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“Coworking is about community” —but what is “community” in coworking?

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Coworking spaces are shared working environments in which independent knowledge-workers gather to create knowledge and benefit from it, thereby “working alone, together” (Spinuzzi, 2012, p. 299). In coworking spaces, knowledge-workers can make use of the advantages of communities, e.g., cooperating with coworkers, while being free of the hierarchies usually dominating established communities (Jones et al. 2009). The last twelve years have seen the emergence, growth and worldwide diffusion of coworking. The first coworking spaces were started in 2005; their number grew from 75 (in 2007), to 310 (in 2009), to 1130 (in 2011), to 3400 (in 2013), to 7800 (in 2015) coworking spaces, with more than half a million members worldwide (Deskmag, 2015).

As has been argued elsewhere, coworking has reflected broader changes in how work is executed and distributed, changes that have broad implications for how we communicate, coordinate, and collaborate in and across communities (Spinuzzi 2015). We arguably face an age of distributed work (Spinuzzi 2007) in which traditional barriers between organizations have become permeable, work has become more fragmented, and noncore functions have been outsourced to contractors. These changes have meant that many individual workers have exited the organizational and locational borders that characterized hierarchical work throughout most of the 20th century; such borders once delineated communities, but no longer do (Rainie & Wellman 2012). Consequently, such workers arguably seek new ways to form communities and to collaborate within them. These themes have been explored in rhetoric and professional communication, not just in coworking (Spinuzzi 2012), but also in cooperatives (Edenfield 2016), social collectives (Pigg et al. 2014), independent work and self-promotion (Carradini 2016; Lauren & Pigg 2016; Spinuzzi 2014), and entrepreneurship (Fraiberg 2017). This focus on distributed work is not surprising in professional communication, a knowledge work field that has seen remarkable changes in terms of the organization, production, and content of its work (e.g., Andersen 2014; Ferro & Zachry 2014).

Yet coworking presents a unique case because, in the face of long-term work fragmentation and outsourcing, coworking promises local communities and collaboration within them. Beyond professional communication, coworking has been studied in different countries, continents, and milieus from different disciplinary perspectives: psychology (Gerdenitsch et al. 2016), sociology (Gandini 2015; Ivaldi et al. 2018), economic planning (Avdikos and Kalogeresis 2017), urban informatics (Bilandzic 2013), management (Butcher 2013; Capdevila 2015; Jakonen et al. 2017; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte & Isaac 2016; Sebekstova et al. 2017), design (Parrino 2015), real estate (Green 2014), urban studies (di Marino & Lapintie 2017; Groot 2013; Mariotti et al. 2017), organization studies (Garrett et al. 2017), and engineering (Kojo and Neonen 2016, 2017; Liimatainen 2015). Although coworking is so varied and implemented in a number of different ways, a common thread appears throughout much of the literature, including both formal studies and the coworking literature. Coworking is about community, and specifically the collaboration that takes place within communities. This claim is at the heart of the persuasive arguments surrounding coworking.

Yet this claim hangs on two words—“community” and “collaboration”—that are underdefined in the coworking literature. More than that, the terms seem to be defined inconsistently across both the academic literature and the promotional discourse surrounding coworking. What does it mean to say that coworking is “about” community and collaboration? Can we define these terms more precisely to lend more analytical rigor to our studies and recommendations—both in coworking and in other sites of distributed knowledge production in which professional communicators increasingly work?

In this paper, we first review the literature on coworking (and knowledge work environments more broadly) to better examine the construct of “community” and how it relates to “collaboration.” To anchor a more systematic analysis of community in coworking, we introduce Adler and Heckscher’s (2007) typology of communities. We apply that typology to a study of six coworking spaces in the United States, Italy, and Serbia. Based on our analysis, we develop the typology to better understand coworking in

characterizing the spaces and suggest further work, especially in rhetoric and professional communication.

Background

Below, we review the literature on coworking, identifying specific problems with how it characterizes community and collaboration. Next, we discuss the literature on collaborative communities, using this literature as the basis for developing a typology suitable for understanding community and collaboration in coworking.

Coworking, community, and collaboration

Coworking is generally traced back to San Francisco-based independent IT specialist Brad Neuberg, who decided to offer the spatial and social infrastructure for a community of practice relevant to people like himself—to freelancers, entrepreneurs and other individual knowledge workers (Hunt, 2009). Neuberg, who was a member of the open-source movement, suggested that his colleagues and friends take the idea and make it their own. Two of Neuberg's colleagues, the social media consultants Chris Messina and Tara Hunt, were instrumental in conceptualizing the coworking idea by developing a coworking wiki and a Google groups list. The coworking concept diffused first within the San Francisco area, later within the US and then worldwide (Hunt 2009). The coworking idea spread through the coworking wiki, the online magazine Deskmag.com, national and continental Global Coworking Unconference Conferences (GCUC), and an increasing number of texts and books on coworking. The last twelve years have seen the exponential growth and worldwide diffusion of coworking.

Coworking has generally been tied to long-term employment trends in which companies have outsourced non-core functions to independent and dependent contractors or specialized firms, a move that has been empowered by new information and communication technologies or ICTs (Bodrožić & Adler 2018;

Spinuzzi 2015). More specifically, its global spread has been linked to the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis (Mariotti et al. 2017), and more broadly, the collapse of the stable employment paradigm and the rise of precarious working conditions (Avdikos & Kalogeresis 2017; Butcher 2013; de Peuter et al. 2017; Gandini 2015; Merkel 2015). Contractors seek out coworking spaces for various reasons, including social contact with others (Gerdenitsch et al. 2016; Groot 2013; Spinuzzi 2012); access to shared infrastructure and resources (Bouncken et al. 2016; Capdevila 2013, 2014; Clifton et al. 2012; Kojo & Neonen 2016, 2017; Merkel 2015); and networking opportunities with potential clients, subcontractors, and other collaborators (Capdevila 2014; Groot 2013; Kubatova 2014; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte & Isaac 2016; Liimatainen 2015; Rus & Orel 2015; Waters-Lynch & Potts 2016). Some of these needs have also been discussed in adjacent cases such as nomadic and contingent work (Ciolfi et al. 2014; Connelly & Gallagher 2004; Costas 2013; Czarniawska 2013; Gandini 2015; Liegl 2008; Rossitto et al. 2013; Su & Mark 2008), and other forms of distributed work (Avdikos & Kalogeresis 2016; Heckscher & Carre 2006), including forms that have been examined in the professional communication literature (Carradini 2016; Edenfield 2016; Fraiberg 2017; Lauren & Pigg 2016; Pigg et al. 2014; Spinuzzi 2007, 2014).

What makes coworking attractive for distributed workers? In the literature, the answer has been summed up in one word: community. Community is typically (though not universally) what characterizes coworking throughout the coworking literature—both academic and nonacademic. For instance, in the nonacademic literature, coworking is consistently characterized as having “five core values: Community, Openness, Collaboration, Sustainability, and Accessibility” (coworking.com). The coworking wiki (FrontPage 2017) affirms these values and declares that “Coworking spaces are about community-building and sustainability.” This focus on community dates back at least to Neuberg’s declaration in August 2005 that “In coworking, independent writers, programmers, and creators come together in community” (quoted in Jones et al. 2009, p.9).

This orientation is typically reinforced in the academic literature as well—and with a similar lack of a precise definition for this key term of community. For instance, Capdevila (2015) states that “one of the most important features” differentiating coworking spaces from shared offices is “the focus on the community and its knowledge sharing dynamics” (p.3), and the same author elsewhere claims that “coworking is about creating a community” (2014, p.14). Fuzi (2015) states that coworking spaces are “collaborative work environments,” each of which “provides community” (p.465). Parrino (2015) states that “The concept of community refers to the possible relational implications of the co-location of workers within the same space and emphasises the role of coworking as a work context able to provide sociality to coworkers” (p.265). Kubatova (2014) states that coworking “gives rise to a professionally heterogeneous community which enables development of informal relations, sharing knowledge, and increasingly also standards and values similarly to what happens at a normal workplace within an organization” (p.1). Merkel (2015) defines coworking as “a collective, community-based approach to the organisation of cultural and creative work” (p.124) and “While the service provider concentrates on the work aspect associated with facilitating a good work environment and providing attendant services, the visionary host is more concerned with enabling the ‘co’ aspects of coworking such as communication, community and collaboration among the coworkers” (p.128). Leclercq-Vandelannoitte & Isaac (2016) state that “Coworkers tend to co-create a sense of community” that they interpret as more genuine than imposed corporate community (p.6). Holienka & Racek (2015) argue that the “community character of coworking is visible in the willingness of members to help each other within their expertise” (p.32). Finally, Cabral & van Winden (2016) explore the role of the community manager in building community—although, like most of the others here, they do not offer a definition of community.

This lack of a definition creates relative coherence across coworking sites that are configured in rather different ways—that is, since no strict definition is on offer, more sites can characterize themselves as coworking sites. However, this marketing benefit becomes a liability for researchers into coworking and adjacent cases of loosely structured work. Such research requires a specific definition of community, one

that can underpin a systematic analysis. Yet in coworking research, “community” is rarely defined in these terms, even when invoked as a differentiator (e.g., Capdevila 2015). Rare exceptions include Butcher (2013), who applies Bourdieu’s conceptualization of habitus to the symbolism of community; Liimatainen (2015), who defines community in social network terms as “the composition of actors and the connections among them” (p.52); Garrett et al. (2017), who examine how types of interactions contribute to a sense of community; and Rus & Orel (2015), who analyze “community” through four characteristics (functional, structural, cultural and territorial). Toivonen (2016), in examining the Hub network, draws on Adler & Heckscher’s concept of collaborative communities to argue that social innovation communities—including some coworking spaces—represent emerging collaborative organizations. Gandini (2016) rejects the characterization of community in coworking altogether: he argues that coworking, as a para-institutional environment, reproduces a perception of communitarian relations through the creation of a common ethos—but actually reproduces fictitious institutionalism that permits the marketing of subjects to increase their reputation and networks. Similarly, Jakonen et al. (2017) argue that coworking both builds and commodifies a sense of community; along these lines, de Peuter et al. (2017) further charge that “coworking’s key word, ‘community’, is a linguistic device shared by large employers who use it to cultivate loyalty and obscure antagonism” (p.10).

Similarly, both in coworking marketing materials and empirical studies of coworking, the related term “collaboration” has been used colloquially, without much unity in the characterization of collaboration. “Collaboration” has been used in terms of innovation (Surman 2013); a “culture of sharing” (Rus & Orel 2015); a relational milieu (Gandini 2015); the renewing of social connections (Kubatova 2014); the exchange of information (Gerdenitsch et al. 2016); and accelerated serendipity (Leclercq-Vandelanotte & Isaac 2016) or the seeking of people, information, or resources when the seeker does not have enough information to coordinate (Waters-Lynch and Potts 2016). Capdevila (2014) gives perhaps the finest-grained typology with three layers: “Cost-based collaboration,” “Resource-based collaboration,” and “Relational collaboration” (p.8).

These uses, we argue, do not describe a single concept. More specifically, they do not all describe incidents in which people co-labor on a shared project objective. In part, this lack of coherence stems from the fact that “collaboration” is not anchored in a coherent understanding of community, one that unites specific human assets and agreements between subjects who acknowledge each other’s substantial reputation, temporarily sharing some contents (e.g., knowledge or competences) in order to accomplish a temporary joint objective. To some degree, Spinuzzi (2012) and Capdevila (2014) follow this path in conceiving coworking as emerging forms of collaborative activities and organizations in which people, dwelling in colocation and physical proximity (Boschma 2005; Parrino 2015) can create relational conditions for collaborative work. However, more development is needed to firmly anchor collaboration in an analytically operationalizable understanding of community.

We agree with Rus & Orel (2015) that “While the concept of community is so central to the coworking, it is necessary to pay closer attention to this concept” (p.1022). But we also argue that, if it is to underpin a principled analysis of a coworking site’s community, the concept of “community” must interact with an articulated concept of “collaboration”—specifically, the degree to which community members co-labor in service of a shared work objective.

An analytical construct for understanding community

Specifically, we sought a concept of communities with the following characteristics.

- First, it should be operationalizable in empirical studies: we should be able to identify observable criteria and verify them in empirical work.
- Second, it should allow us to distinguish collaboration (literally, co-laboring) from other ways in which co-present individuals interact (such as communicating or coordinating without a shared work objective; cf. Spinuzzi 2015).

- Third, it should be suitable to integrate with broader social theory, such as activity theory, which is often used in workplace studies of writing.
- Fourth, it should allow us to compare types of communities in the literature as well as empirical work.

After reviewing the possibilities, we selected Adler & Heckscher's typology of communities (Adler & Heckscher 2007; Adler, Kwon, & Heckscher 2008; Bodrožić & Adler 2018; Heckscher 2007) for further development and application to coworking. This typology is based on Tonnies' (1887/2011) distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. *Gemeinschaft* is what characterized relationships in medieval towns: based on blood relations, physical locality, and friendship (pp.37-42), it is characterized by tacit understanding (p.49) and is focused inward (p.79). In contrast, *Gesellschaft* is an "artificial construction of an aggregate of human beings which superficially resembles the *Gemeinschaft* in so far as the individuals live and dwell together peacefully," but "they remain united in spite of all separating factors" (pp.64-65). In *Gesellschaft*, "goods are conceived to be separate, as also are their owners" (p.65); Tonnies quotes Adam Smith as arguing that every man becomes a merchant (p.76). Whereas *Gemeinschaft* relies on personal bonds of loyalty and values of honor and duty, *Gesellschaft* focuses on consistent, rational, individualistic action.

Adler & Heckscher (2006) argue that *Gemeinschaft* involves "thick" trust, while *Gesellschaft* involves "thin" trust (p.13). These forms of trust correspond with two organizational forms: hierarchy and market (pp.15-17).

At present, they argue, a new form of trust associated with a new organizational form is emerging: the collaborative community (p.15). In such collaborative communities, knowledge workers focus on fluid collaborative activity, built on mutual understanding and trust, in order to rapidly innovate in cross-disciplinary projects. The resulting typology of communities is shown in Table 1. These are ideal types;

in practice, organizations tend to be mixed in their structure and logic (see Boisot et al. 2001; Mintzberg 1979; Schein 2010).

Table 1. Three ideal types of communities (based on Adler & Heckscher 2007).

	Gemeinschaft	Gesellschaft	Collaborative
Structure Division of labor	Mechanical division of labor coordinated by common norms	Organic division of labor coordinated by price or authority, or both	Growth in organic division of labor coordinated by conscious collaboration
Nature of interdependencies	Hierarchy-oriented dependence	Market-oriented independence	Collaborative interdependence
Tie network structure	Local, closed	Global, open	More global, open ties, as well as stronger local ties
Basis of trust	Loyalty, honor, duty, status deference	Integrity, competence, conscientiousness	Contribution, concern, honesty, collegiality
Basis of legitimate authority	Tradition or charisma	Rational-legal justification	Value-rationality
Values	Collectivism	Consistent rational individualism	Simultaneously high collectivism and individualism
Orientation to others	Particularism	Universalism	Simultaneously high particularism and universalism
Orientation to self	Dependent self-construals	Independent self-construals	Interdependent self-construals

Adler & Heckscher argue that in this typology, collaboration is anchored by “cooperative, interdependent activity towards a common object” (2007, pp.20-21). Similarly, Heckscher (2007) argues that collaboration involves “a shared objective that cannot be reached without the contribution of all. Thus it

necessarily implies processes of dialogue and negotiation, of exchanges of views and sharing of information, of building from individual views toward a shared consensus” (2007, p.2).

This typology has anchored prior studies, but those studies have focused on professions and organizations with a long history, such as the medical profession (Adler, Kwon, & Heckscher, 2008), corporations and bureaucratic agencies (Adler & Heckscher, 2006). This focus on studying established activities, which emerged when the *Gemeinschaft*-like or *Gesellschaft*-like type of community were dominant, stands in contrast to findings of innovation studies about the emergence of organizational innovation in new sectors and new industries (e.g., Bodrožić and Adler, 2018). Specifically, the collaborative community emphasizes firms as distributed knowledge systems (Tsoukas, 1996) and the need to enhance the flow of knowledge through social networks within communities and overcoming barriers between different communities (Brown and Duguid, 1998; Wenger, 2000)—two themes that are relevant to coworking and other loosely organized knowledge work (e.g., Spinuzzi 2015).

To apply this typology to coworking (a phenomenon with a much shorter horizon) and specifically to empirical investigations of coworking (which require definitions that can be operationalized in methodology and analysis), we developed a modified typology that applies the insights of the original. Here, we focus only on the currently dominant types of community: *Gesellschaft*-like and collaborative. Coworking sites, we argue, are not set up as *Gemeinschaft* communities: As a historically new form of organizing, coworking sites, are not based on blood relations and loyalty, but typically charge their members and welcome new members.) We applied only selected aspects of the typology in order to better focus our typology on the distinct, concrete characteristics of coworking. Finally, we collapsed three related criteria from the original typology—values, trust, and orientation to others—because we found that they were difficult to separate empirically. The resulting typology offers three criteria for distinguishing types of community (Table 2).

Table 2: Concepts of community operationalized for coworking, based on 5 of the 8 characteristics from Adler and Heckscher (2006).

	Gesellschaft community in coworking	Collaborative community in coworking
Structure, Division of labor	A dominant actor (owner or company) benefits disproportionately from knowledge creation.	All contributors of knowledge creation benefit proportionately from knowledge creation.
Nature of coworker-manager relationships	Characterized by market-oriented service contract.	Characterized by collaborative interdependence.
Nature of coworker-coworker relationships (combination of values, trust, and orientation to others)	Institutional (based on the values of the dominant actor) or transactional (based on commercial interest as interpreted by a dominant actor).	Networked, based on shared interest in common project objectives.

The resulting typology of coworking spaces shares some characteristics with other typologies advanced by other coworking researchers. For instance, Capdevila (2014) distinguishes between cost-based, resource-based, and relational collaboration in coworking. Spinuzzi (2012) identifies three types of coworking spaces: the unoffice, the community workspace, and the federated workspace. And in describing coworking hosts, Merkel (2015) separates service providers, who facilitate a good work environment and provide attendant services, from visionary hosts, who enable “the ‘co’ aspects of coworking such as communication, community and collaboration among the coworkers” (p.128). Yet, in comparison to those other typologies, the one in Table 2 is more theoretically grounded in specific types of communities and a more specific concept of collaboration. Simultaneously it is more analytically grounded in an articulated understanding of types of community.

This typology is not meant to imply that collaboration (that is, co-laboring in service of a shared work objective) happens only in coworking spaces characterized as collaborative communities. Collaboration

could happen in any of these kinds of spaces. But in collaborative communities, the shared objective is the central focus: the division of labor is built around it, as are interactive characteristics such as values, trust, and authority.

To test and refine this typology, we conducted linked studies into coworking spaces in three different countries.

Methodology

To develop a better understanding of the evolution of communities, we conducted an inductive, multiple-case study of multiple coworking sites in three countries. The case studies were executed independently by the authors, but designed, developed, coordinated, and analyzed jointly. The studies in Italy and Serbia did not require human subjects approval; the US study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Texas at Austin (#2016-09-0031).

Sites

The coworking cases were based in the United States of America (USA), Italy, and Serbia. We chose these three countries because they adopted coworking in different periods and could therefore show us different patterns of development. The USA was the first country to establish coworking spaces in 2005. Italy is a relatively early adopter of coworking, with its first coworking space established in 2008. Serbia is a later adopter: the first coworking spaces opened in 2012.

We originally investigated 10 coworking spaces in these locations. To focus our investigation, we selected one non-franchise space and one franchise space from each location, yielding a sample of 6 spaces (Table 3). Two of the franchise spaces (IntlFranchiseUS and IntlFranchiseSerbia) belong to the same international network.

Table 3. Selected coworking sites.

	Austin, Texas, USA	Milan, Italy	Belgrade and Niš, Serbia
Non-franchise space	IndependentUS	IndependentItaly	IndependentSerbia
Franchise space	IntlFranchiseUS	StartupItaly	IntlFranchiseSerbia

The USA cases were based in Austin, Texas. According to one interviewee, Austin had nearly 40 coworking spaces in 2016—a significant increase from the 13 reported in Spinuzzi (2012). (A September 2017 Google Maps search listed 20 spaces, including multiple locations with common owners.) This increase in spaces indicates considerable growth and development in this city’s coworking—but also considerable change: of the nine coworking spaces that Spinuzzi (2012) interviewed, only four remain in business, and only two of those are primarily coworking (the other two are community workspaces that offer coworking as a minor service).

The Italy cases were based in Milan, which is the location of the first coworking space in Italy and thus the city in Italy with the longest tradition of coworking. Furthermore, Milan has the most coworking spaces in the country, with 54 coworking spaces certified by the municipality of Milan. In addition, different private and public institutions in Milan are currently investing in the development of coworking by providing structures and spaces to be dedicated to coworking or finance coworking initiatives.

The Serbia cases were based in Belgrade, the capital and the city in Serbia with the longest tradition of coworking, and Niš, the third biggest city of Serbia, a city with a large university and a long tradition in the electronics industry.

Data Collection

We used a linked qualitative case study approach (similar to Jakonen et al. 2017). In all cases, the researchers collected semistructured interviews with coworking site managers, who play a key role in such sites (Ivaldi et al. 2018), as well as with coworkers; conducted participant-observations of the coworking spaces; and collected artifacts (such as documents, photos, and website screen captures) from each site.

For all cases, the interviews were structured around the categories in Table 2. However, the different cases involved different sorts of access to sites within different contexts, so the collected data vary from country to country (Table 4).

Table 4. Data collected from each site.

Case	Interviews (minutes)		Artifacts		Observations	
	Founders, managers	Coworkers	#	Example	#/Time	Participation
Independent US	1 (36:02)	0	15	Website pages; brochure; 11 photos	1 (4 hours)	Worked in coworking space
IntlFranchiseUS	1 (30:14)	0	18	Website pages; member application; 14 photos	1 (4 hours)	Worked in coworking space
Independent Italy	1 founder (148:24)	4 (39:39;	11	Website page; 10 photos	20 times (total of	Worked in coworking

	3 project managers (24:38 ; 25:47; 45:44) 1 community manager (47:33)	30:30; 58:17; 12:10)			80 hours)	space
StartupItaly	1 community manager (32:27)	8 coworkers (47:33; 26:29; 21:50; 46:32; 30:17; 27:31; 40:11; 24:17)	10	Website page; 9 photos	21 times (total of 75 hours)	Worked in coworking space
Independent Serbia	2 (147:30; 217:48)	5 (64:14; 105:07; 96:18; 102:23 160:37)		Website pages; 8 photos;	8 times (together 16 hours)	Worked in coworking space;
IntlFranchis eSerbia	3 (155:30; 58:25)	3 (24:08; 17:37;		Website pages (8 photos)	4 times (together 10 hours)	Stayed in coworking space;

	36:08)	16:09)				visited events
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For the US cases, the researcher conducted semistructured interviews with community managers at each site, conducted a single four-hour observation in each space, and collected artifacts such as documents, photos, and relevant pages from their websites (including membership applications).

For the Italy cases, the researchers conducted semistructured interviews of coworking space founders, project and community managers and coworkers, as well as observing the everyday practices and interactions inside the coworking spaces. More specifically, the researchers spent various days in working at the coworking spaces and interacted with people inside the space. At IndependentItaly, researchers observed 20 sessions for a total of 80 hours; at StartupItaly, researchers observed 21 sessions for a total of 75 hours.

For the Serbia cases, the researcher conducted semistructured interviews with coworking site managers and coworkers; observed sites for 10-16 hours; and collected relevant artifacts.

Data Analysis

To code interview data, researchers used the categories in Table 2 as starter codes (Miles, Huberman & Saldana 2014), applying these codes to their own data. The researchers primarily wanted to examine how well the typology could characterize community and collaboration across these cases, rather than build theoretical categories; thus they did not further develop the coding scheme with open or axial codes, as is often practiced in theory-building analyses (e.g., Schuster & Proppen 2011; Spinuzzi 2012; Teston 2009).

To triangulate their data within each case (Miles, Huberman & Saldana 2014), researchers each used interviews as the central data for characterizing spaces, then compared assertions in interviews to their observations and collected artifacts. Once they triangulated data within each case, researchers independently used coding to characterize their sites based on each category of the typology (Table 2). Researchers then triangulated across cases by comparing assertions across interviews. In the process, researchers discussed each others' characterizations and examined each others' supporting data.

Findings

Below, we overview the coworking spaces we investigated, then characterize them based on the typology in Table 2.

The coworking spaces

As mentioned, we studied a sample of six spaces: three franchises and three non-franchises. The non-franchise spaces included IndependentUS, IndependentItaly, and IndependentSerbia.

IndependentUS. The owner and community manager identified her business sector as “the hospitality industry. What I’m really interested in is in excellence in running the space and providing a consistent, predictable, delightful experience.” IndependentUS was one business in this industry, but the owner had also opened affiliated businesses, including an office rental space, a flexible-terms space, and a consultancy on coworking trends. Community members were mid-career professionals who enjoy socializing during core business hours. Collaboration did not typically involve coworkers taking on a shared project; rather, they sometimes hired each other for services and informally provided each other with feedback.

IndependentItaly. The community manager described IndependentItaly as the first coworking space in Italy specifically dedicated to the topic of “women and work.” It was originally opened to support entrepreneurs who did not want to choose between being a mother and a professional. The space is characterized by distinctive services and projects (e.g. co-baby, training courses for the development of competences, mentoring programs, etc.), most of which are provided by a not-for-profit association connected to the coworking space. The organization behind the space is thus a “hybrid” organization consisting of a for-profit startup providing the facilities and a not-for-profit association providing the projects, each with its own leadership structure. This double orientation means two communities: the “internal community” (coworkers) and the “external community” (the users of the projects).

IndependentSerbia. IndependentSerbia was founded in 2015 as a joint project of two leaders of a local non-governmental organization (NGO) and an architecture agency. Coworkers work in creative industries; they are selected based on how innovative they are and how well they complement each other’s startup companies. Coworkers collaborate in terms of sharing experience and knowledge. Deli serves coworkers by connecting to different activities complementing coworking, e.g., offering training to potential startup entrepreneurs and supporting the conduction of joint projects with regional companies from creative industries and the IT sector.

The franchise spaces include IntlFranchiseUS, StartupItaly, and IntlFranchiseSerbia.

IntlFranchiseUS. This coworking space, which began in 2012 under a different name, joined an international network of coworking spaces in March 2016. It focuses on connecting coworkers to aspects of social good in their own mission and to social good in Austin, encouraging coworkers to “use your resources to enhance the world around you.” This space mainly seems to attract nonemployer firms and small-group entities. Their work is not restricted to a specific focus (such as technology). The community manager characterized collaboration in the space as sharing services (e.g., a photographer found clients

there), perspectives (e.g., coworkers helped each other develop ideas), and social good projects (e.g., coworkers volunteered their time and expertise to a housing accelerator that worked on the housing problem in Austin).

StartupItaly. This space is a member of a franchise network consisting of 16 spaces (“campuses”): 10 in Italy and the rest in Spain, Albania, Lithuania and Romania. It originated with a young entrepreneur who wanted to share both space and experiences with other entrepreneurs in the technology sector. At that point, the selection process was rigorous and exclusive, and collaboration consisted of startups sharing experiences. However, some coworkers report that current selection standards are not as rigorous: coworking has been extended beyond startups to freelancers without a vision of developing their own business; the quality of startups is no longer evaluated; and many professionals, startups and companies use the coworking space only for its image and reputation.

IntlFranchiseSerbia. This medium-sized space is part of the same international network of coworking spaces that IntlFranchiseUS joined. It opened in 2014 and serves entrepreneurs and freelancers of various industries, partly through an accelerator program for young entrepreneurs. Collaboration involves sharing experience and contacts; the accelerator program also helps entrepreneurs to create a small team or network, recruited through its international network of coworking spaces, to complement the core service of each entrepreneur.

As noted, several of these spaces tend to be hybrids rather than ideal types. Nevertheless, we characterize them below based on the typology.

Structure and division of labor

By “structure and division of labor,” we refer to how actors have structured the coworking space, establishing related roles that contribute to the common objective of the coworking space.

All six spaces had a **dominant actor (owner or company) that benefited disproportionately from knowledge creation**. For instance, at IndependentItaly, the not-for-profit association provided the projects and exerted increasing control over the space: one founder told the researchers that “we realized that the sustainability of our organization came from the projects of the association” and hoped to rely far more heavily on the association in the future. At IndependentUS, the owner/community manager saw the space as providing hospitality service; she also ran adjacent businesses for those coworkers whose needs outgrew coworking. At StartupItaly, the space initially exerted control over the composition and potential collaboration of coworkers (one coworker alleged that “At the beginning ... many startups were rejected”), but at the time of the study it had become a broader business service. We believe that this characteristic is inherent in the current coworking models, in which the owner disproportionately takes on the risks of a long-term lease while the coworkers mainly commit to the site month-to-month.

In three spaces, we saw instances in which **contributors of knowledge creation benefited proportionately from knowledge creation**. Although none of the spaces were completely characterized in this way, two spaces also generated opportunities to support collaboration that was not dominated by a specific actor—that is, they could be considered hybrids. At IntlFranchiseUS, the space was affiliated with an accelerator focused on solving the city’s housing crisis; coworkers voluntarily contributed to that institutionally defined mission by volunteering their time and expertise. At IndependentSerbia, coworkers voluntarily joined and defined shared projects. At IntlFranchiseSerbia, coworkers voluntarily contributed to some shared projects.

Nature of coworker-manager relationships

Here, we specifically refer to how coworkers and managers relate to each other. Such relationships could be characterized by a service contract—in which the coworker accepts the preexisting rules of the space as a condition for joining it—or by collaborative interdependence, in which coworkers and manager develop the rules together.

The **service contract** characterized coworker-manager relationships in five of the spaces: IndependentUS, IndependentSerbia, IntlFranchiseSerbia, StartupItaly, and IndependentItaly. In all of these spaces, the community manager was tasked with promulgating and enforcing rules. For instance, IndependentUS's owner/community manager said, "I have lots of rules. I am a dictator. ... I'm putting the community before what you want. It will always be that way. The rules are in place for a reason." Similarly, the community manager at StartupItaly said, "There is the central team of [StartupItaly] that manage[s] all the sites and gives the guidelines and rules to the managers of the franchise spaces."

Two of these spaces also were involved in some activities (e.g., promoting women entrepreneurship) that were characterized by **collaborative interdependence**: IndependentSerbia and IntlFranchiseSerbia. A third space, IntlFranchiseUS, was to a higher extent characterized by collaborative interdependence. Here, the community manager described "Maslow's hierarchy of trust," a relationship that started with service contract obligations:

You first come into a space, you want to make sure that your stuff is going to be taken care of, that the printer works. The basic is safety and taking care of. I'm safe here and my stuff's not going to get stolen. You want to trust that what they say they're going to deliver, they will. Coffee's there, paper's there, toilet paper's there, the operational things, the WiFi's working.

But those service contract obligations formed a substrate for coworker-nominated relational conditions:

“It's more about community building rather than rules and regulations, that kind of stuff. I feel like there's a lot of contribution when it comes to just being connected to one another.”

The coworker-manager relationship was often characterized (by managers) as the foundation for coworker-coworker relationships, as we'll see below.

Nature of coworker-coworker relationships

Here, we examine the regularized patterns that governed coworkers' coexistence and interchanges.

Specifically, these included the values (common orientation toward a problem located in the world outside the coworking space), trust (the implicit agreement by which relationships are governed or policed across coworkers), and orientation to others (sanctioned types of relationships that community managers expected coworkers to develop) in these spaces.

The nature of interactions among coworkers could be institutional, transactional, or networked.

In five spaces, the nature of coworker-coworker relationships seemed to be grounded in the **institutional rules and values** at each space. For instance, community managers at both IndependentUS and StartupItaly characterized institutional rules as providing the substrate for coworker-coworker relations. IndependentItaly's interactions were grounded in its institutional orientation to a social cause (supporting women in the workplace), anchored in a single dominant not-for-profit association. The non-profit kept IndependentItaly oriented to its original institutional value: “we could adapt the model [of coworking] and use it to tackle the themes we deal with linked to women and work.” IndependentSerbia and IntIFranchiseSerbia also attempted to ground coworker-coworker relationships in institutional rules.

Two of these spaces also showed orientation to interactions that were **transactional, based on commercial interest**: IndependentUS and StartupItaly. Community managers at these spaces emphasized how individual coworkers saw each other as potential commercial partners. For instance, the community manager at IndependentUS characterized her coworkers this way: “The folks here are here because they need to get something done, and they need to be productive. ... They want to come here, get shit done, and go.” StartupItaly similarly stated that “people who work in the same field should have the opportunity to exchange ideas, but also to identify synergies” (our emphasis). In these spaces, although coworkers could collaborate on shared projects, they were not encouraged to do so. No spaces focused on creating ad hoc teams to tackle shared work projects to produce mutual economic benefit (compare with Conjunctioned in Spinuzzi 2012).

At three spaces, coworker-coworker relationships were also sometimes **networked, based on shared interest in common project objectives**: IntlFranchiseUS, IntlFranchiseSerbia, and IndependentSerbia. At IntlFranchiseUS, the focus on social sector/social good entities meant that the site’s value proposition is its social impact, or what the community manager calls its “mission-based community.” This social impact required networked trust, which involved “collaboration and connection” across coworkers. IntlFranchiseSerbia was oriented to a different external problem—that of developing the entrepreneurship community (as opposed to just individual entrepreneurs)—but its orientation to interactions was similar. Finally, IndependentSerbia curated its membership to ensure that members complemented each other’s startup companies, leading to sharing experience and knowledge across noncompeting members in creative industries. IndependentSerbia aimed to connect coworkers to different activities complementing coworking, e.g., offering training to potential startup entrepreneurs and starting joint projects with regional companies from creative industries and the IT sector. However, these efforts resulted only partly in actual collaboration; the majority of coworkers were focused on realizing their individual projects and business development efforts and had little time and energy for common projects.

Analysis: Relationship to types of communities

In all cases, interviewees indicated that community is important to their coworking spaces. Likewise, in all coworking spaces, sharing information and ideas was routine behavior. However, although community managers and coworkers praised the ideals of community and collaboration, they did not seem to use these terms consistently. For instance, although all interviewees emphasized that coworkers would be open to different forms of collaboration, the forms that they described were quite limited: socializing (IndependentUS); resource sharing (IndependentUS; IndependentItaly; IntlFranchiseUS; StartupItaly), and lateral knowledge sharing (IndependentUS; IntlFranchiseUS; StartupItaly). Collaboration on common projects, with a common objective, occurred in only half of the spaces (IndependentSerbia; IntlFranchiseUS; IntlFranchiseSerbia). The division of labor in the majority of cases was characterized by coworkers working alongside each other on separate projects, providing camaraderie and emotional support but not intense work collaboration—in a phrase, “working alone, together” (Spinuzzi 2012).

In three of the cases, we see predominantly Gesellschaft-oriented rules and values such as the focus on individuality and business interests (IndependentItaly, IndependentUS, StartupItaly). In some limited aspects, we saw members actively contribute to developing a collaborative community (IndependentSerbia, IntlFranchiseUS, IntlFranchiseSerbia).

Thus, the vast majority of cases were characterized by the Gesellschaft-type of community (see Table 5). Correspondingly, we see a striking contrast between the professed openness to collaborate and the reality of relatively little collaboration in the sense of co-laboring on a common project objective. We also see a contrast between the starting point of coworking, with its aspiration to develop new models of workplaces and community, and the current dominance of Gesellschaft-type of community.

Yet we also see potential for the ongoing development of collaborative communities in coworking. In particular, IndependentSerbia, IntlFranchiseSerbia, and IntlFranchiseUS show characteristics of collaborative community in terms of structural aspects, manager-coworker interactions, or coworker interactions.

In sum, in providing analytically separate categories, the typology has provided a finer-grained understanding of different coworking communities, specifically as they relate to a defined understanding of collaboration.

Table 5. Characterizing spaces within the typology. *Italicized spaces show characteristics of both ideal types.*

	Gesellschaft-like community in coworking	Collaborative community in coworking
Structure, Division of labor	IntlFranchiseUS, IndependentSerbia, IntlFranchiseSerbia, IndependentItaly, IndependentUS, StartupItaly	IntlFranchiseUS, IntlFranchiseSerbia, IndependentSerbia
Nature of coworker-manager relationships	IndependentSerbia, IndependentUS, IntlFranchiseSerbia, IndependentItaly, StartupItaly	IntlFranchiseUS IndependentSerbia, IntlFranchiseSerbia
Nature of coworker-coworker relationships	IndependentUS, IntlFranchiseSerbia, IndependentSerbia, StartupItaly, IndependentItaly	IntlFranchiseUS, IntlFranchiseSerbia, IndependentSerbia

Implications

Coworking sites and coworking researchers alike have long asserted that “coworking is about community.” But at this point, the terms “community” and “collaboration” are too imprecise to

meaningfully and constructively characterize coworking spaces. In this article, we have proffered a typology of community that should be useful in studying coworking, but that can also be applied to other forms of loosely organized knowledge work studied in the rhetoric and professional communication literature: cooperatives, social collectives, independent work and self-promotion, and entrepreneurship.

Using the terms of this typology, we found that despite general impressions of coworking—from the coworking literature and marketing, from space owners, and from coworkers—in the cases we examined, coworking is predominantly characterized by *Gesellschaft*. That is, the coworking spaces we studied in three separate countries were still driven by the logic of the market, and that logic characterized the community and collaboration of these sites in ways that do not square with many of the claims in the literature. Granted, in some cases this logic coexisted with another logic—the logic of collaborative communities—but this second logic is emergent, not dominant, in such spaces, and the resulting characteristics were generally hybrids of the two types. This surprising result suggests that further research is needed to understand such spaces.

Beyond this need for further research, we see four implications for applying this typology to coworking as well as other loosely organized, relatively durable configurations of knowledge work.

First, we believe the typology can underpin critical comparisons across coworking sites. In our analysis, we have developed the typology in order to distinguish different bases for coworking sites—different structures, interdependencies, and interactions—that together support these ongoing arrangements. Based on this small sample, the typology can be systematically applied to empirical data in order to characterize different coworking sites. All of the sites might be “about community,” but different types of communities support different kinds of activities. Thus the typology provides a basis for comparison and characterization, allowing researchers to answer questions such as: To what extent are sites aligned across a coworking franchise? To what degree do other networked configurations of knowledge work, such as

subcontractor networks, resemble coworking sites? And the typology also provides a basis of critique: What promises can a coworking site make? How are control and rewards distributed across such a network? What constitutes effective communication and collaboration across such sites?

Second, we see potential for applying the typology to further examine inner tensions within a specific coworking site. Strikingly, none of the coworking sites in Table 5 are completely aligned across all characteristics. Future researchers might explore questions such as: To what extent does lack of alignment correlate with tensions or contradictions that manifest within a given site? To what degree do tensions between types of community result in hybrid characteristics? Can we predict necessary changes based on lack of alignment?

This brings us to the third implication. In this article, we have used the typology to develop a “snapshot” of each coworking site at a particular moment. Yet coworking is a new phenomenon and in considerable flux, with sites changing rapidly as coworking models mature and labor conditions change. We see an opportunity to apply the typology in a longitudinal study, providing a detailed characterization of changes across years (and, eventually, decades—e.g. Bodrožić and Adler 2018). Such a study might answer questions such as: How do coworking sites change over time? How does the coworking community develop mechanisms to address ongoing tensions? How do these interact with the community’s relationship to collaboration?

Finally, although we have focused on coworking as a particular case of loosely organized knowledge production, we see potential for extending this critical approach to other sites of knowledge production studied in professional communication: entrepreneurship, collectives, cooperatives, and freelancing. Professional communicators are not only candidates for coworking, they are frequently asked to do the same sorts of things that coworkers are asked to do: work in emergent and temporary communities, and within those communities, collaborate across professional boundaries. Doing this is not easy, and the task

is made harder when “community” and “collaboration” hide important variations that require different approaches and skills. This typology, if extended to these other sites of knowledge production, could provide more fine-grained insights into developing and working within such knowledge production sites.

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