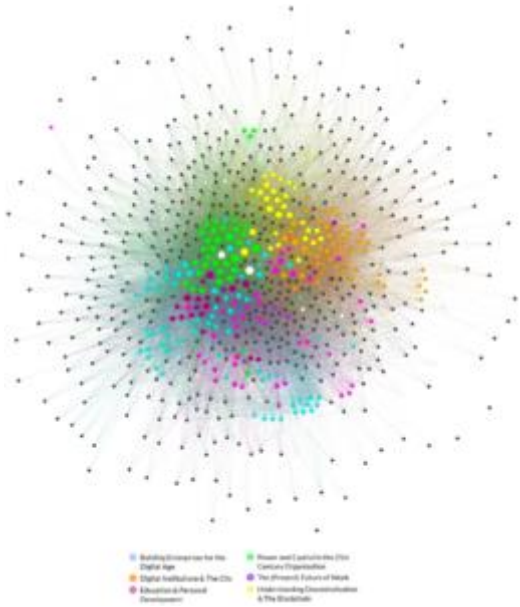

Figure 6: attendance choices

This is a wholly connected network: all speakers received choices. Some attendees (the black dots at the center of the graph) made multiple choices, revealing their willingness to attend many sessions and engage a lot with the event; others (the loosely connected black dots at the periphery) chose just one session or two.

And what speakers are more chosen? We notice that although they are relatively less numerous, green dots ("power and capital" theme) are mostly rather large, and so are purple ones ("future of work"). Yellow dots ("blockchain") are slightly more numerous but more unequal in size, suggesting that some speakers in this area attract far more attention than others. Choices of light blue ("Enterprise") and orange ("sharing cities") are, instead, scattered over a larger number of speakers: these themes attract

significant attention collectively, but with fewer choices for each individual speaker. Light blue and especially pink ("personal development") nodes are smallish and spread throughout the network, suggesting that they attracted the attention of otherwise very different participants: people can get interested in these topics from a diverse range of perspectives. The very few white dots ("other") are prominent speakers in sessions such as Fest opening and closure.

These results arise from a combination of factors: in part, they might be simply due to differences in session format (some workshops being limited to fewer participants), venue capacity, day and time at which each session was scheduled. But in part – and this is what interests us most – they arise from people's interests and preferences for different topics and for the thought leaders who bring them forward. These choice networks, together with participants' face-to-face meetings and their online contacts, help us understand what brings the collaborative economy community together and what ideas and themes are going to shape its future.

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More information on https://databigandsmall.com/

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