

# Architectures for Conversation

What Communities of Practice can mean for IA

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Andrew Hinton / Vanguard/ IASummit 2007

3 Chapters:

A Fine Mess  
Communities of Practice  
Describing the Damn Thing

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# Chapter I

## A Fine Mess

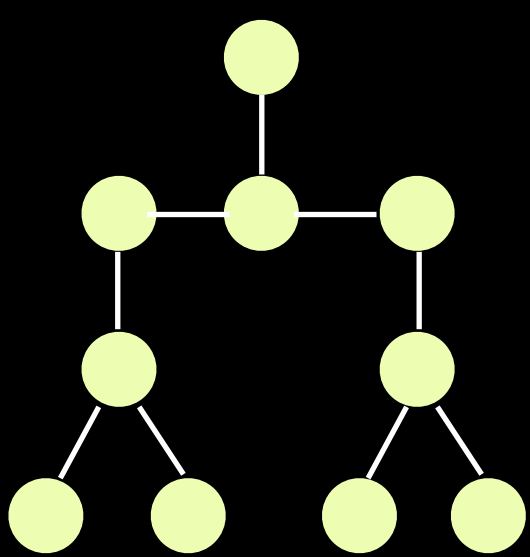


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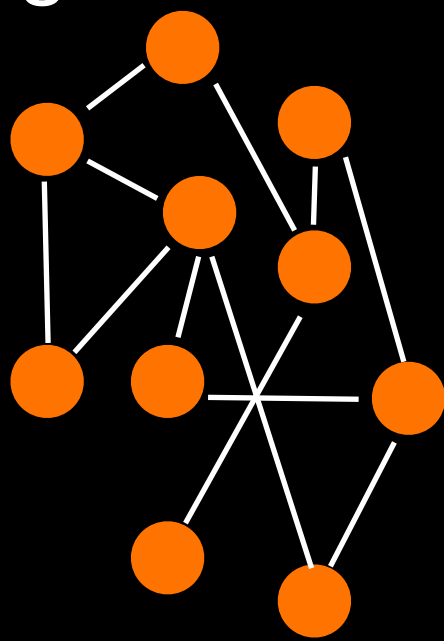
Before I get to Communities of Practice specifically, I want to cover the context that I think makes them so relevant.

Basically, how we have gotten ourselves into a sort of mess. A beautiful, wondrous mess, but a mess nonetheless.

# Top-Down Command Hierarchy



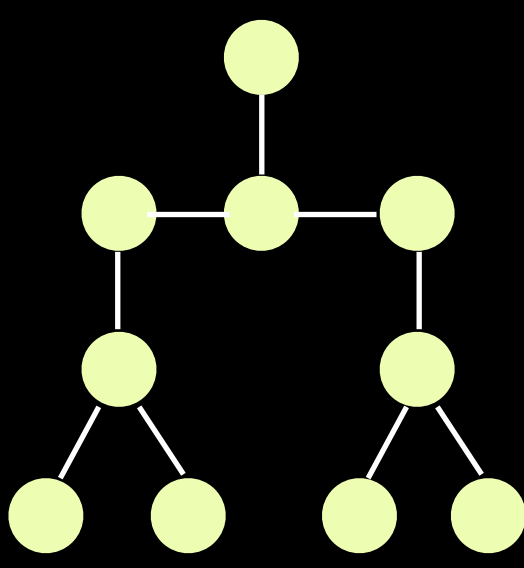
# Emergent Organic Network



Let's start with two patterns. One extreme is very controlled, the other is pretty much anarchy.

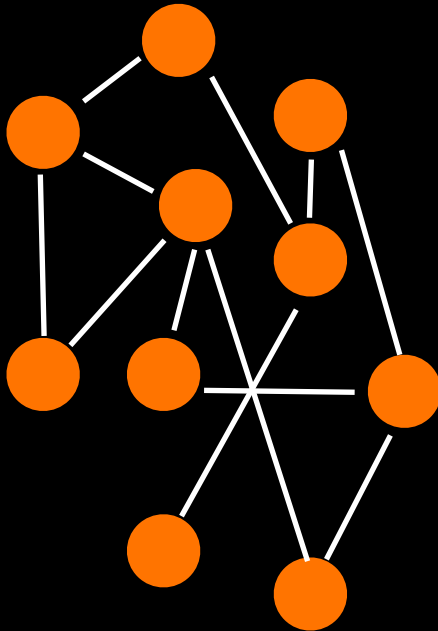
To illustrate some key differences between them, we're going to talk about assault rifles.

# Top-Down Command Hierarchy



Team/Management/Military

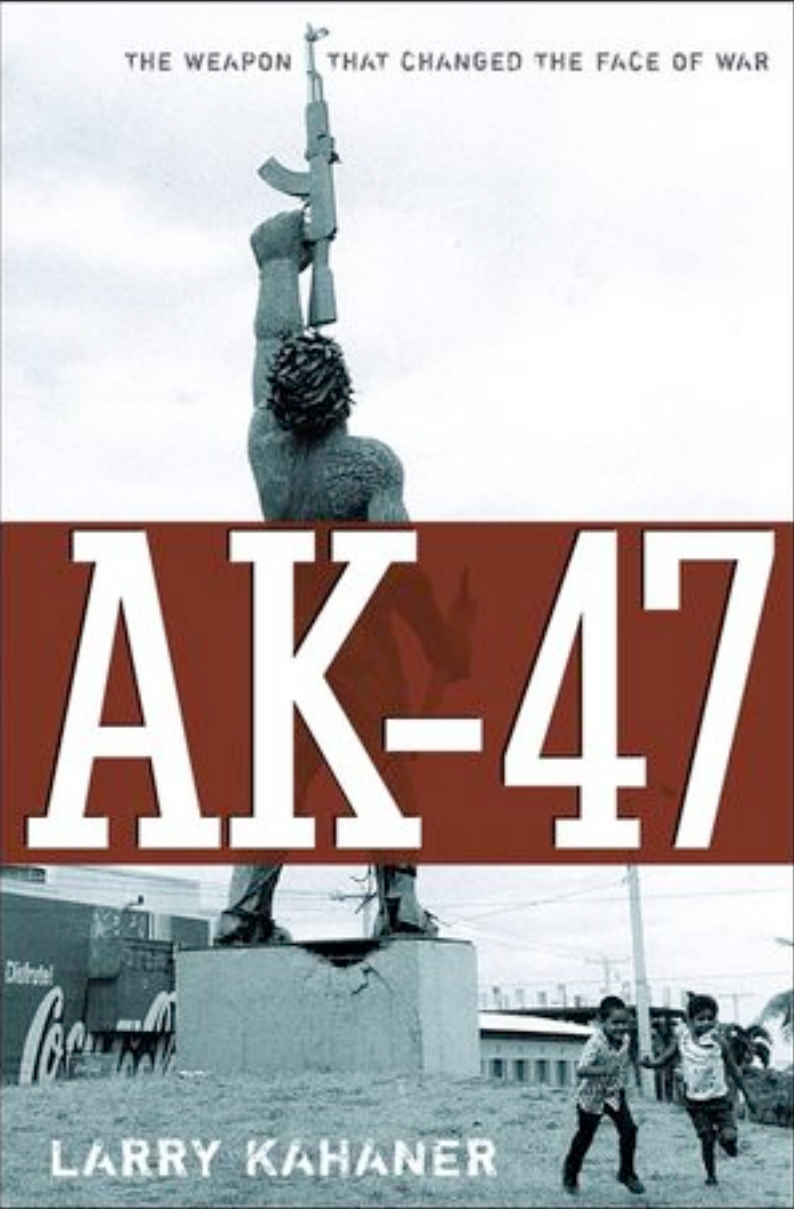
# Emergent Organic Network



Crowds/Friends/Incidental Networks

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To illustrate some key differences between them, we're going to talk about assault rifles.



Here’s an object lesson in how design can catalyze change, and tap into latent emergence.

Larry Kahaner explains how certain characteristics of the AK–47 make it more devastating than any other single weapon in the world, comparing it to the US standard military rifle, the M–16.





M-16



AK-47

7

Both of these designed objects look very similar in all the ways that seem to matter. They both look like assault rifles, and they both work basically the same way. So how could they be much different?  
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The M-16 is designed with a particular philosophy in mind.

- There will always be a proprietary infrastructure capable of manufacturing them and delivering parts;
- There will always be money to pay for them;
- Exactly the right ammunition will be available for it;
- Soldiers will have and take the time to meticulously clean and maintain the weapon. (otherwise it is notorious for jamming)
- Soldiers using them will be professional marksmen

The design of the device comes with certain implications that it cannot escape --

>> you could say that these qualities are in its DNA.

>> The AK47, although appearances is the same thing (an assault rifle), is almost completely different in most of the ways that count.

- It was designed for easy mass production,
- parts that could more easily be repaired and remanufactured, and retrofitted,
- it's not fussy about ammunition, meaning it's easier to get hold of bullets it can fire.
- and while it's not a marksman's weapon, it's close enough.

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That means its DNA is different enough that it lends itself to latent emergence -- only in this case, unfortunately, that means political strife, insurgencies, and 3rd world armies.

According to the UN the AK-47 kills more than a Quarter Million people every year.

But the main lesson here is that a few design decisions can make a huge difference in the impact a designed thing can have on the world.

Closed  
Expensive  
Complex  
Accurate



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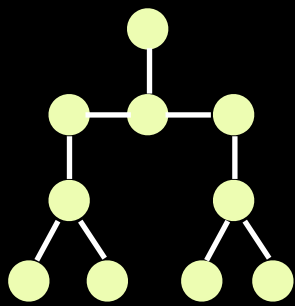
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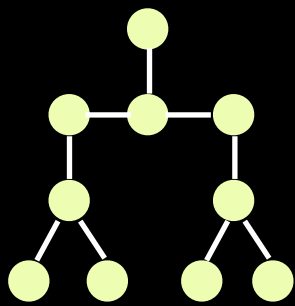


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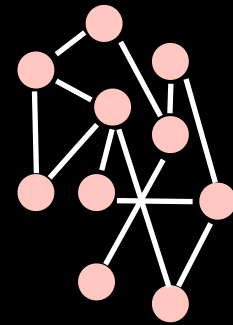
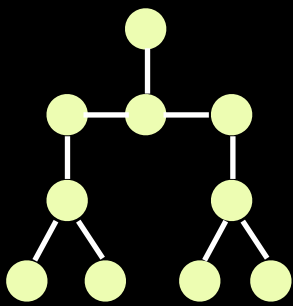


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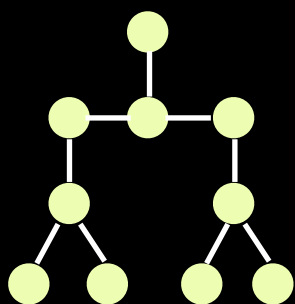
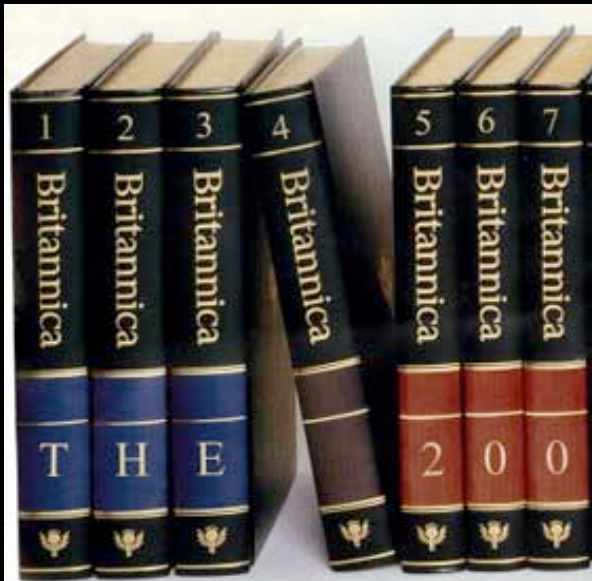
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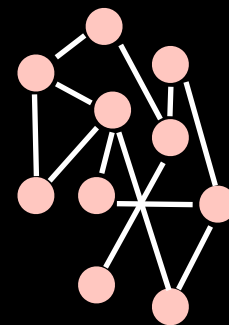
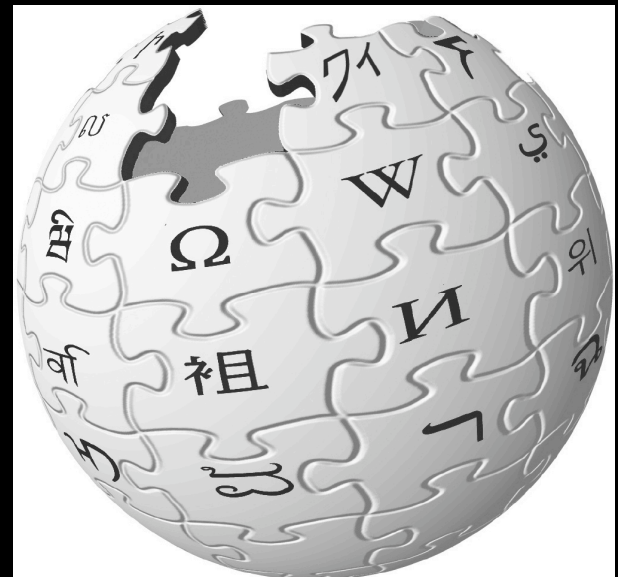
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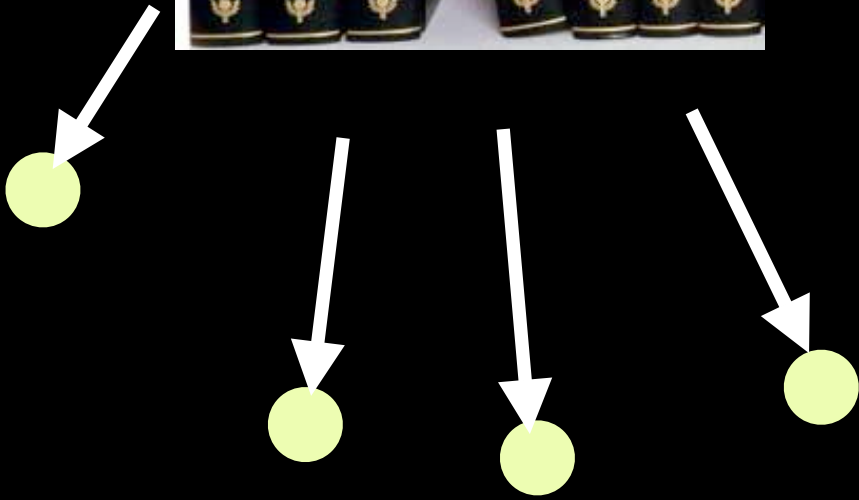
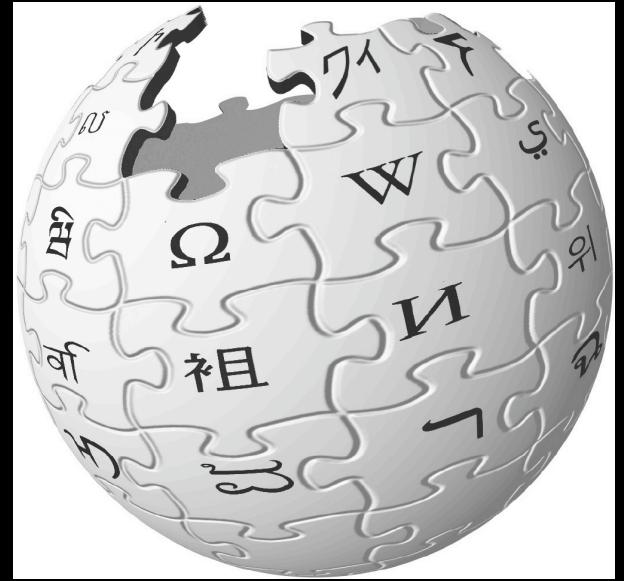
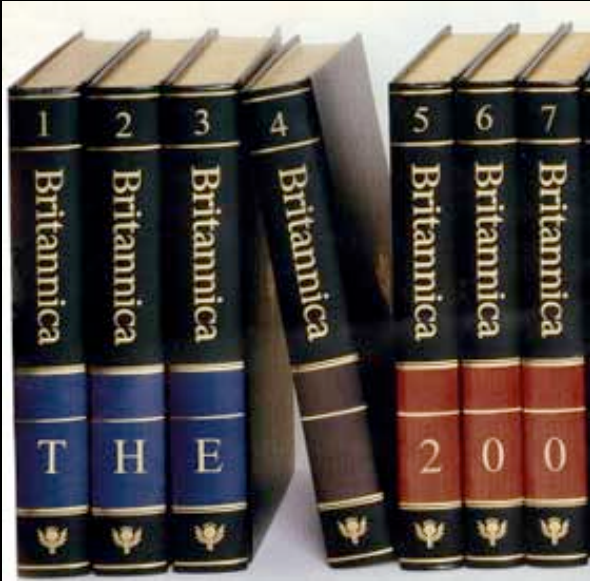
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# Instruction



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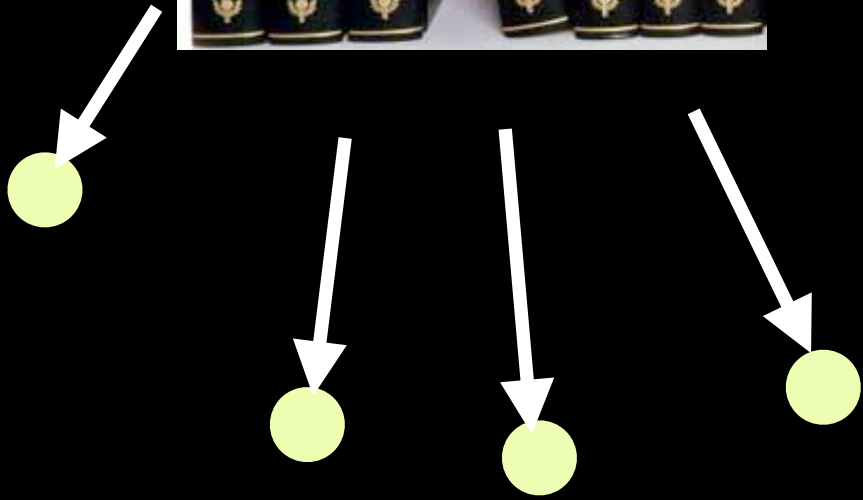
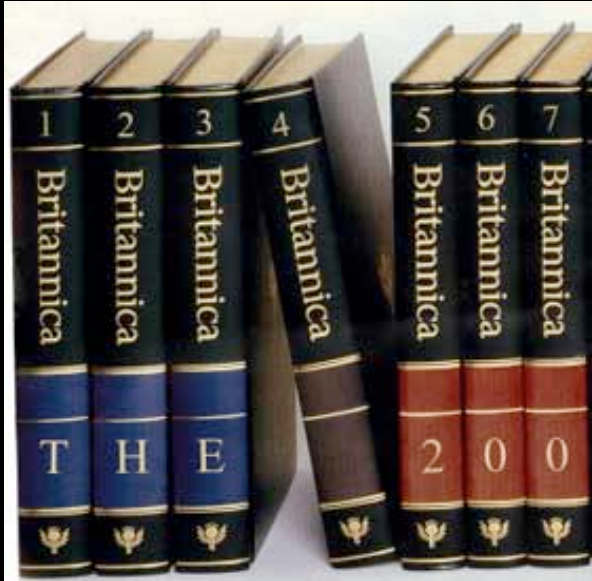
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>> While wikipedia is conversational. It fulfills more of what human beings want in their daily life.

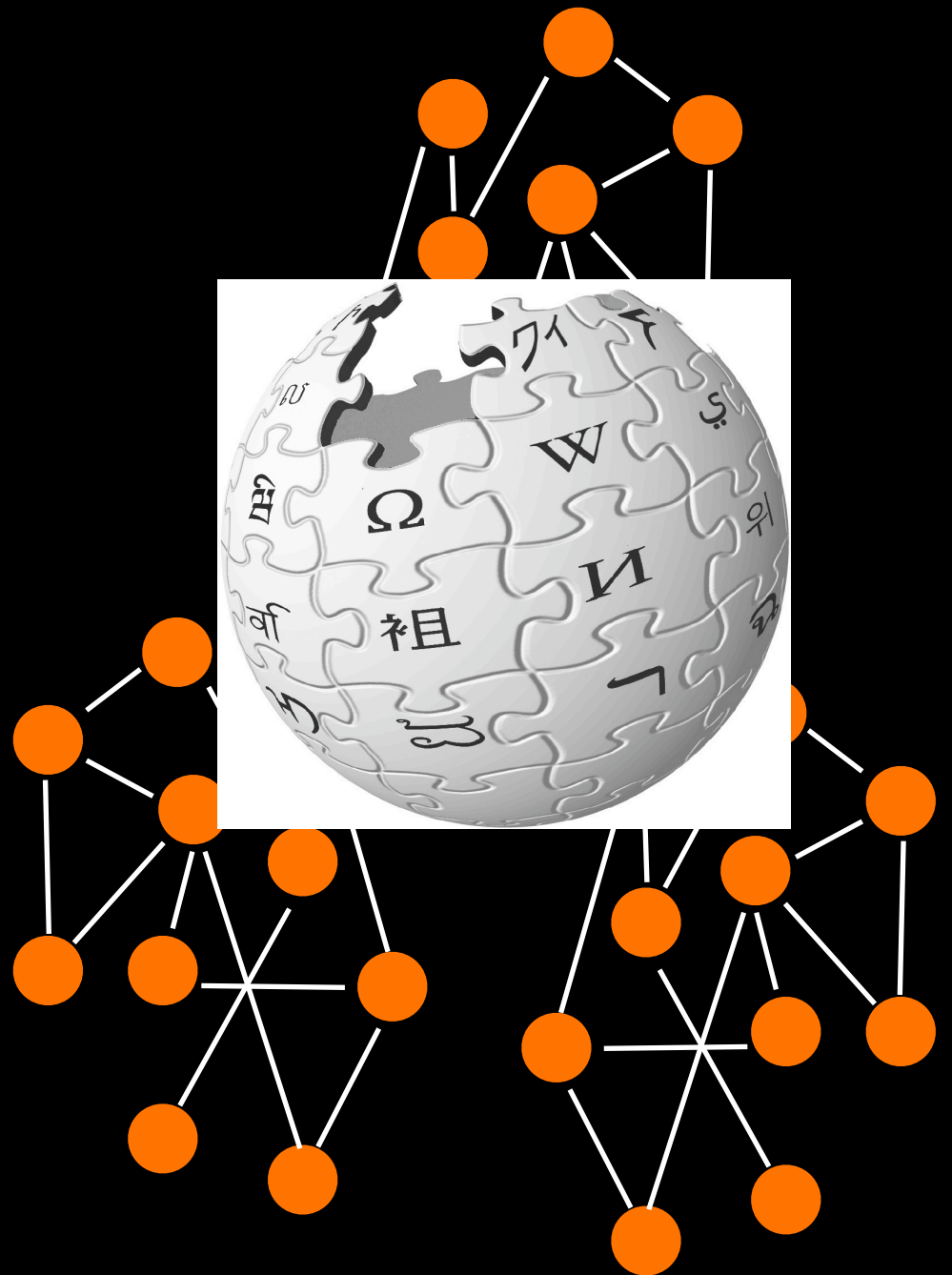
That's not to say that wikipedia is better than britannica, or that the old way is evil or irrelevant.

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# Instruction



# Conversation



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“Conversation is king.  
Content is just something to talk  
about.”

Cory Doctorow

“Conversation is king. Content is just something to talk about.”

It’s not that content is unimportant; it’s what conversations are *\*made\** of!

But focusing on the content -- or the “information” -- to the exclusion of its use is a mistake.



Conversation is the  
engine of  
knowledge.



Conversation is the engine of knowledge. It's the generative activity of civilization.  
But I don't only mean literal "talk" -- I mean conversation in the abstract sense of civic engagement.

# “Markets are Conversations ...”



As the wisdom of the Cluetrain Manifesto reminds us, even markets are conversations --

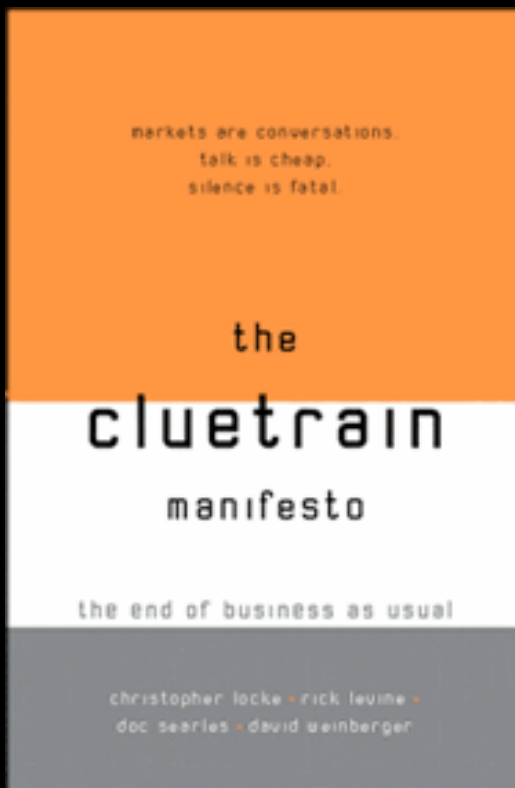
And conversations are purposeful human communication, and it's hard to get more purposeful than how you spend your money.

Money is language too... there's a reason why we say "money talks..."

If I tip my bartender with a dollar bill, that dollar bill is saying something.

But even if I buy something at WalMart, I'm saying something there too... I'm engaging in a larger conversation that's happening with money.

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# Group Creation Capabilities

1980

1990

2000

2007

People have gone conversation-happy on the web.

Before the Internet, there were very few ways to create groups: newspapers, local associations, things like that.

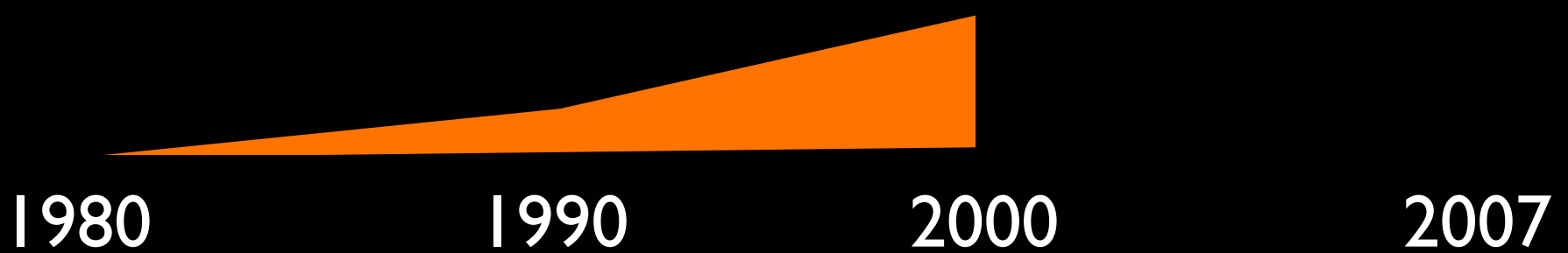
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But even by 2000, there were only a few main places online, like E-Groups (Now Yahoo Groups) or USENET, and the venerable ListServ mailing lists hosted here and there, usually in universities.

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Suddenly, in the last 5–6 years, we’ve seen an incredible explosion -- almost any social software environment has an ability to create a “community” or “group”. I think that’s a big part of what has caused the Web 2.0 phenomenon.

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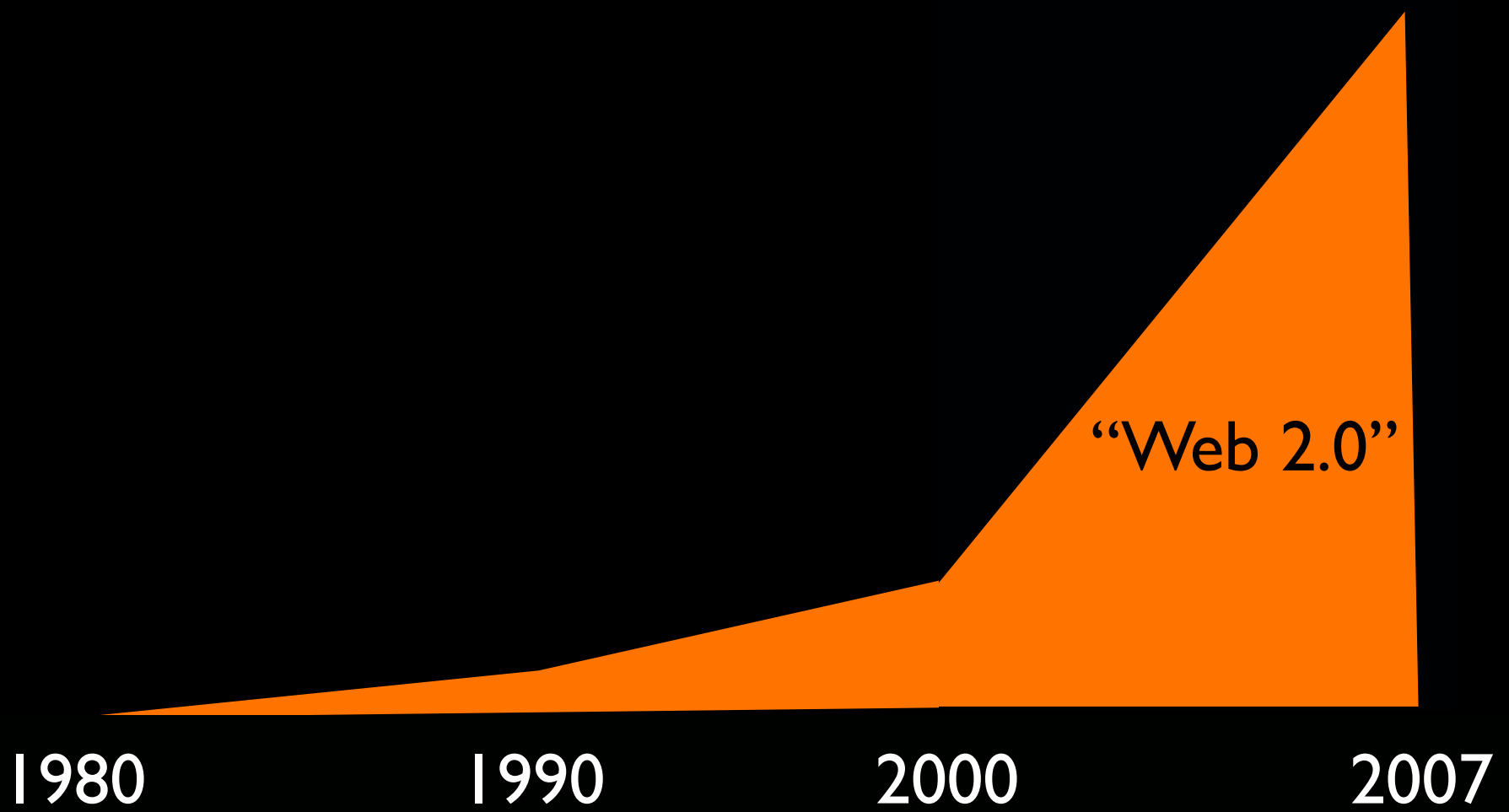
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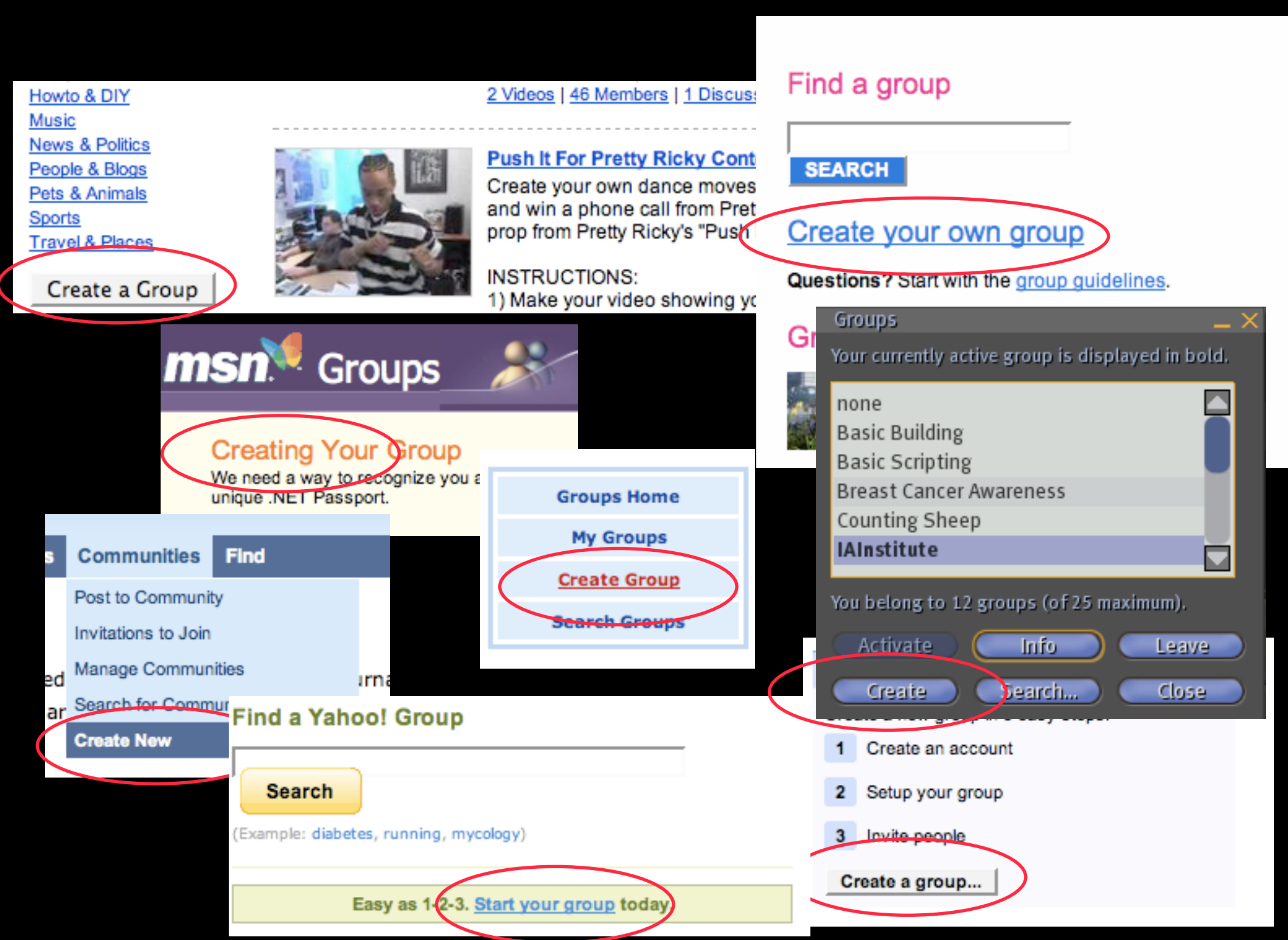
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Everywhere you look, you can create a group. It's become a sort of commodity: people are coming to just expect to be able to make a group at the click of a button.

And this really is more than just more of the same; I think it represents a cultural shift that has some very significant implications.

And this brings me to Groucho Marx



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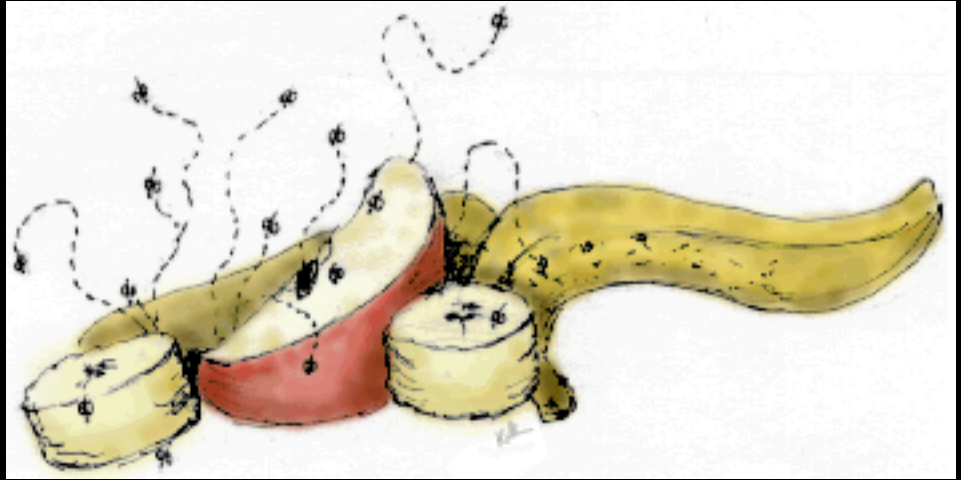


“Time flies like an arrow ...



“Time flies like an arrow ...  
...but fruit flies like a banana.”





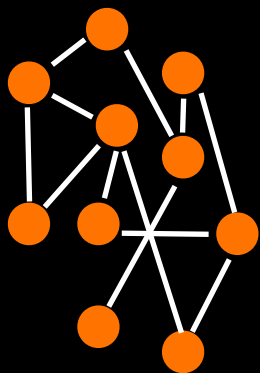
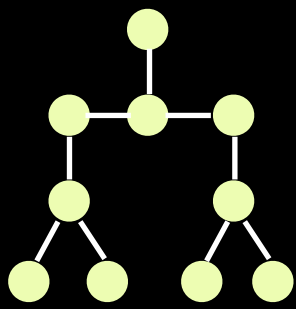
If you want to get fruit flies to show up, you just put out some bananas.

Bananas are an excellent medium for growing lots of fruit flies.



It doesn't just go for fruit flies -- people are attracted to food as well. Put some out and they tend to show up.





### 13 Minute Mark!!!!

>> In an industrial society where people are mostly paid to follow directions rather than talk about their work or innovate, hierarchies made a lot more sense.

>> But the truth is, the looser organic network has always been where Knowledge & Innovation occur -- in the hidden, unofficial connections and conversations between people. Just think of all the stories you hear about things like the Lockheed skunk works, or Bell Labs -- situations where innovation fermented in spite of organizational lines.

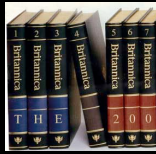
>>The big difference is that the Web has given the organic networks the ability to make themselves explicit, to come out from the shadows. And it's a perfect medium for growing them quickly. You might even say the web is like our banana. >>

>> So, if I can oversimplify things a bit, it looks as if the more organic, semantic way of connecting things and people is on the ascendant; and that tends to draw away from the power and necessity of the command network.

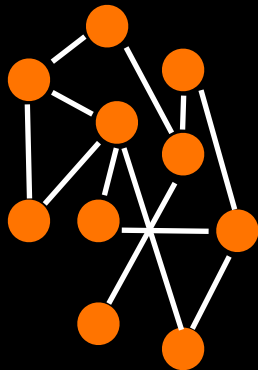
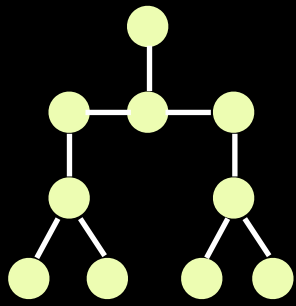
Of course it's still needed for corporate structure and operational efficiency; but it's having to learn to share the wealth in a more official way with the organic network.

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Is it possible for these two to ever play well together? How do we reconcile this tension?



# Traditional Institutions [Instruction & Production]



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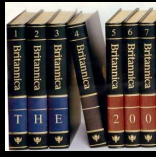
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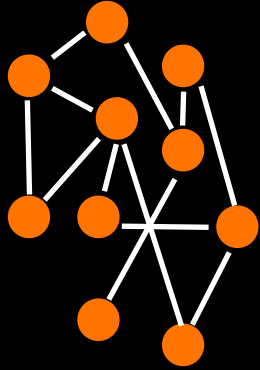
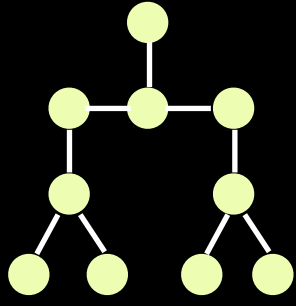
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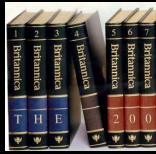
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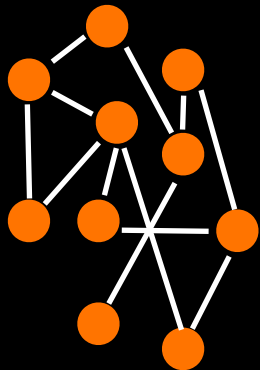
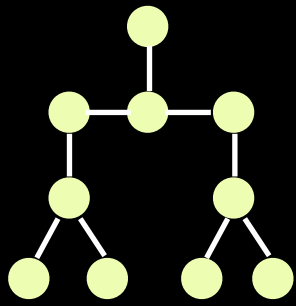
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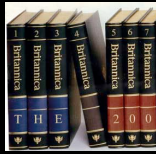
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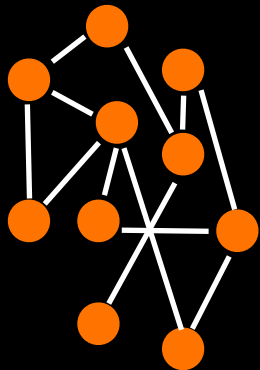
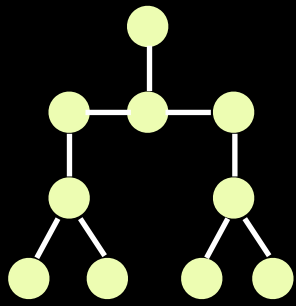
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Is it possible for these two to ever play well together? How do we reconcile this tension?





# Traditional Institutions [Instruction & Production]



# Organic Networks [Learning & Innovation]



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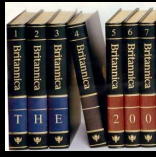
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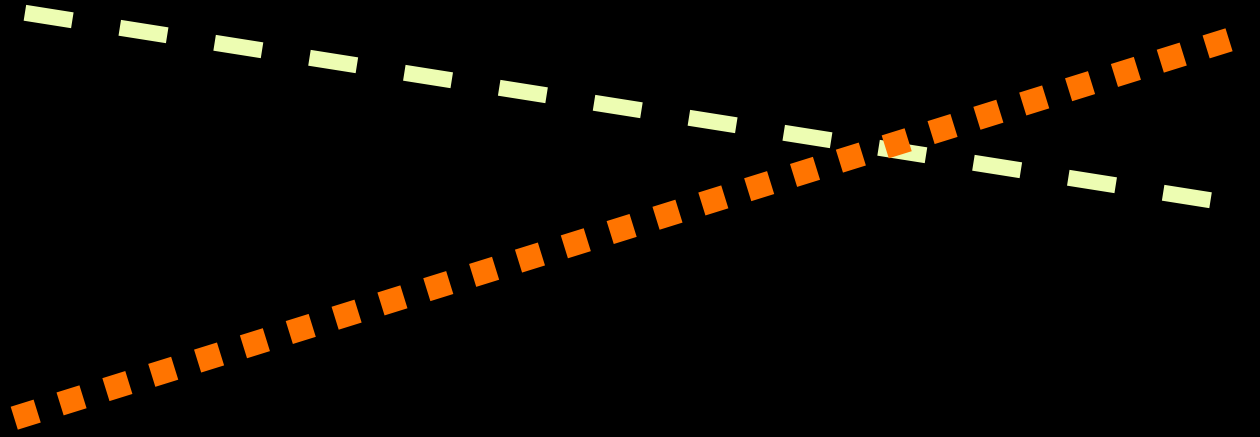
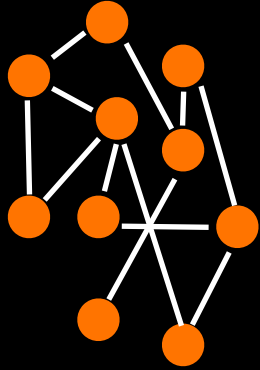
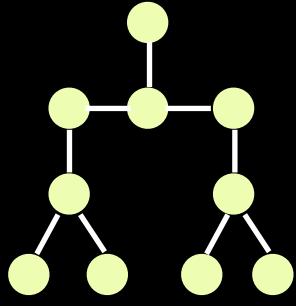
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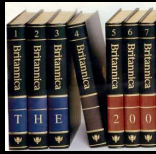
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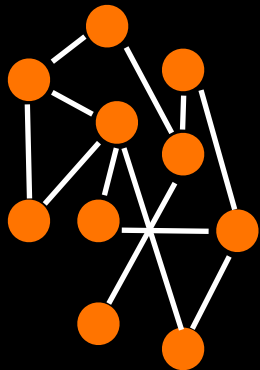
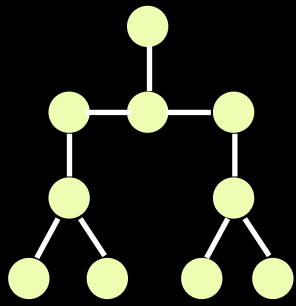
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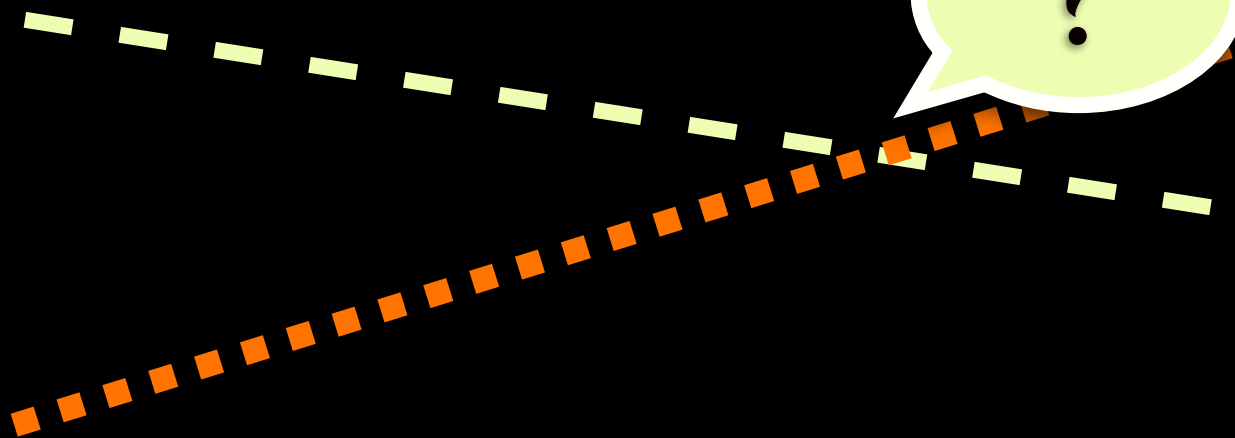
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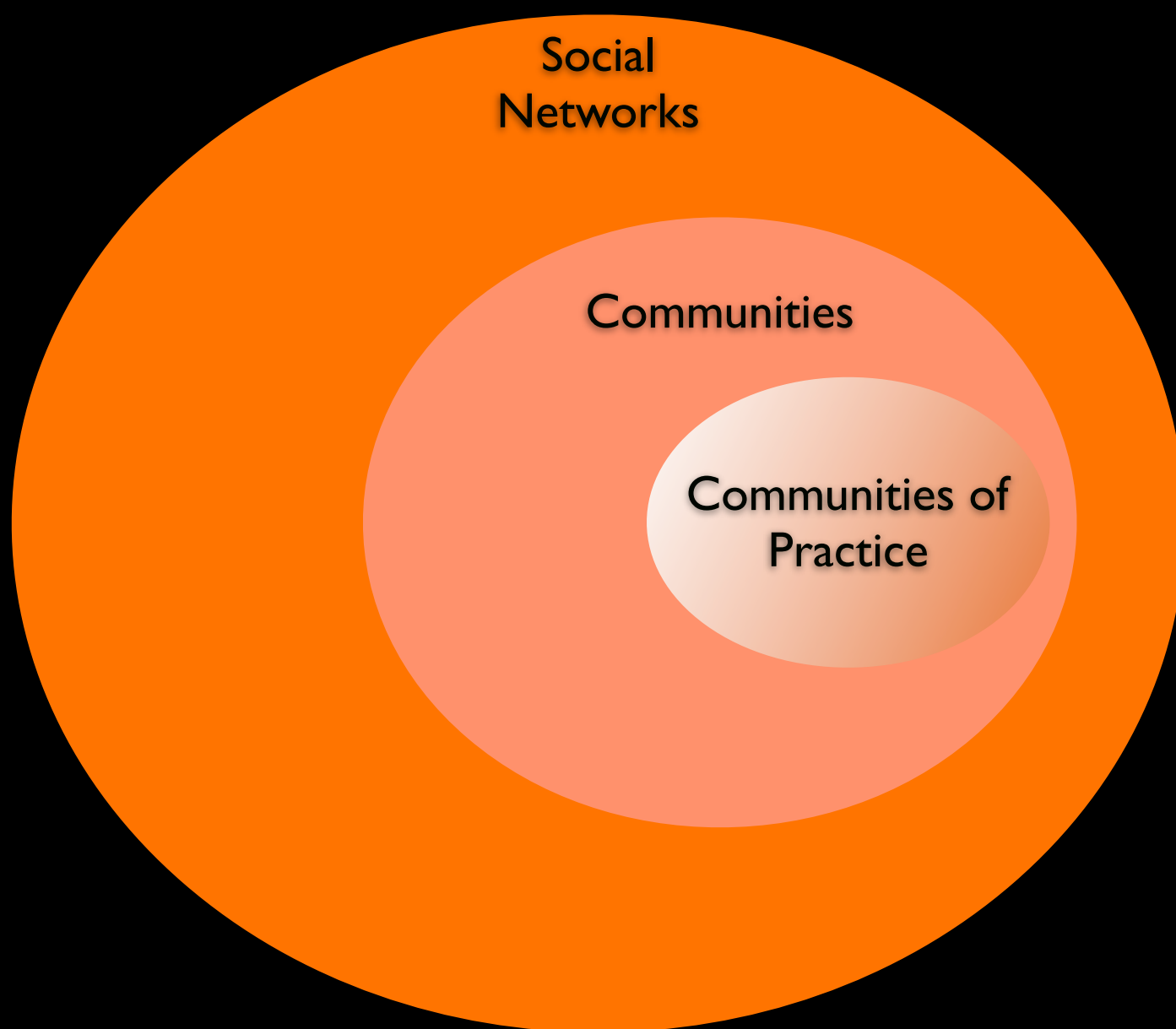


## Chapter 2

# Communities of Practice



I think that's a major value of the Community of Practice. So let's dig in and figure out what one is ...



HURRY

Just to be clear on one thing... Social networks are a very large category of emergent, organic networks in general.

Communities of Practice are a subset -- though they do derive some of their qualities from the parent pattern.

“Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.”



Etienne Wenger

Etienne Wenger, who coined the phrase, defines it like this.

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DOMAIN: A community of practice is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between people. It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people. (Wenger)

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PRACTICE: Members are practitioners, developing a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems. This takes time and sustained interaction. A good conversation with a stranger on an airplane may give you all sorts of interesting insights, but it does not in itself make for a community of practice. (Wenger)

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COMMUNITY: In pursuing joint interests in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other. A website in itself is not a community of practice. Having the same job or the same title does not make for a community of practice unless members interact and learn together. (Wenger)

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# Many Communities of Practice

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Lots of CoPs

- >> The royal society is an old example from 1660 -- amateurs with time and passion about how the world worked, who got together and might dissect an animal one day and try to figure out how light works the next.
- >> Builders and carpenters learn from one another in groups and in person, in mentorships and practice among one another.
- >> The same goes for stone carvers and craftspeople all over the world
- >> This includes tailors -- for example, the area of London called Savile Row -- geographically colocated tailors for generations.
- >> even cheerleaders have a community of practice -- if you watch how they learn the craft, you see that even though they have a coach and a schedule, they still do much of their learning from one another, making their craft better as they go.
- >> So even in situations where the work is highly structured or even industrial, often we see CoPs crop up when they're allowed to, because people have a vested interest in improving the work they do, and making better things with it.
- >> It applies to every kind of work, from the ridiculous to the sublime.
- >> A major distinguishing factor is that Communities of Practice are about Learning, Making & Improving.



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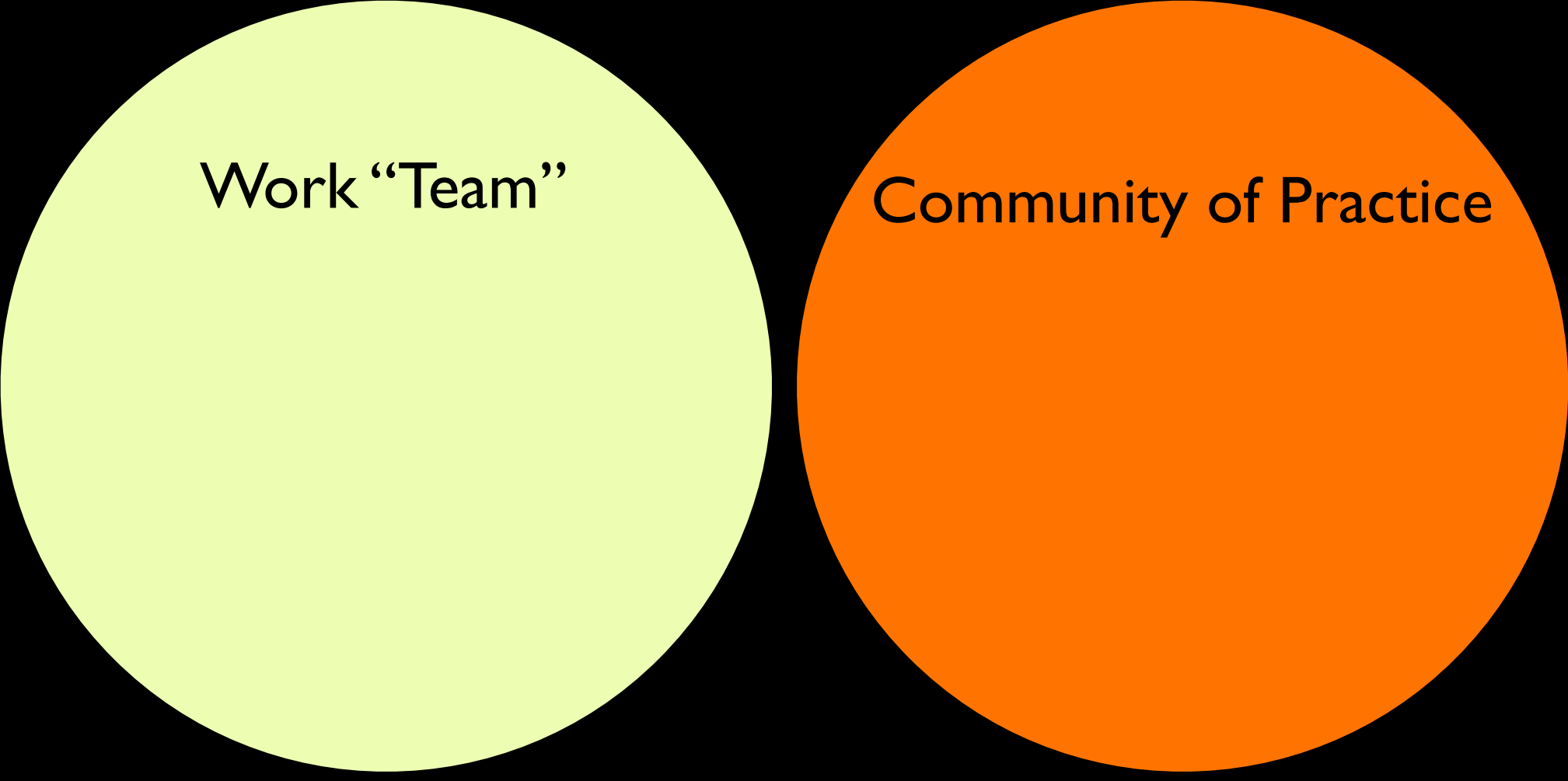
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## How are they different from teams?

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One way understand what something is, is to understand what it is not. For a moment, let's focus in particular on the distinction between Communities of Practice and Work Teams, since that's especially relevant in the workplace.



Work “Team”

Community of Practice

23

So let's look at just a few characteristics of both.

>>

Teams are Involuntary -- you're assigned to them -- but Communities of Practice are very organic, and people get involved in them because of their interest, not to fulfill an obligation.

>>

A team's purpose is to deliver products, on delivery dates. But a Community of Practice's purpose is its own evolution -- Learning, Making & Improving -- the continual improvement of practice and knowledge among its members. There's no delivery date -- even though the community often may set goals and work together on meeting them, it's in the service of the ongoing evolution.

>>

And not only are a team's members and goals assigned, it's entirely defined by the organization's management structure. **Without an org chart, it wouldn't exist.** A Community of Practice is defined by the aggregate of its members, and whatever domain they happen to share in common.

>>

This means that management really doesn't have much of an idea what to \*do\* with a CoP. It doesn't fit the MBA concept of a managed organization. Even though, in almost any workplace, they exist in some form or another, and in many organizations they're essential to the org's success.

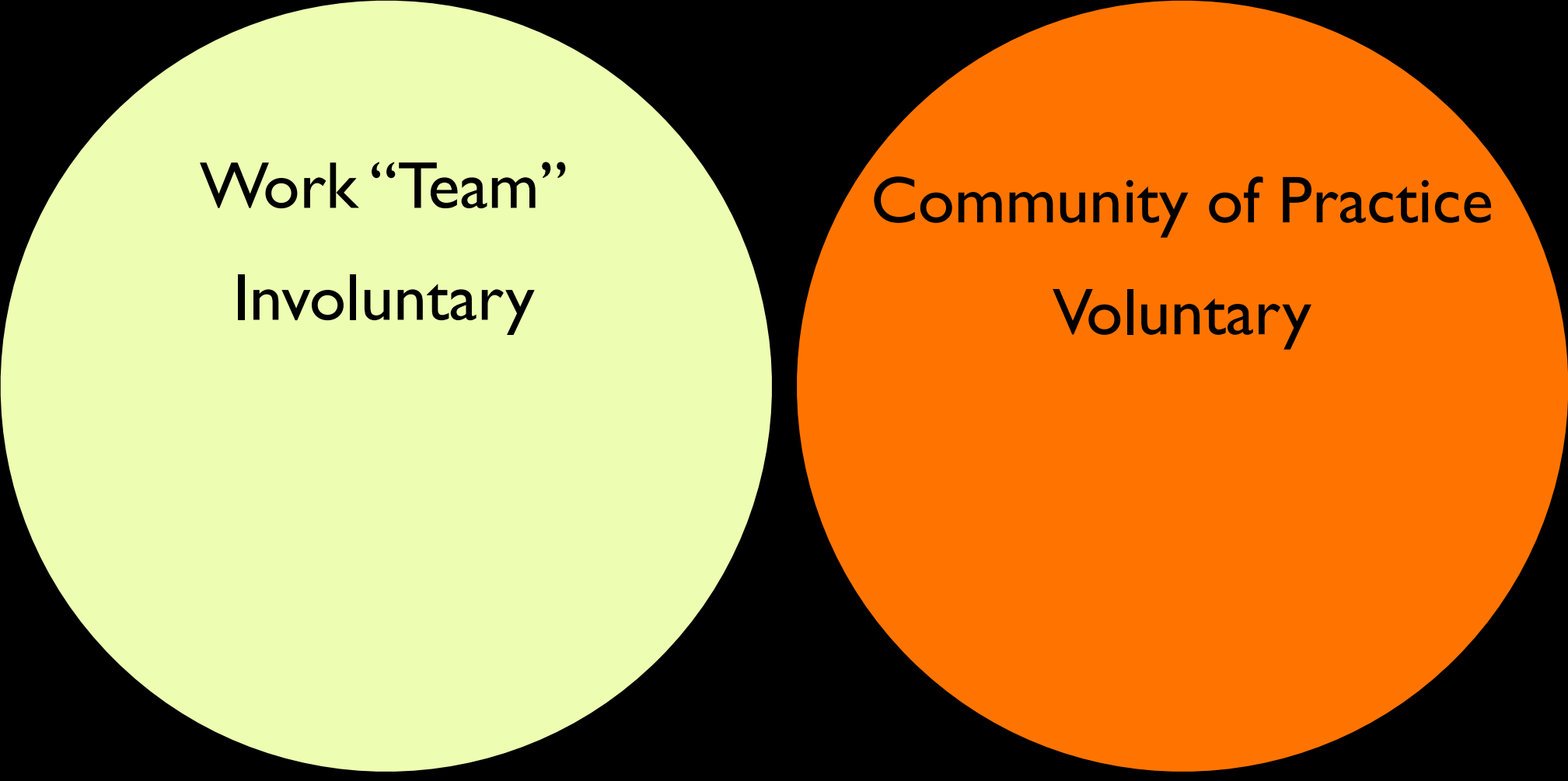
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By the way this is something management often doesn't understand: that when you put something organic down it tends to grow roots. If you've ever been in a team that you felt like you really grew with, and felt like a community, then were arbitrarily transferred to some other team ... you feel ripped out by the roots. That's why.

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based in part on [http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/knowledge\\_management/km2/cop\\_toolkit.asp](http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/knowledge_management/km2/cop_toolkit.asp)



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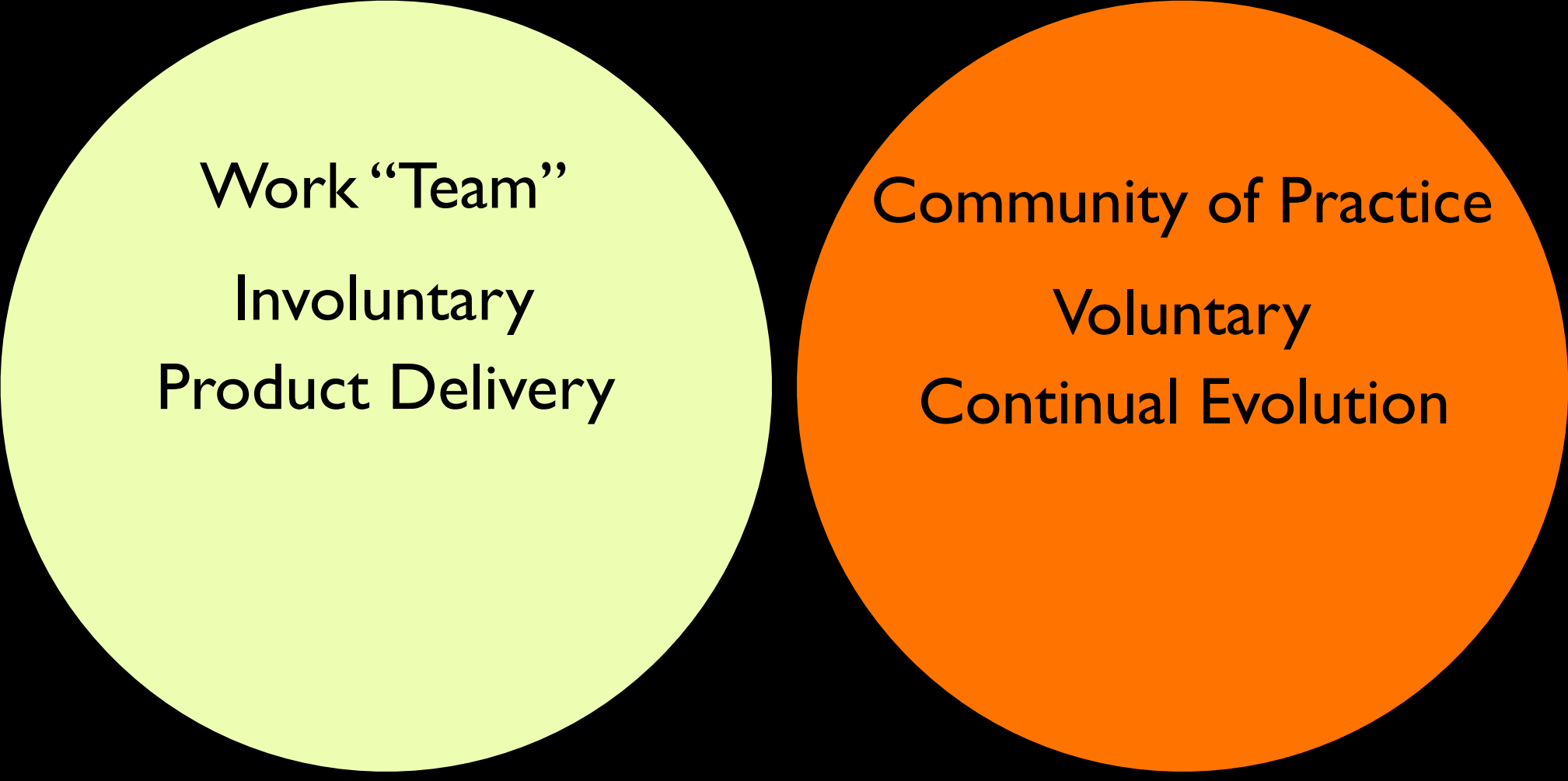
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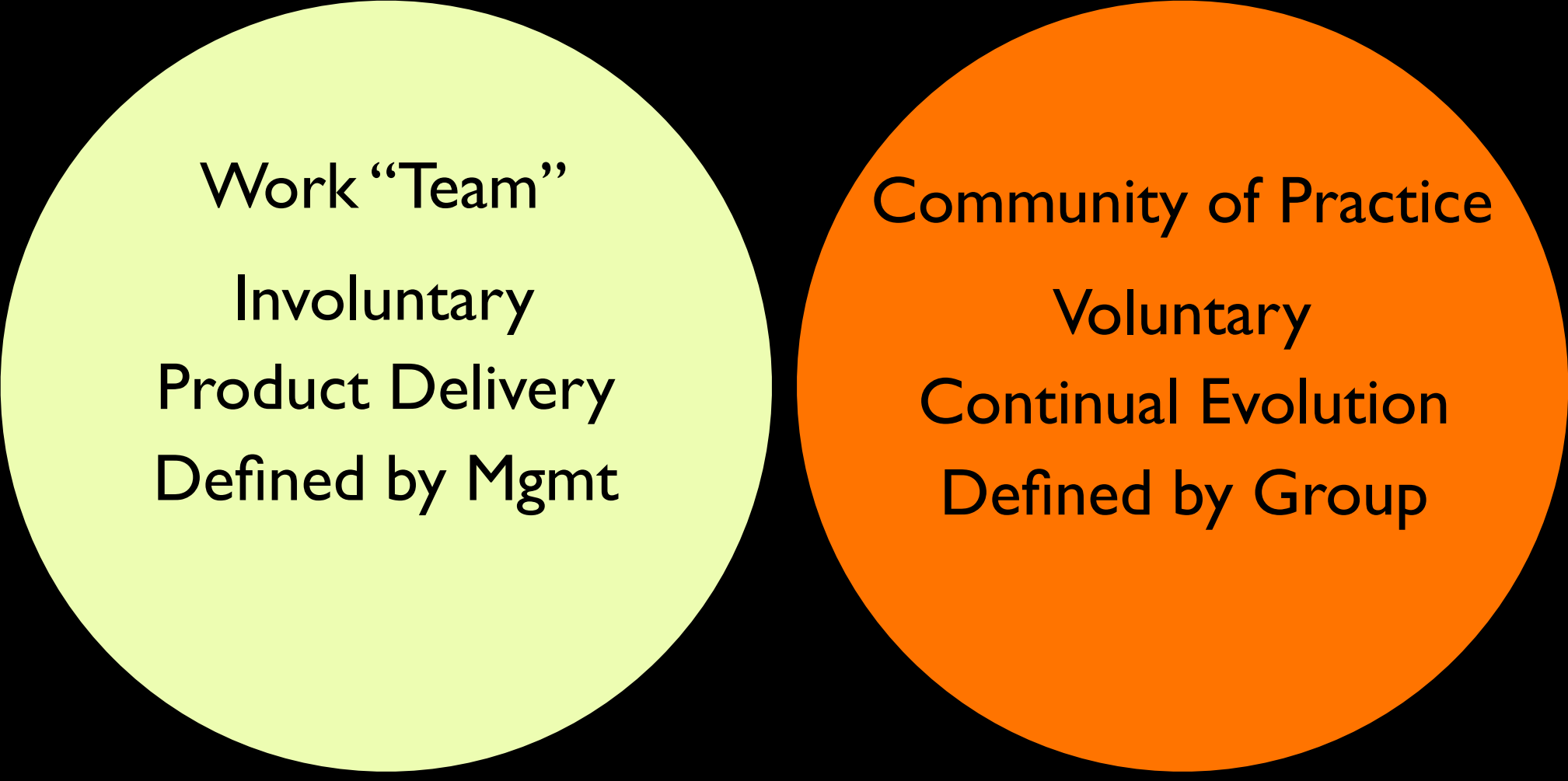
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This means that management really doesn't have much of an idea what to \*do\* with a CoP. It doesn't fit the MBA concept of a managed organization. Even though, in almost any workplace, they exist in some form or another, and in many organizations they're essential to the org's success.

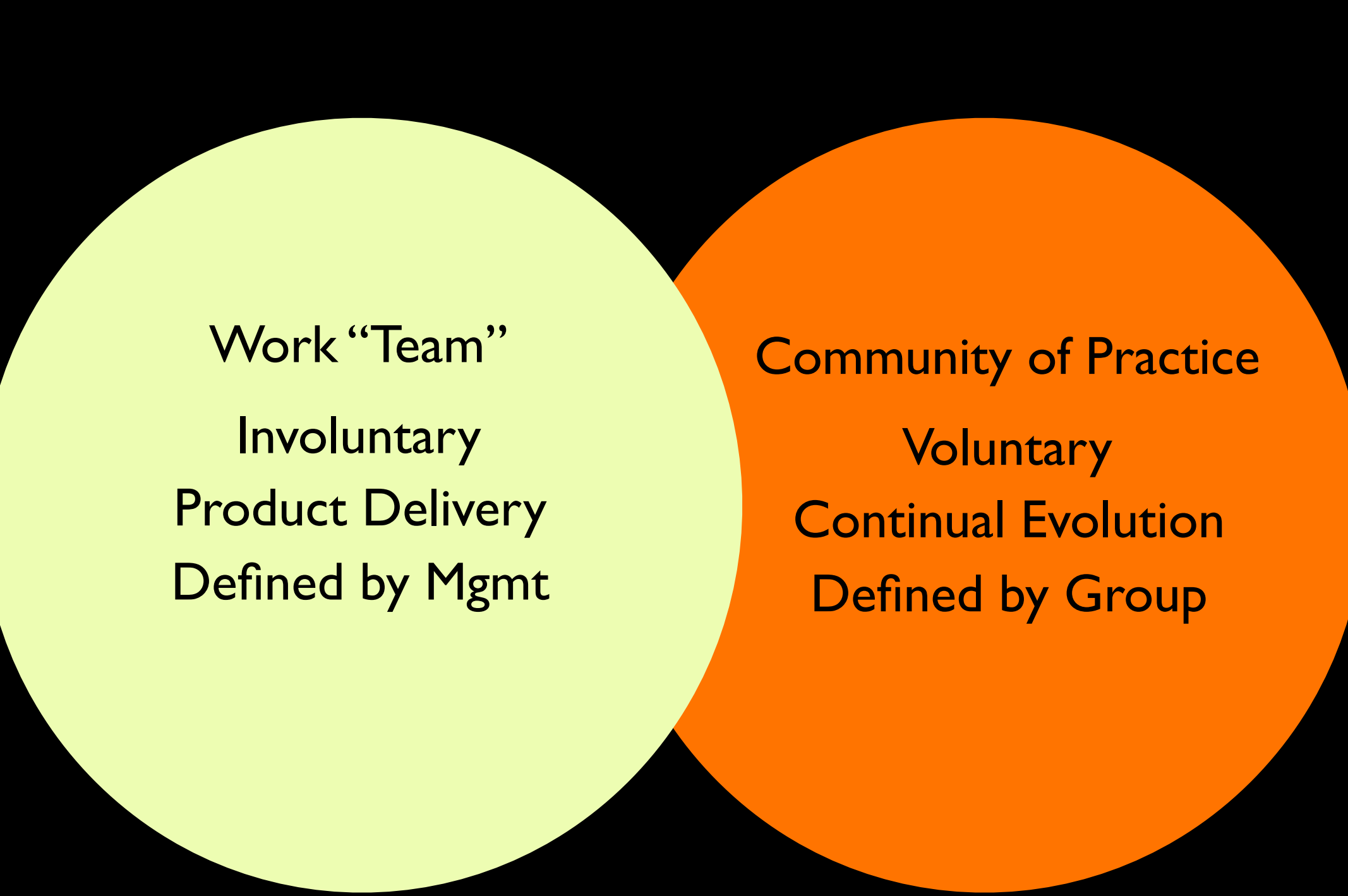
Does this mean Teams and CoPs are mutually exclusive? No... in fact, sometimes the best teams have taken it upon themselves to become communities of practice >>

They can work in a complementary fashion -- but often they end up blurring boundaries between other teams and branches in the organization.

By the way this is something management often doesn't understand: that when you put something organic down it tends to grow roots. If you've ever been in a team that you felt like you really grew with, and felt like a community, then were arbitrarily transferred to some other team ... you feel ripped out by the roots. That's why.

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based in part on [http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/knowledge\\_management/km2/cop\\_toolkit.asp](http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/knowledge_management/km2/cop_toolkit.asp)



Work “Team”  
Involuntary  
Product Delivery  
Defined by Mgmt

Community of Practice  
Voluntary  
Continual Evolution  
Defined by Group

23

So let's look at just a few characteristics of both.

>>

Teams are Involuntary -- you're assigned to them -- but Communities of Practice are very organic, and people get involved in them because of their interest, not to fulfill an obligation.

>>

A team's purpose is to deliver products, on delivery dates. But a Community of Practice's purpose is its own evolution -- Learning, Making & Improving -- the continual improvement of practice and knowledge among its members. There's no delivery date -- even though the community often may set goals and work together on meeting them, it's in the service of the ongoing evolution.

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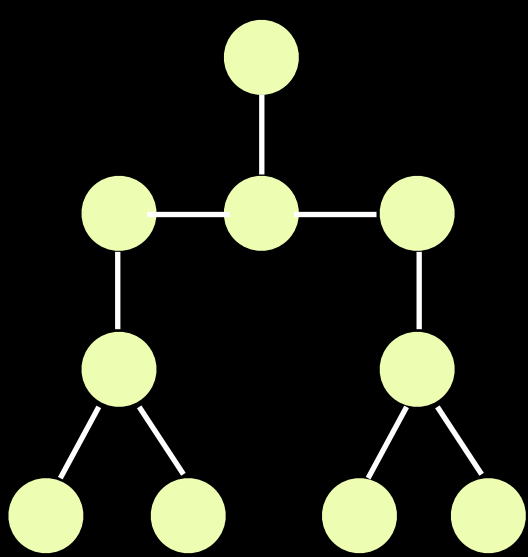
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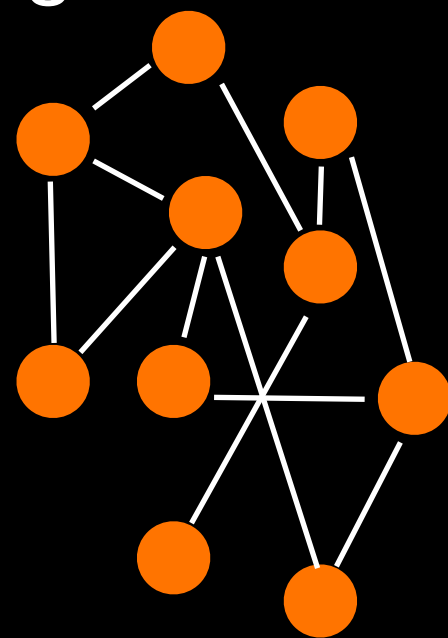
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# Top-Down Command Hierarchy



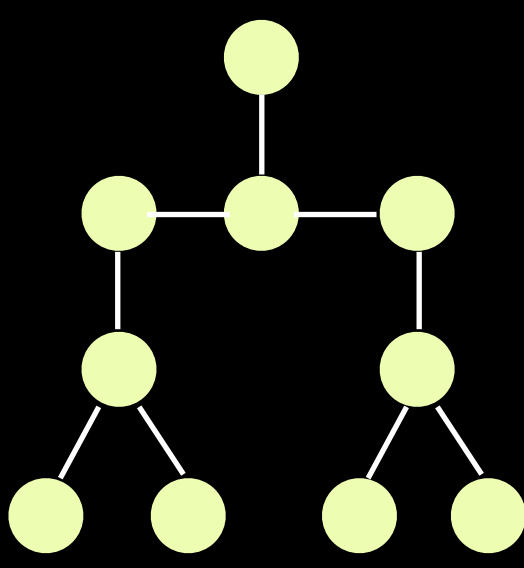
# Emergent Organic Network



Here are our network patterns again. And the spectrum between them.

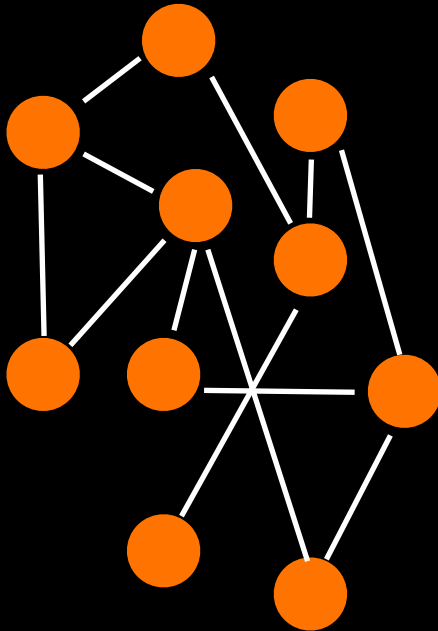
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Communities of practice could be seen as a sort of specialized organic network. In order to understand it well, we’ll touch on a number of qualities and ideas about the larger category of organic networks, but

# Top-Down Command Hierarchy



Team/Management/Military

# Emergent Organic Network



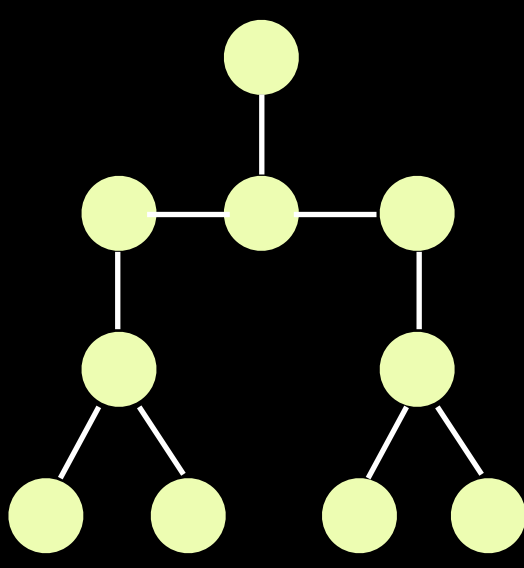
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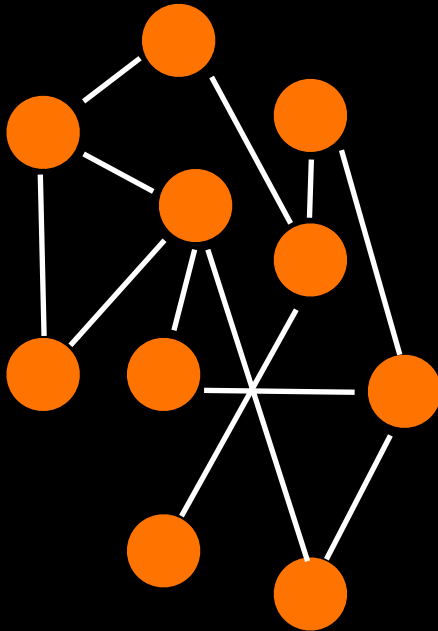
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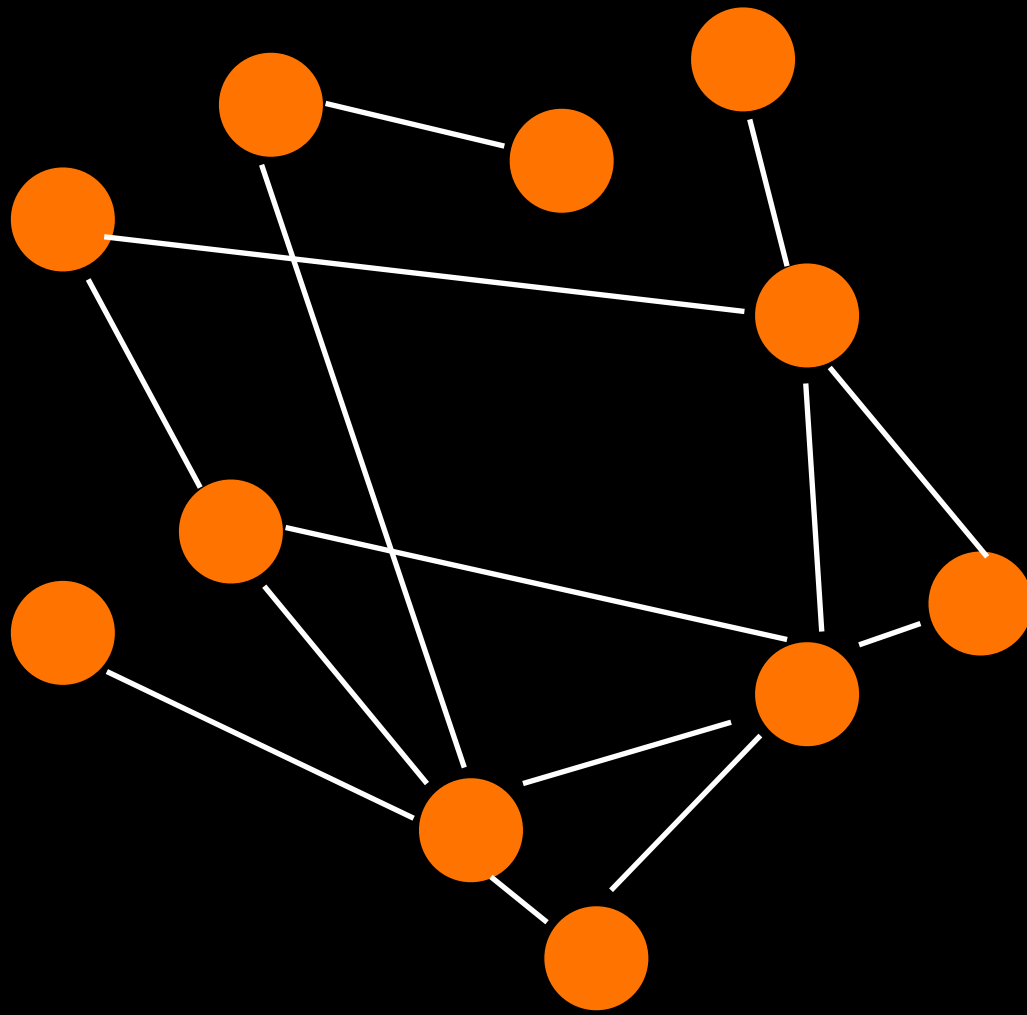


Communities  
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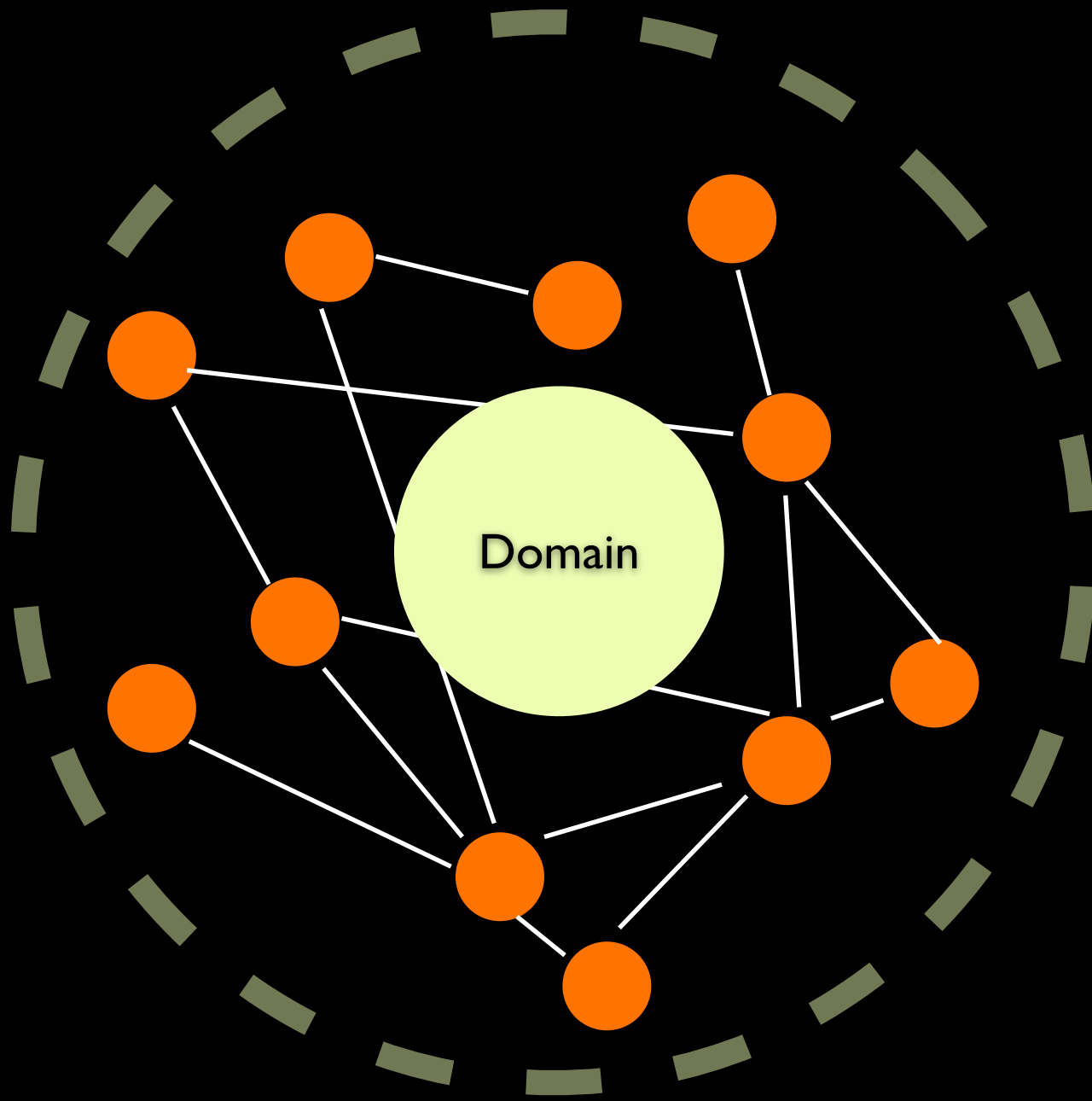
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These people are often part of other practices, and bring skills along with them.

And this is all perfectly OK... in fact, it's essential. This whole, roiling ecosystem of members and ideas is part of what helps these patterns thrive.

Now let's look at a quick case study that helps illustrate some of this.

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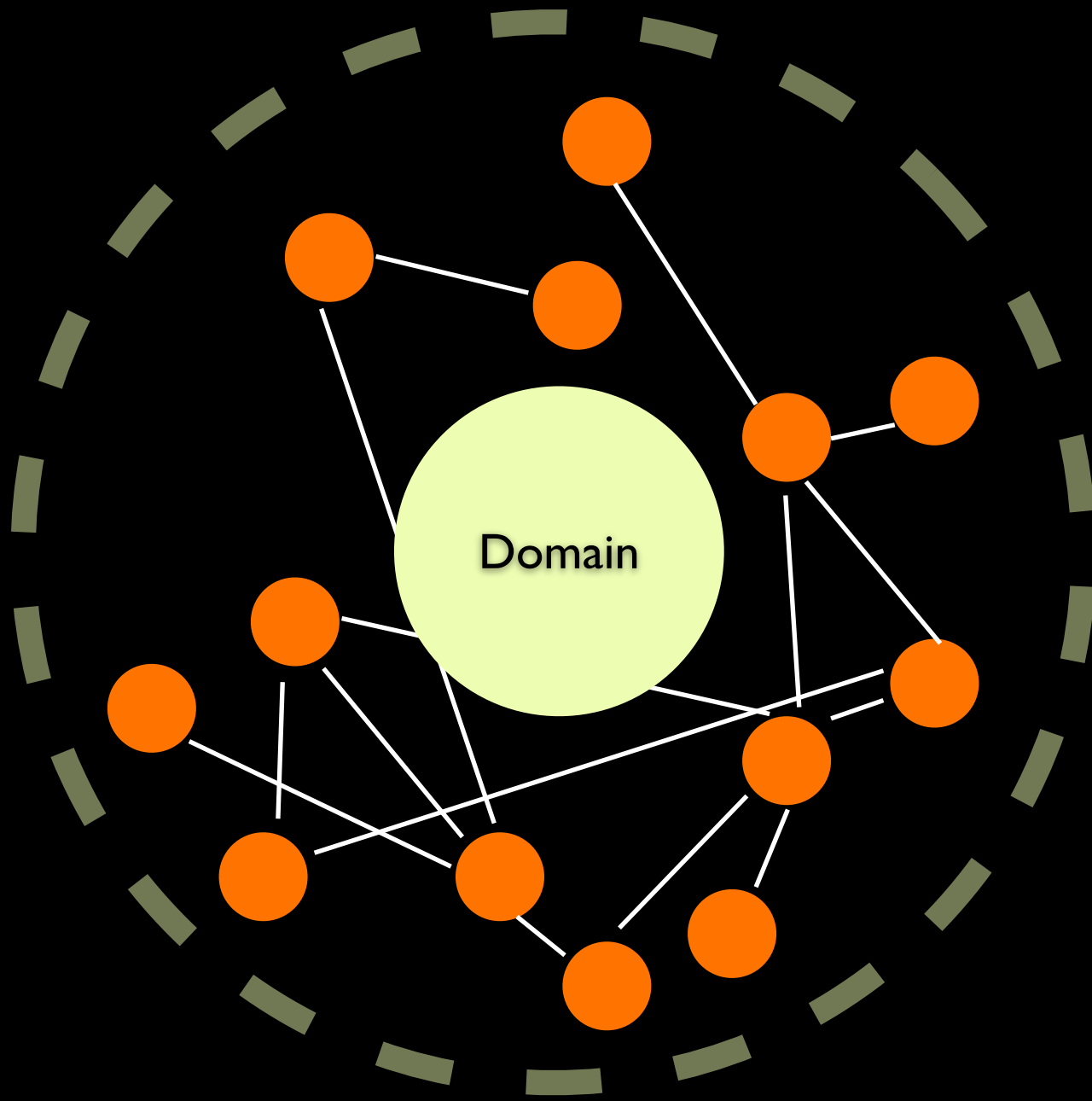
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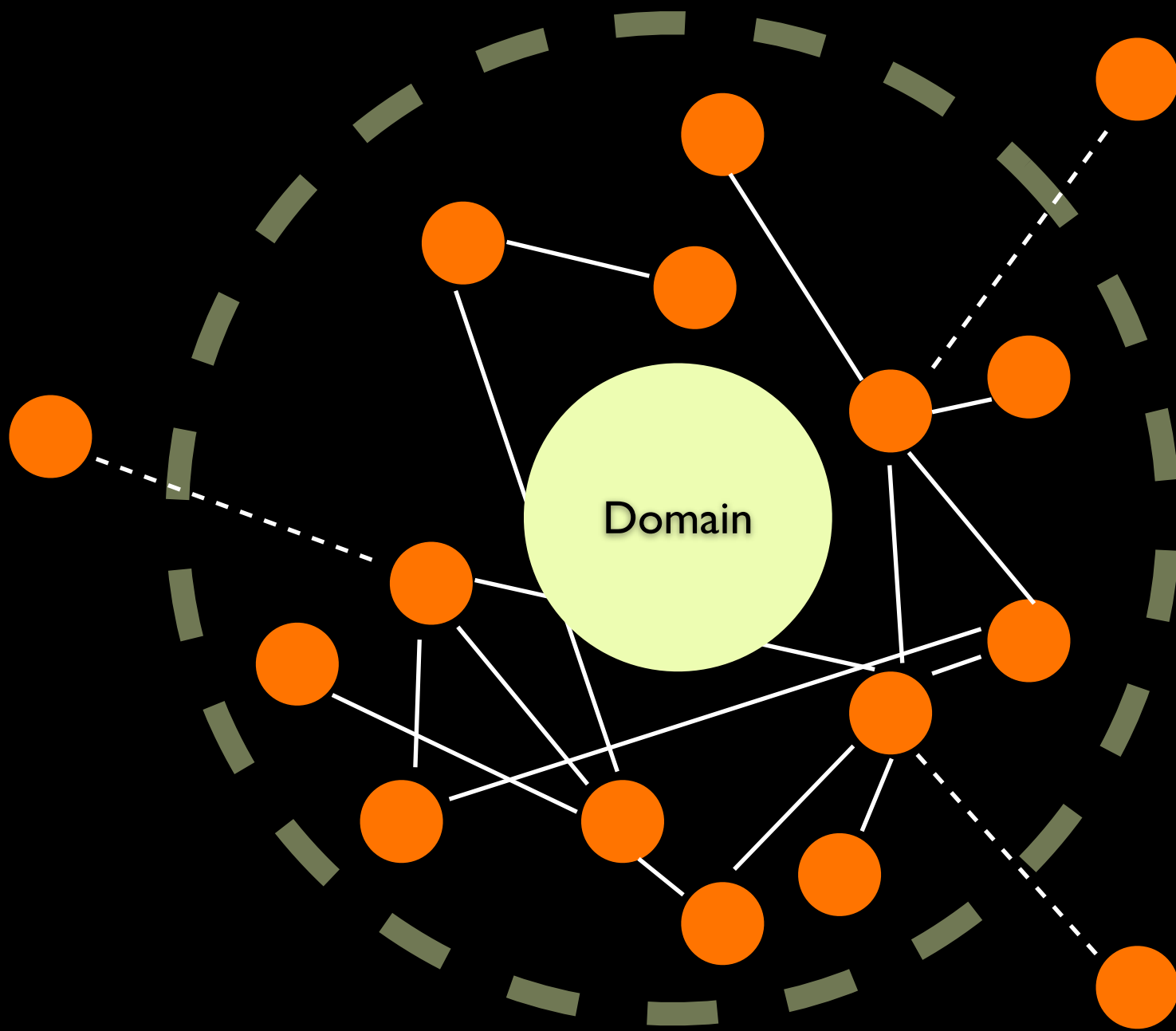
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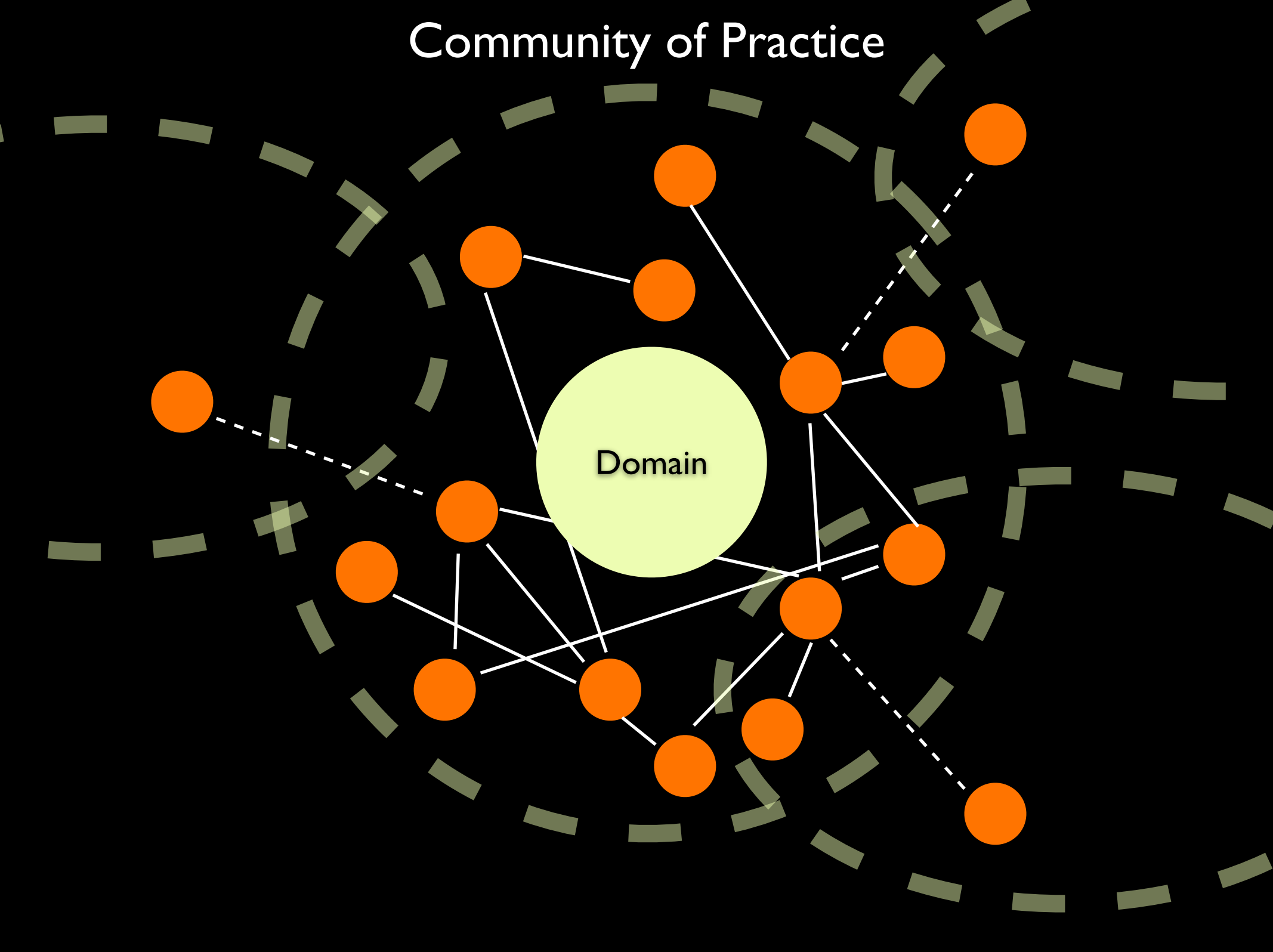
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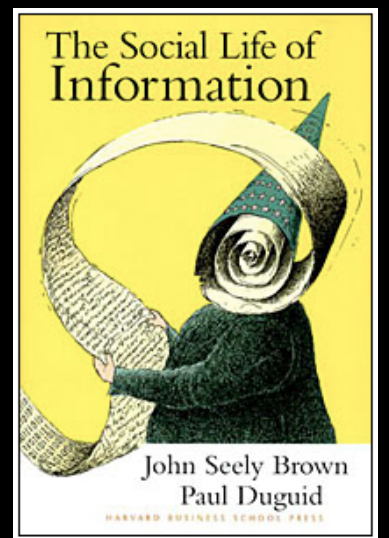
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# Xerox



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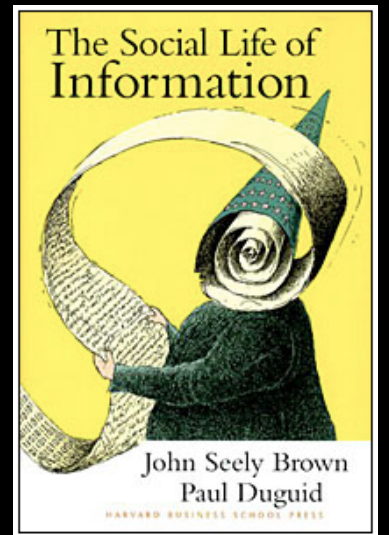
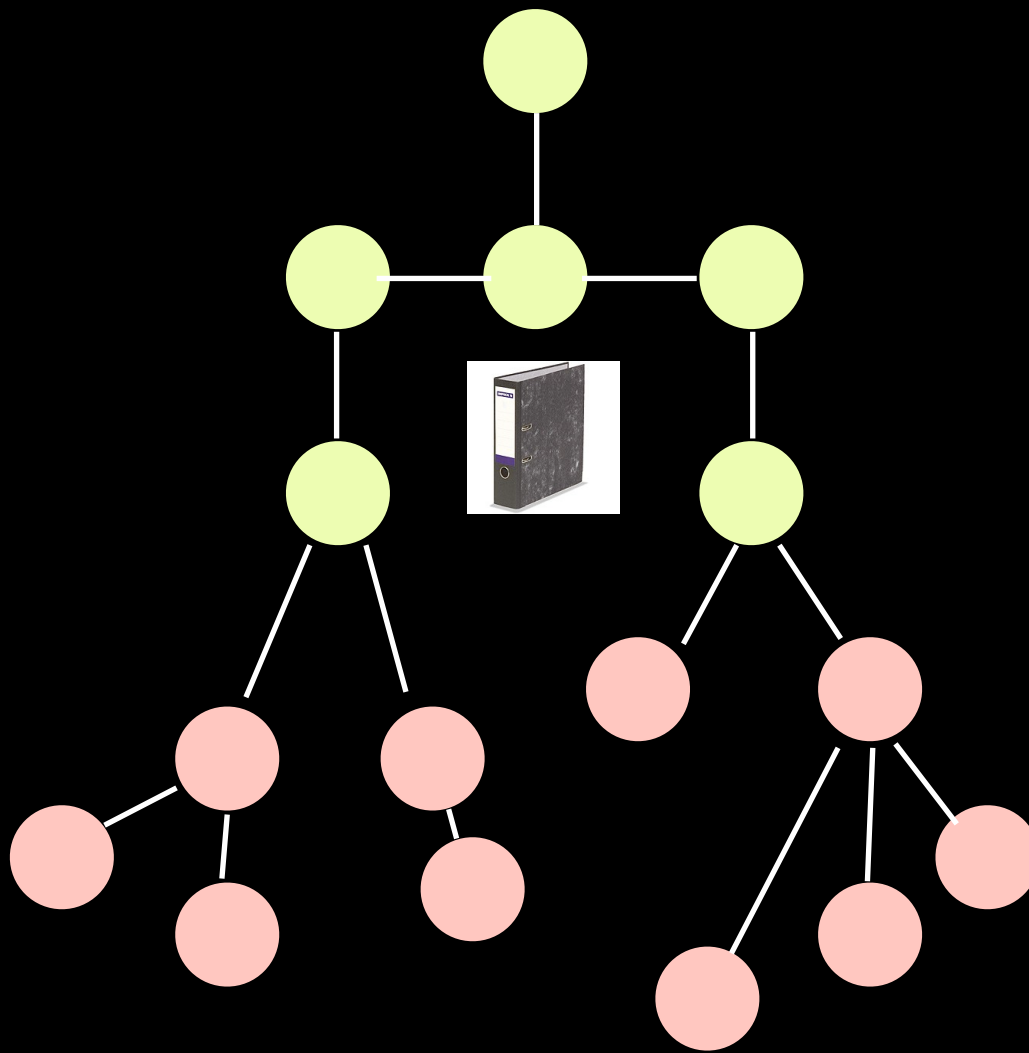
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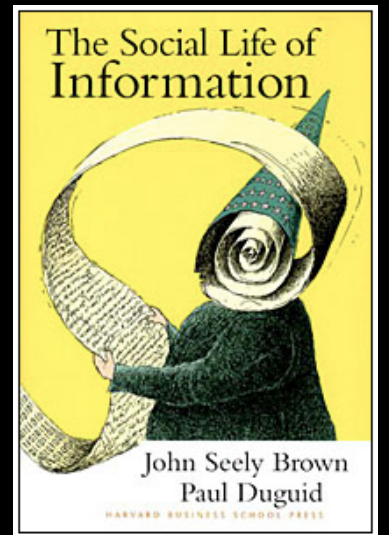
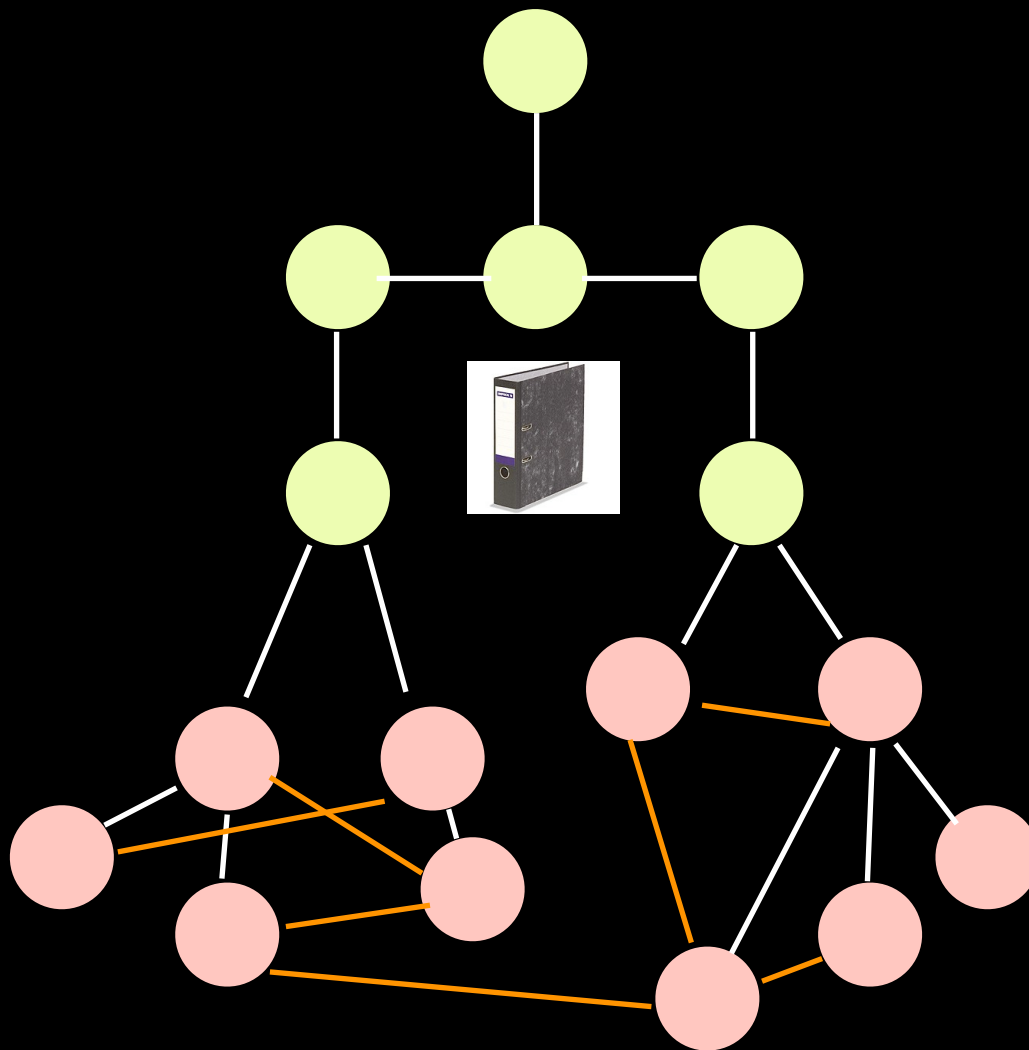
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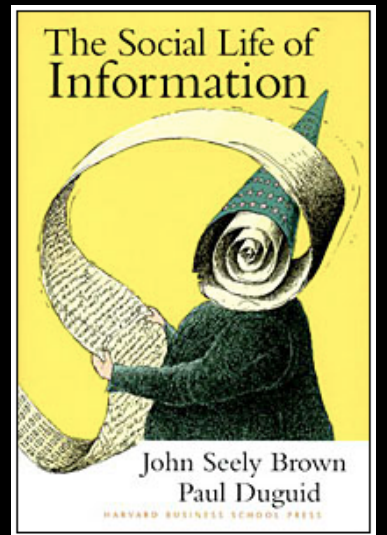
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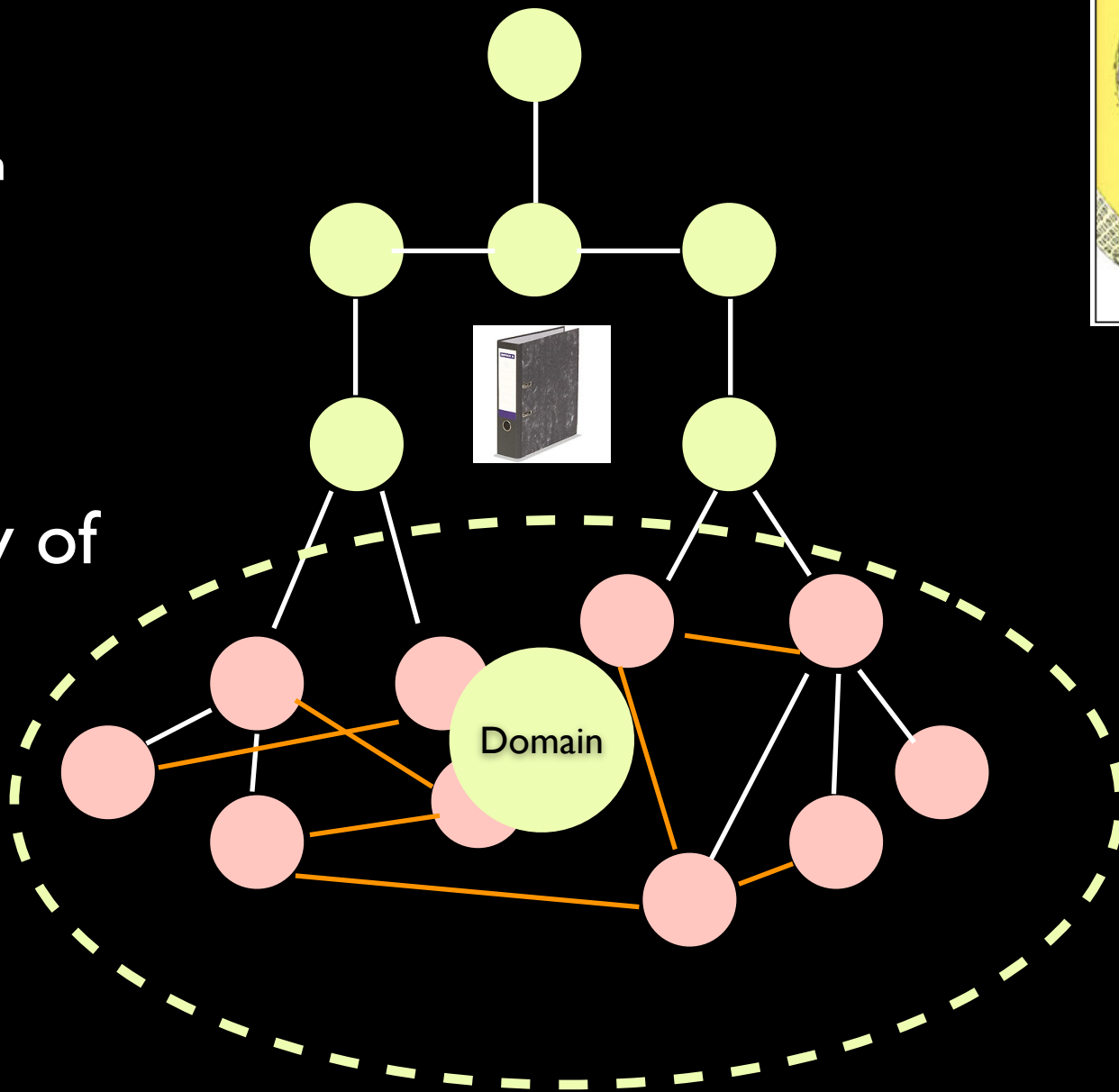


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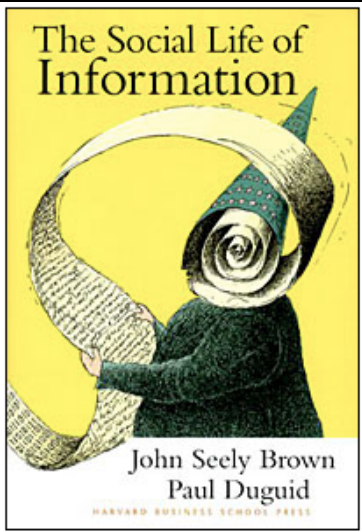




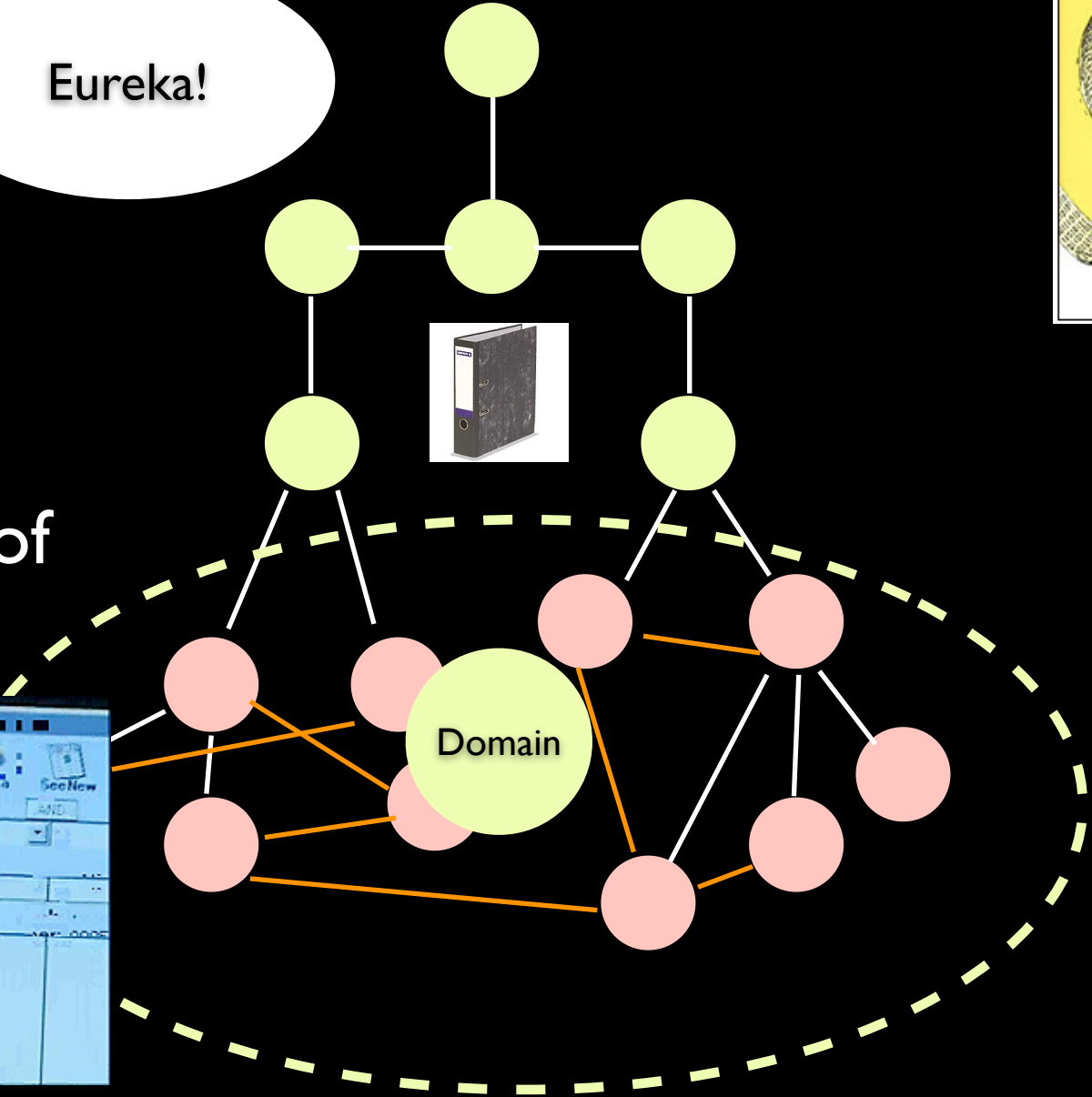
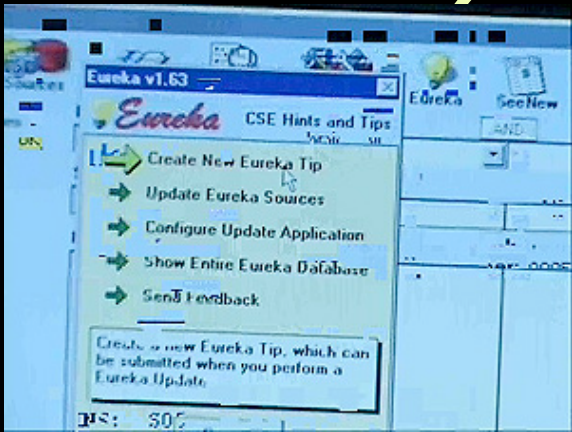
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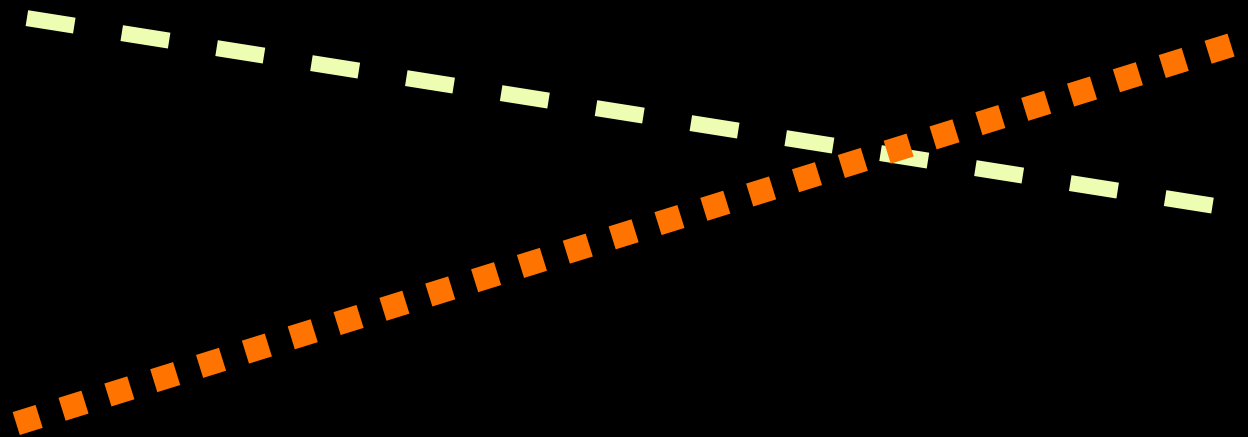
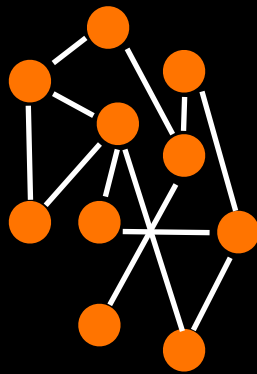
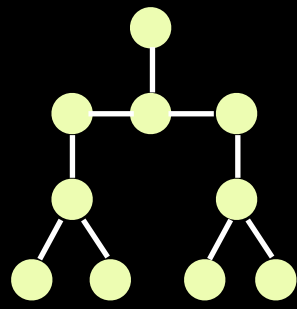
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# Organic Networks [Learning & Innovation]

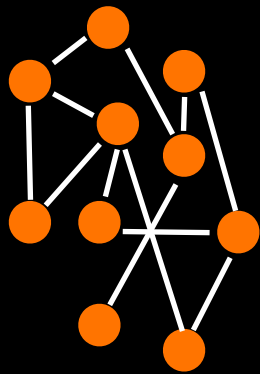
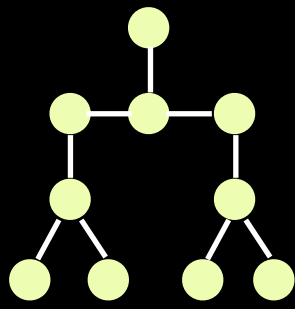
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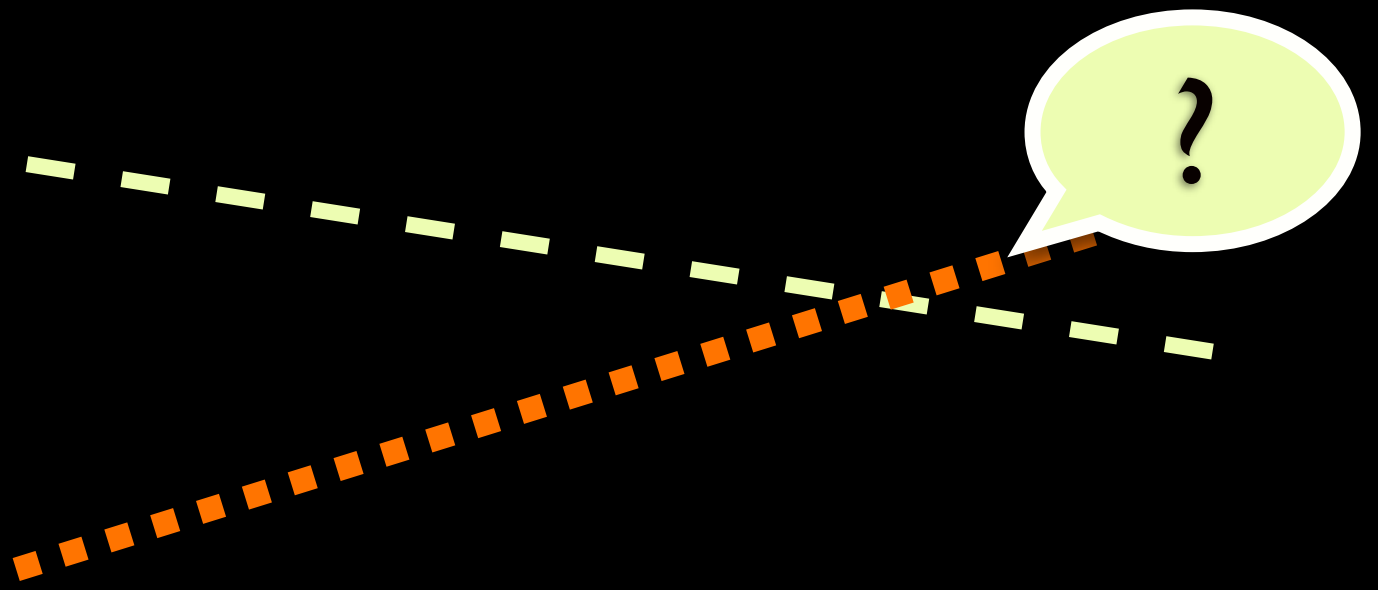
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It means, however, that the traditional network is going to have to learn to let go of some of its control, and at least when it comes to learning and community, let the group guide the domain.

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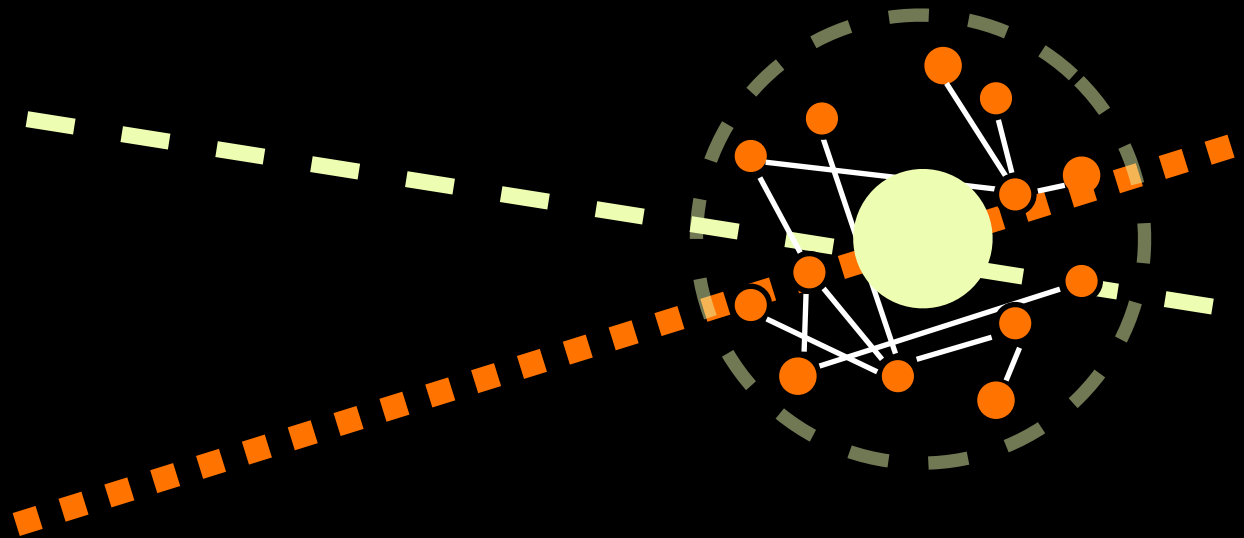
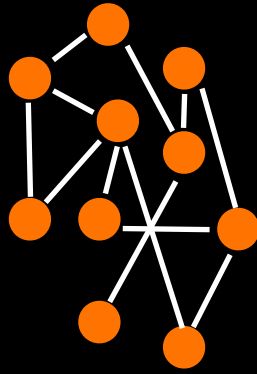
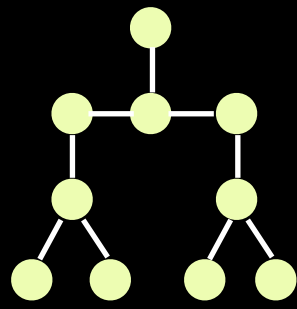
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They're Cropping  
Up All Over



And really, if you think about it, we don't have any choice. Because the tools are there and they're going to crop up all over whether we want them to or not.



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 Open Discussion	Threads	Posts	Last post
<div> <a href="#">Not diagnosed but worried</a> (2 viewing) For those of you who have not been diagnosed but are concerned about developing breast cancer for the first time or receiving a diagnosis after a mammogram or other testing <i>Moderator: <a href="#">Melissa &amp; Tami</a></i></div>	684	5378	<div> <a href="#">Re: US confirmed 3 lumps</a> (left1hurts) - 03/23/07 08:04 PM</div>
<div> <a href="#">Just Diagnosed</a> (8 viewing) Helping you go from feeling overwhelmed to feeling supported. <i>Moderator: <a href="#">Melissa &amp; Tami</a></i></div>	372	5025	<div> <a href="#">Re: People's reactions</a> (Mandy41) - 03/23/07 08:26 PM</div>
<div> <a href="#">For high-risk women</a> (1 viewing) Share and support others who have a higher risk for developing breast cancer for the first time. <i>Moderator: <a href="#">Melissa &amp; Tami</a></i></div>	33	374	<div> <a href="#">Re: Prophylactic mastectom...</a> (leaf) - 03/23/07 04:45 PM</div>

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It turns out that their forums follow a pattern that you can see in many other similar places -- that the community ends up being not the secondary resource for knowledge, but for the majority of regular users, it’s the *\*primary\** resource.

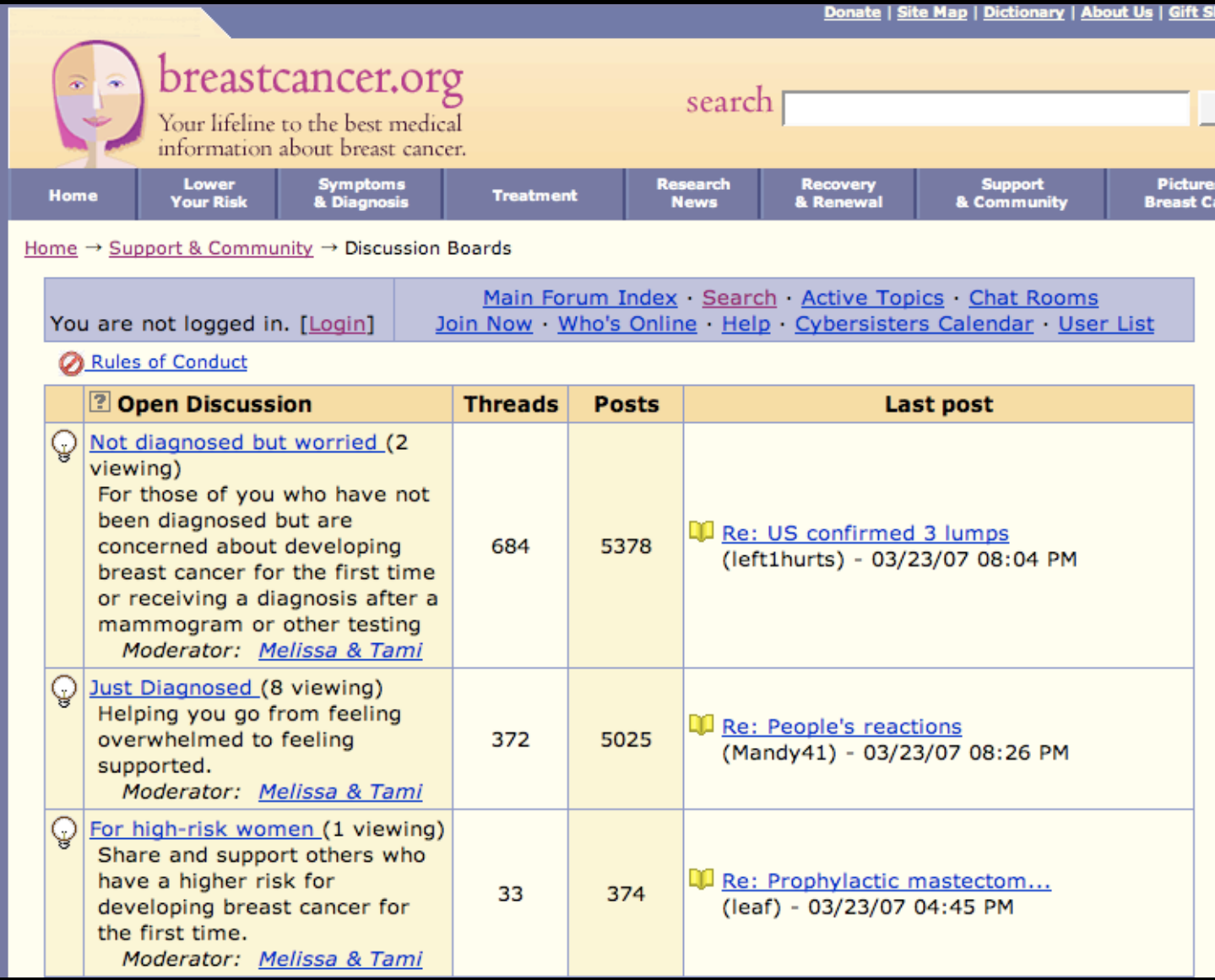
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He has a bunch of friends who play the game as a sort of team, but it functions more like a Community of Practice.  
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<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-5160442894955175707>





Even in multiplayer gaming circles, interesting things are happening.

Joi Ito, the internet entrepreneur, has made a big deal out of his community of practice in World of Warcraft

>>-- he's written how in his professional geek circle, people are actually getting recruited and hired for real jobs based on the qualities of leadership and strategy they display in the game.

He has a bunch of friends who play the game as a sort of team, but it functions more like a Community of Practice.  
In fact multiplayer games are a great place to look to see how people innovate around a practice -- partly because none of the traditional assumptions are in play culturally, and partly because they tend to be technically savvy problem-solving types.

>>  
For example:  
Because Wow isn't the best place for planning and strategy, they'll sometimes dip into Second Life to map out attacks and raids, then execute them in World of Warcraft.

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## So how do you design for them?

31

So how on earth do you design for such a thing?

There's a lot of great stuff out there about how to design for social networks, and it's not possible to cover it all here... I'll have some links on my site and in my notes to some excellent resources, some of which were presented at the conference this weekend.

But I've tried to boil down some essential rules of thumb that especially apply to Communities of Practice. And I've put them into a sort of formula...



$$\text{Cultivation} = \frac{\text{Motivation}}{\text{Moderation}}$$

Cultivation is essentially motivation divided by moderation.

That is, cultivation is done by getting the ratio of motivation to moderation just right for the particular community you're working with.

>>

You have to cultivate it ... you have to be willing to get your hands dirty, and be involved, and care about it. And that usually means it's best if those doing the cultivating are in the community. Any system you create needs to enable this kind of involvement -- that members can be the cultivators.

>>

You the system needs to encourage and motivate people to be involved; and that means they it has to utilize members' self-interest. Communities of Practice are not idealistic ... they're practical. People want to know that their skill will improve, that they will get better at what they do and be recognized and rewarded for it.

One recent study on virtual communities of practice emphasized the importance of Shared Artifacts. Members need something they can work on together -- not just talking in the air, but touching something real or virtual. That's one of the powerful things about Second Life is that, as in the Ito example, the team was able to 'meet' in a place where they could collaboratively manipulate things and edit things together. They also have a wiki and other things that they can co-author and co-edit.

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Moderation may be the hardest thing. Even if you have a physical co-located community, if you create tools for them where they can work together online, it takes away the subtlety of communication. In person we can convey infinite information about things with body language. So if someone is getting out of hand, we can usually squelch it a bit just with gestures and movement. But online you can't do this ...

So any system you create for online communities needs to allow for subtle cues that can mimic real conversation in a sense. We're seeing this with karma systems, ratings, the ability to mute other members, etc. The trick is to figure out the right combination for your group. One rule of thumb, I think, is that your system needs to have the ability to adjust the rules of moderation for fine-tuning



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**So, is Information Architecture a Community of Practice?**

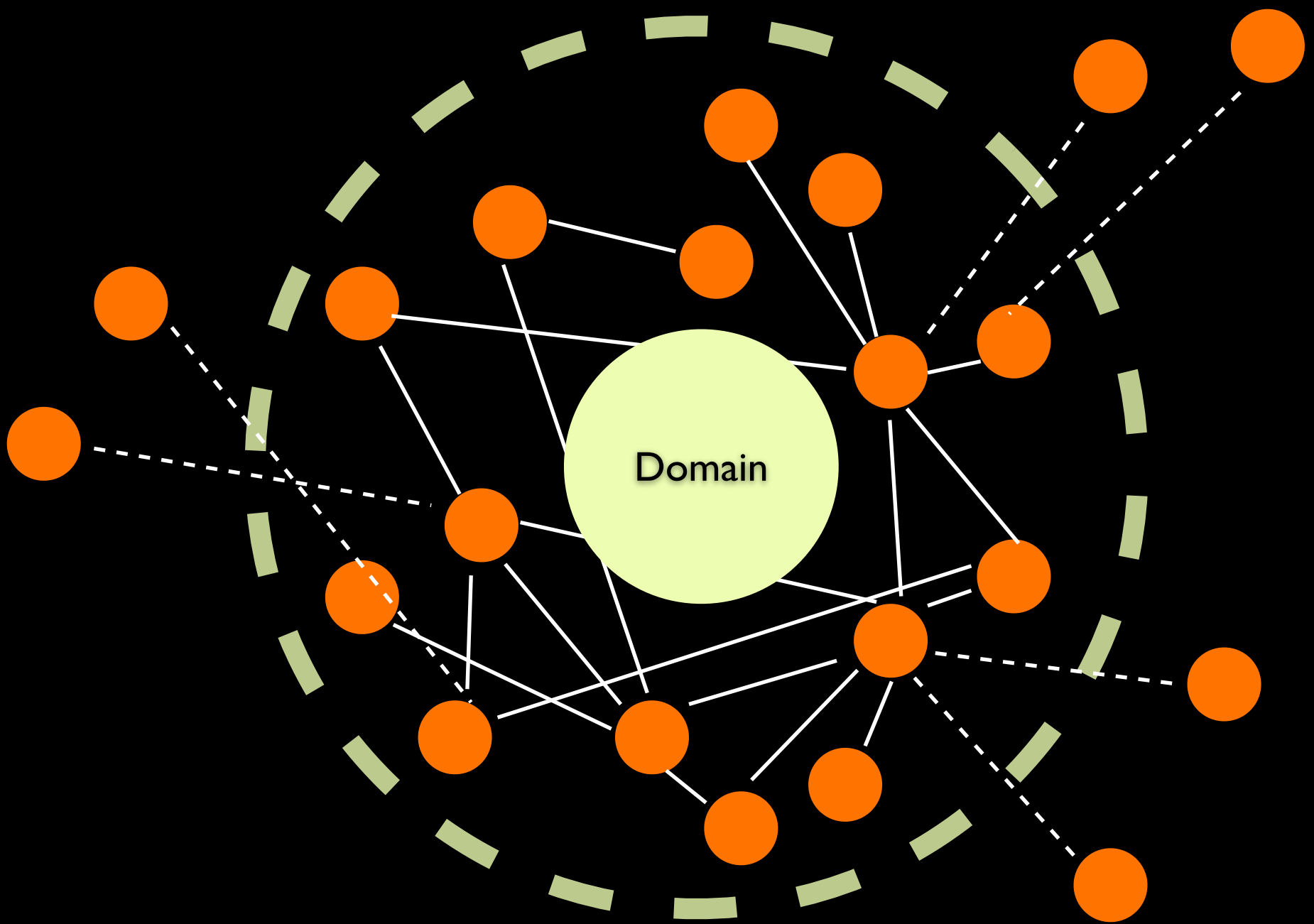


## Chapter 3

### ~~Defining~~ Describing the Damn Thing



# IA Community of Practice



35

For years there's been talk about how IA is or isn't a "real discipline" because other disciplines do many of the same things we do.

But if you get out of the mentality of "Disciplines" and back into the idea of "Practices" it helps assuage a lot of this anxiety about shared tools and methods.

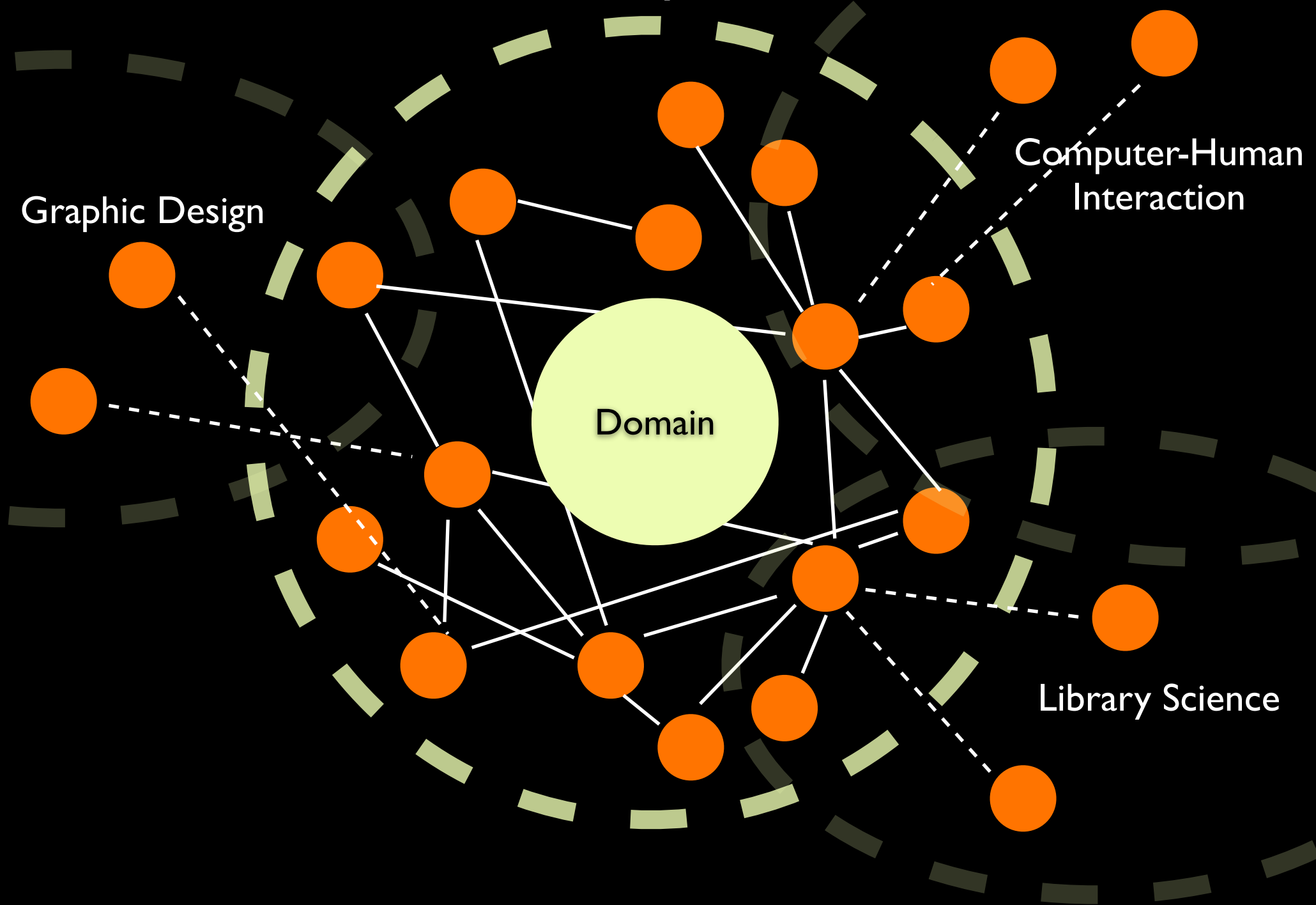
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There is a remaining question, though: if what makes us a community of practice is a shared domain -- and that domain is somehow distinct from the domains of other practices --

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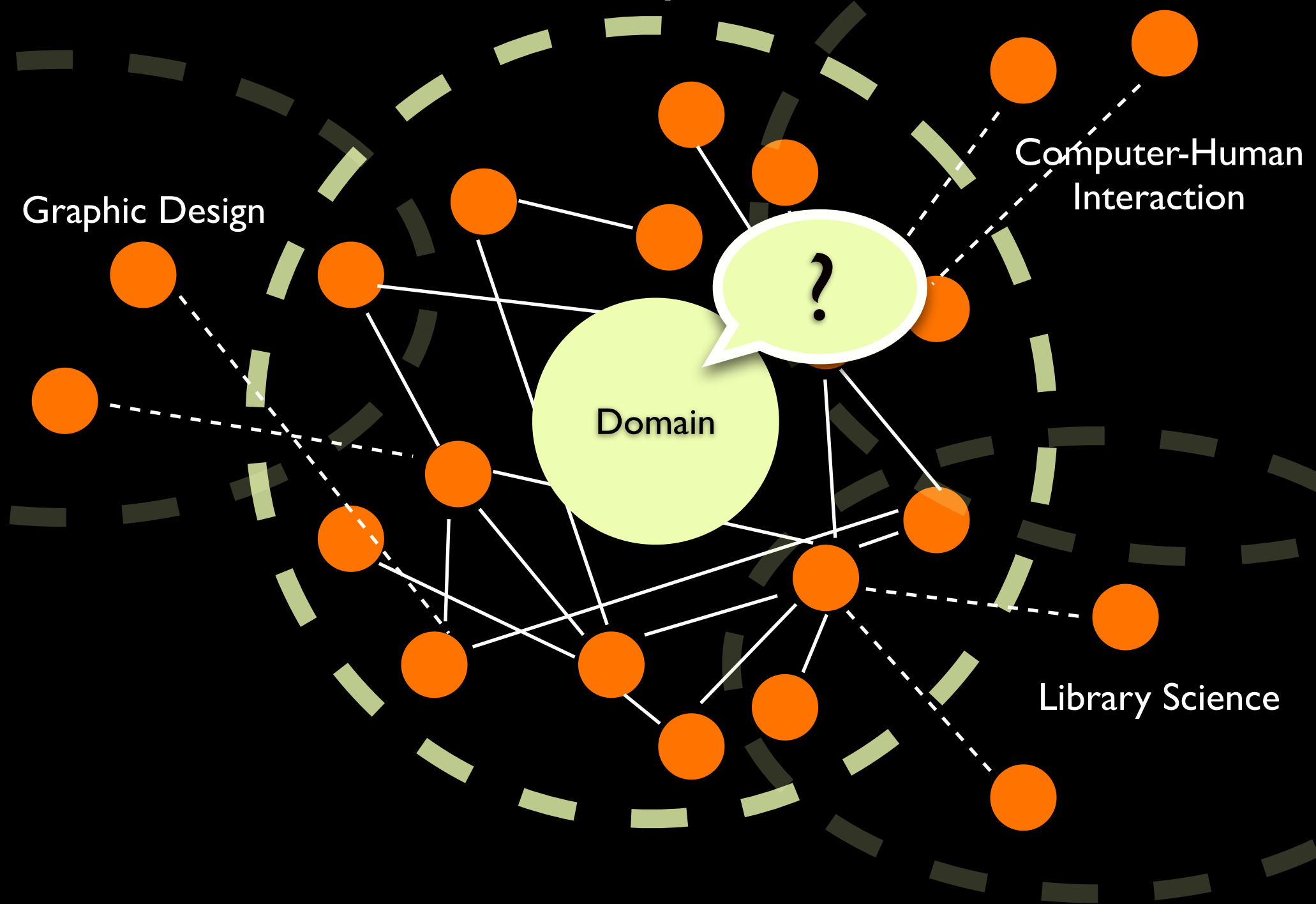
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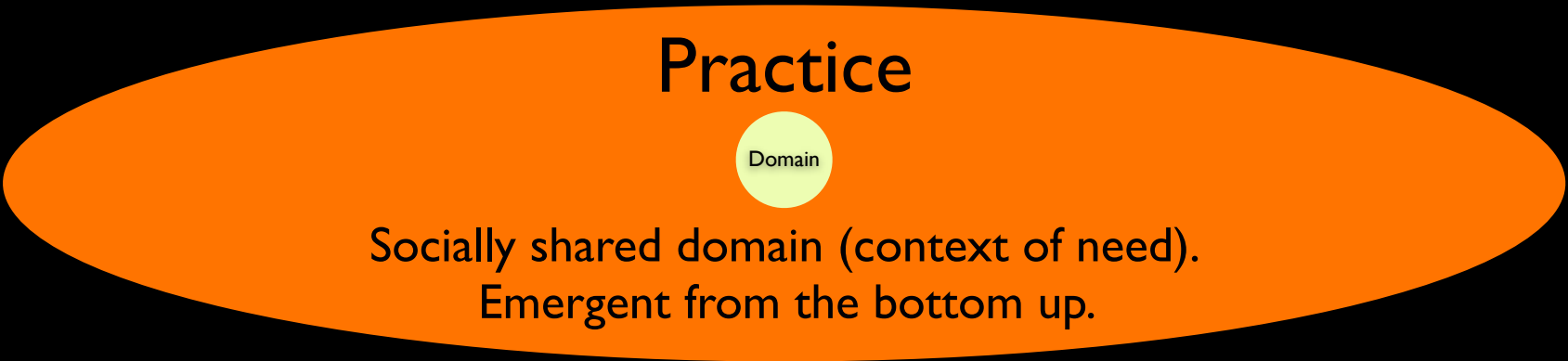
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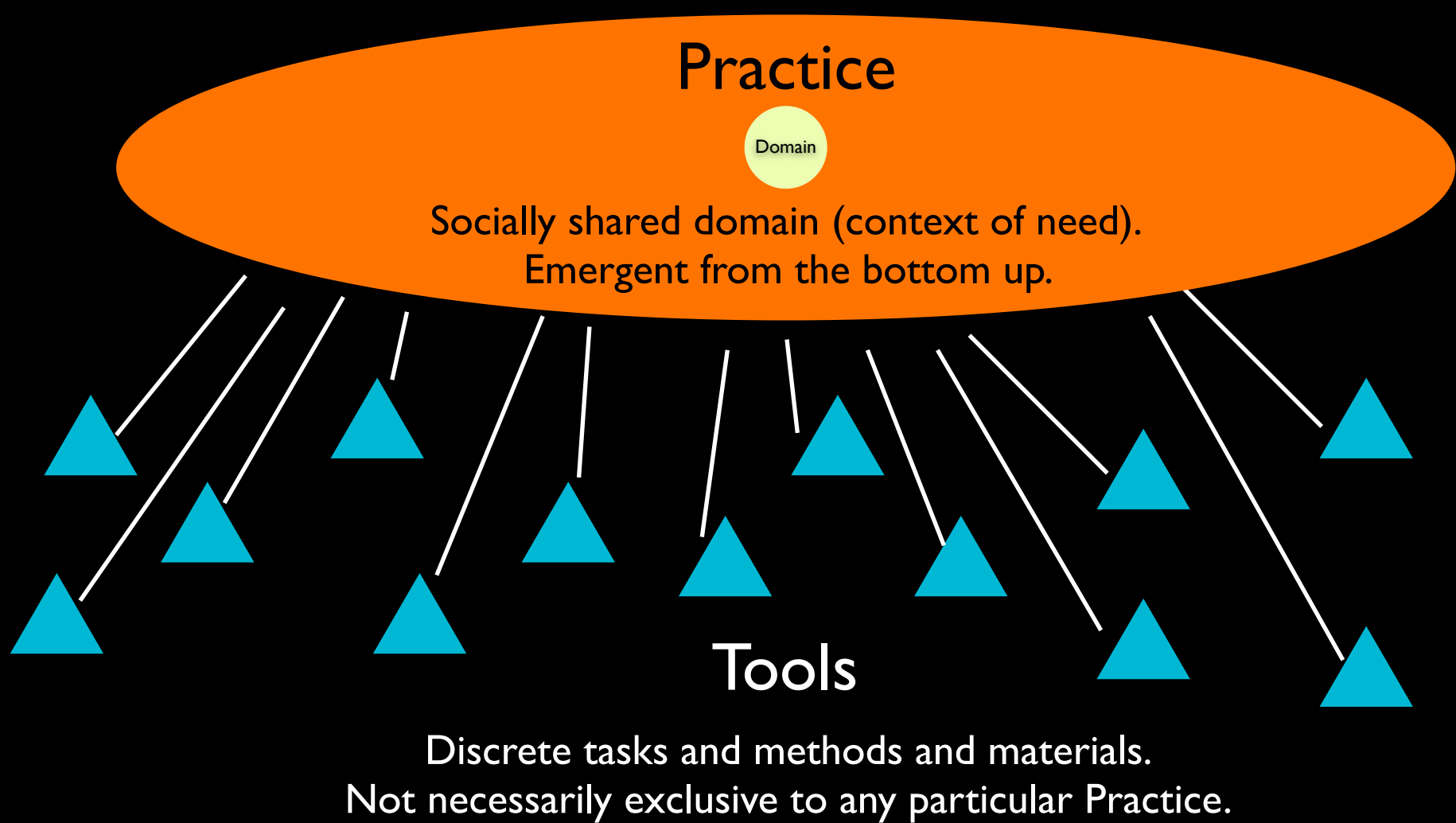
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As we’ve established, a Practice organizes itself around a socially shared domain, and it’s an emergent, bottom–up entity.

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A practice, by its nature, has many tools at its disposal. And it’s VERY important to note, none of these tools is necessarily exclusive to this one practice.





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## One Tool

To illustrate this, let's look at the lowly shovel.

>> Our flower-planting friends from earlier use a shovel for their practice. But it's not an exclusive tool for gardening.

>> This same tool is useful in many other practices. From farming to firefighting to sandcastles and shoveling snow.

>> A PRACTICE is not defined by its tools, only by its domain.

So the question for us shouldn't be "who" does wireframes, but why. That is, what is it about our domain that wireframes as a tool helps us to figure out.



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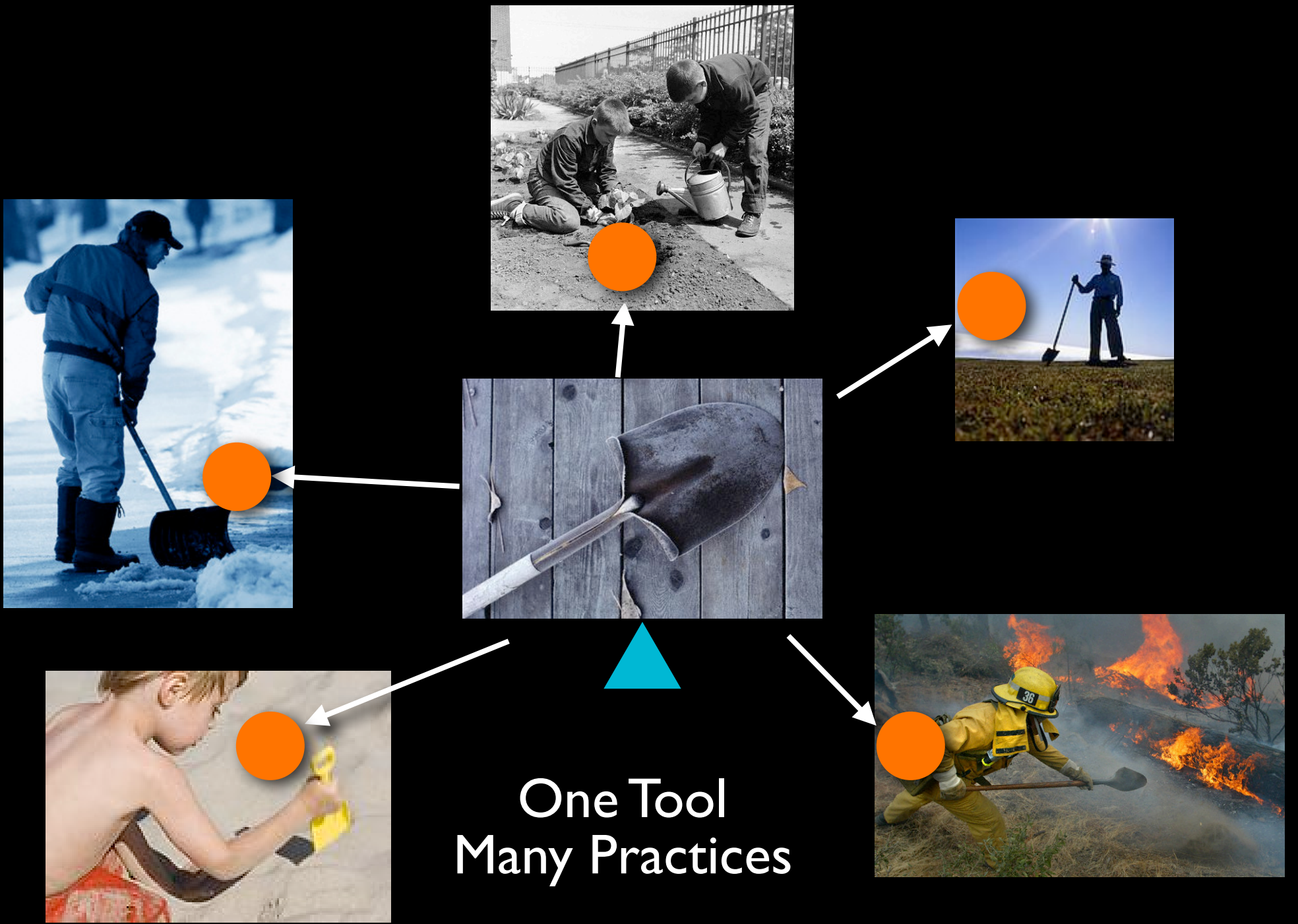
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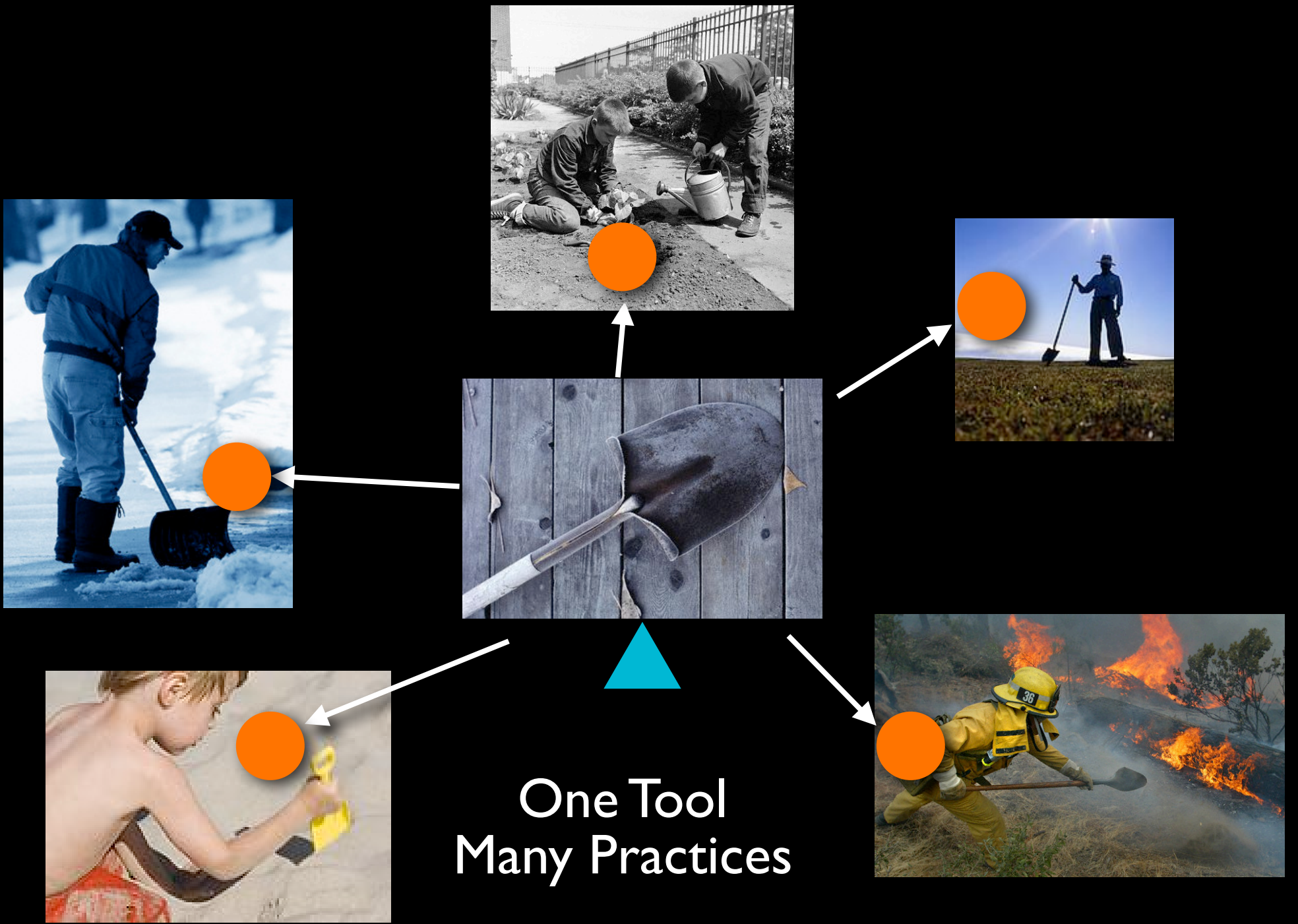


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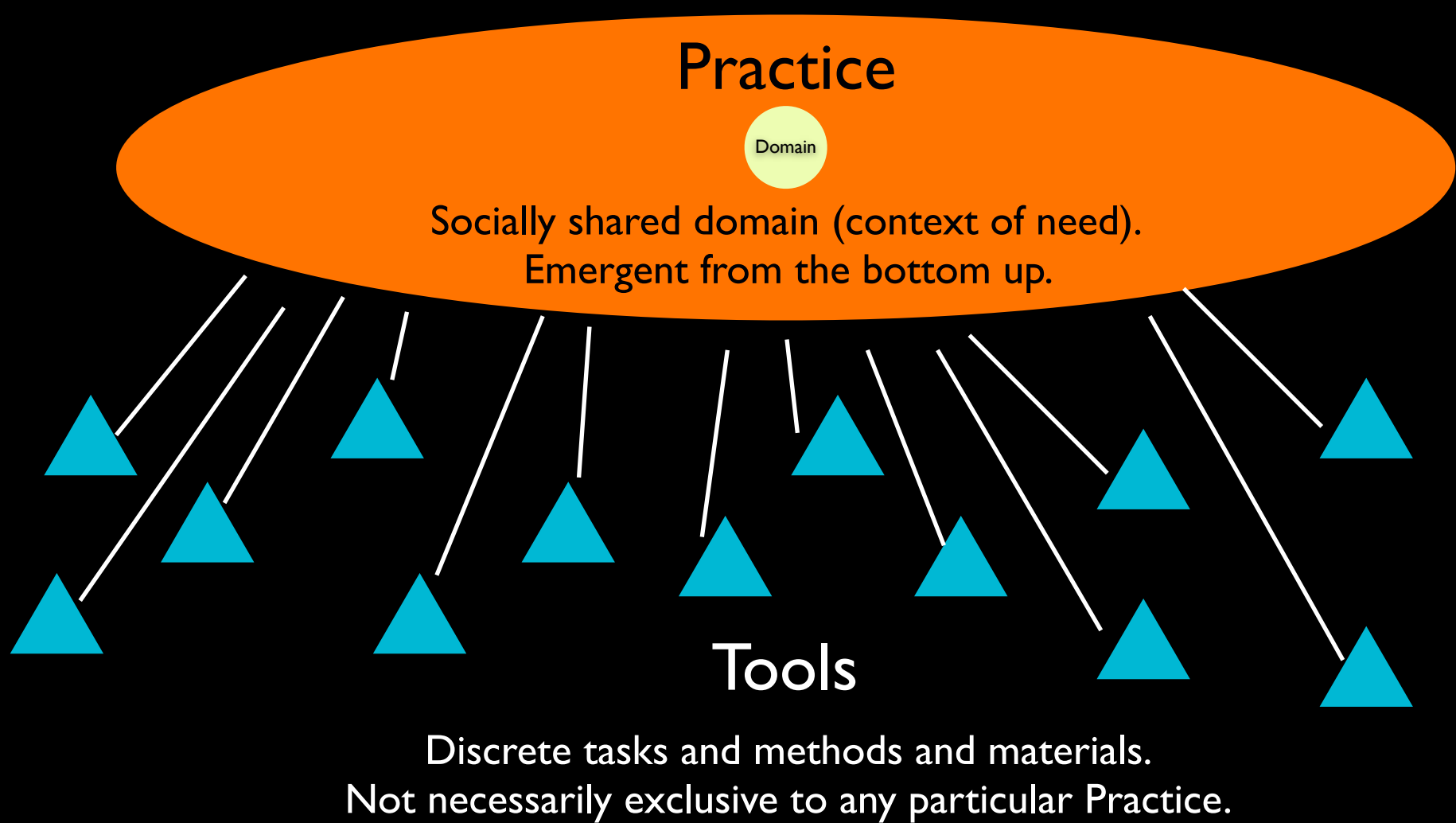
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Now back to our diagram.

As a Practice sticks around a while, it may want to seek professional legitimacy in the marketplace.

>>

Business and Academia, being entities that are highly structured and standardized, look for those qualities in the professions it chooses to accept. But a Community of Practice is much more an organic network than a command network.

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So a practice that yearns for that acceptance tries to establish some kind of “discipline” to give it that structure. A discipline establishes standards and definitions, creates curricula, and plans things from the top down.

Because of their different natures, there’s always some tension between a practice and its discipline, but in the best circumstances it can be a productive tension. And the discipline then gives a sort of mantle of respectability to the practice; but also channels money, resources, attention and lots of other good things.

**IMPORTANT distinction: Definition vs. Description** -- When we want to define ourselves, we’re really yearning for that legitimacy and structure. But you can’t Define yourself before you can really describe yourself.

It takes time ... all disciplines emerged from practices. We only just got started with this stuff about 12–15 years ago.

To be a traditional cheesemaker in France, you have to apprentice for anywhere from 10 to 12 years. And that’s making \*cheese!\*

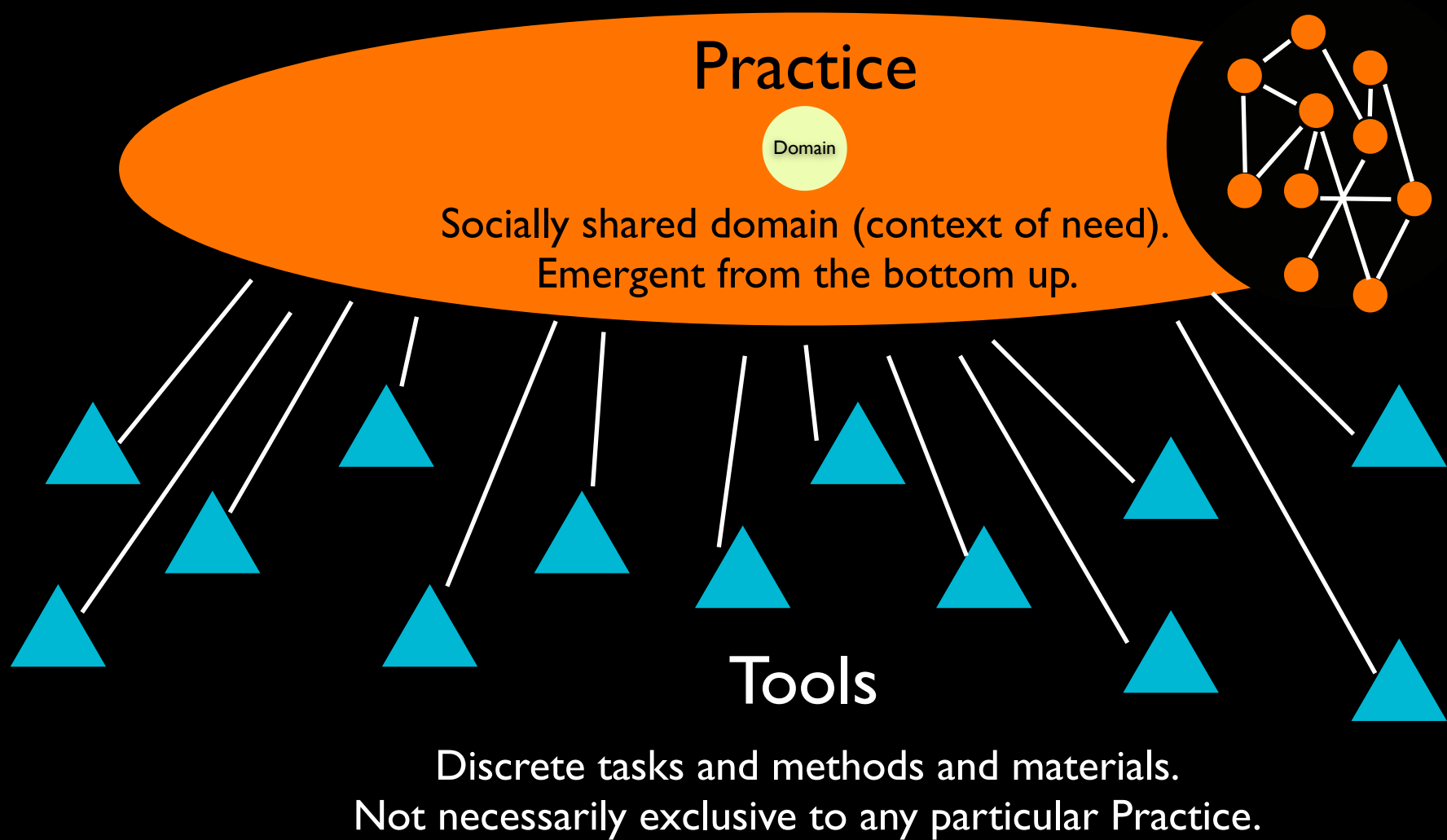
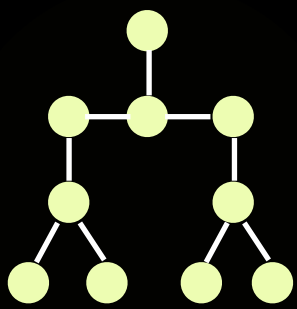
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But even once the discipline provides a definition, it doesn’t replace the practice. The practice and the discipline continue influencing one another in a symbiotic relationship.

In fact, the best thing the discipline can do is provide a nutritious medium for us to grow and thrive ...

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A discipline should be our banana.



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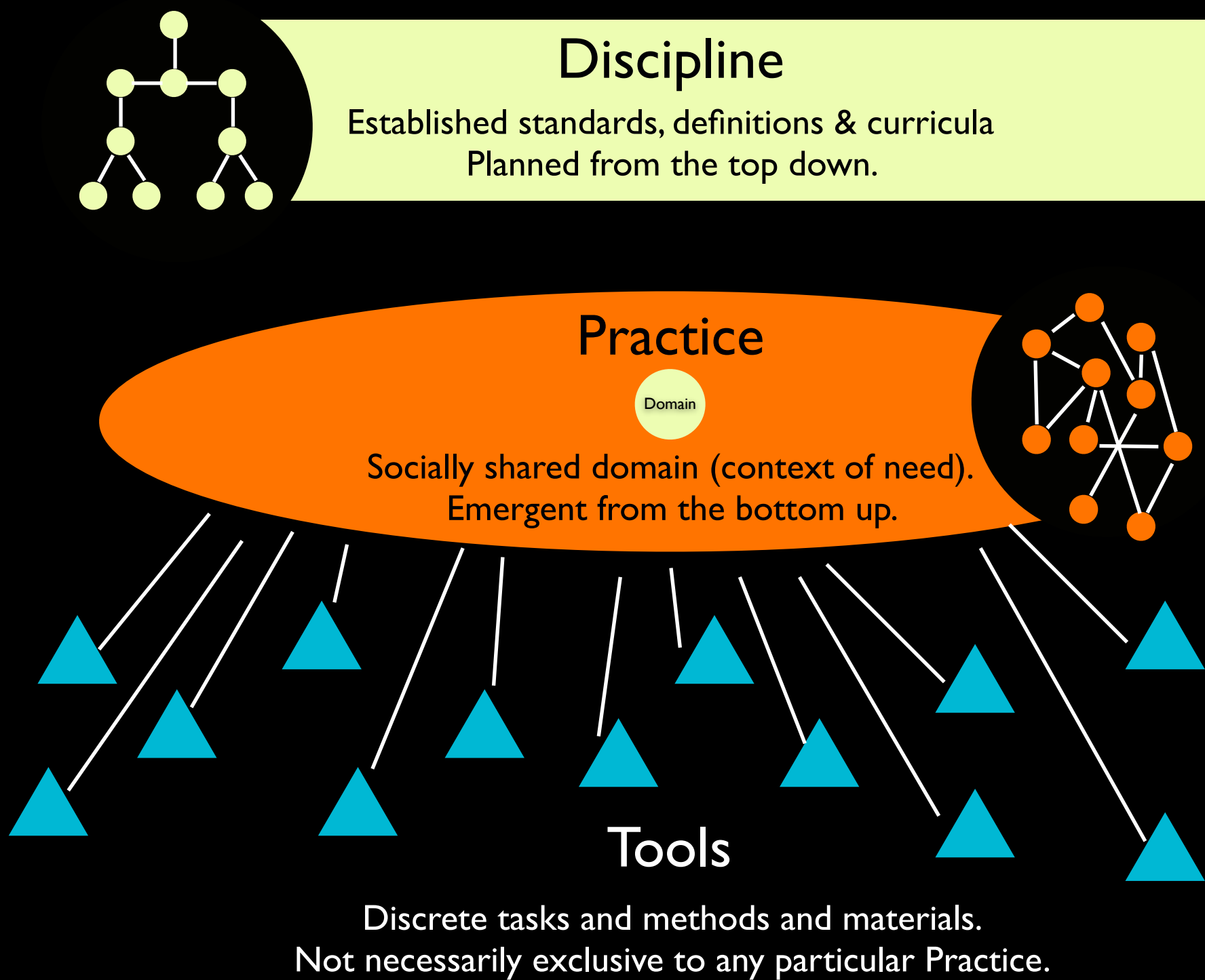
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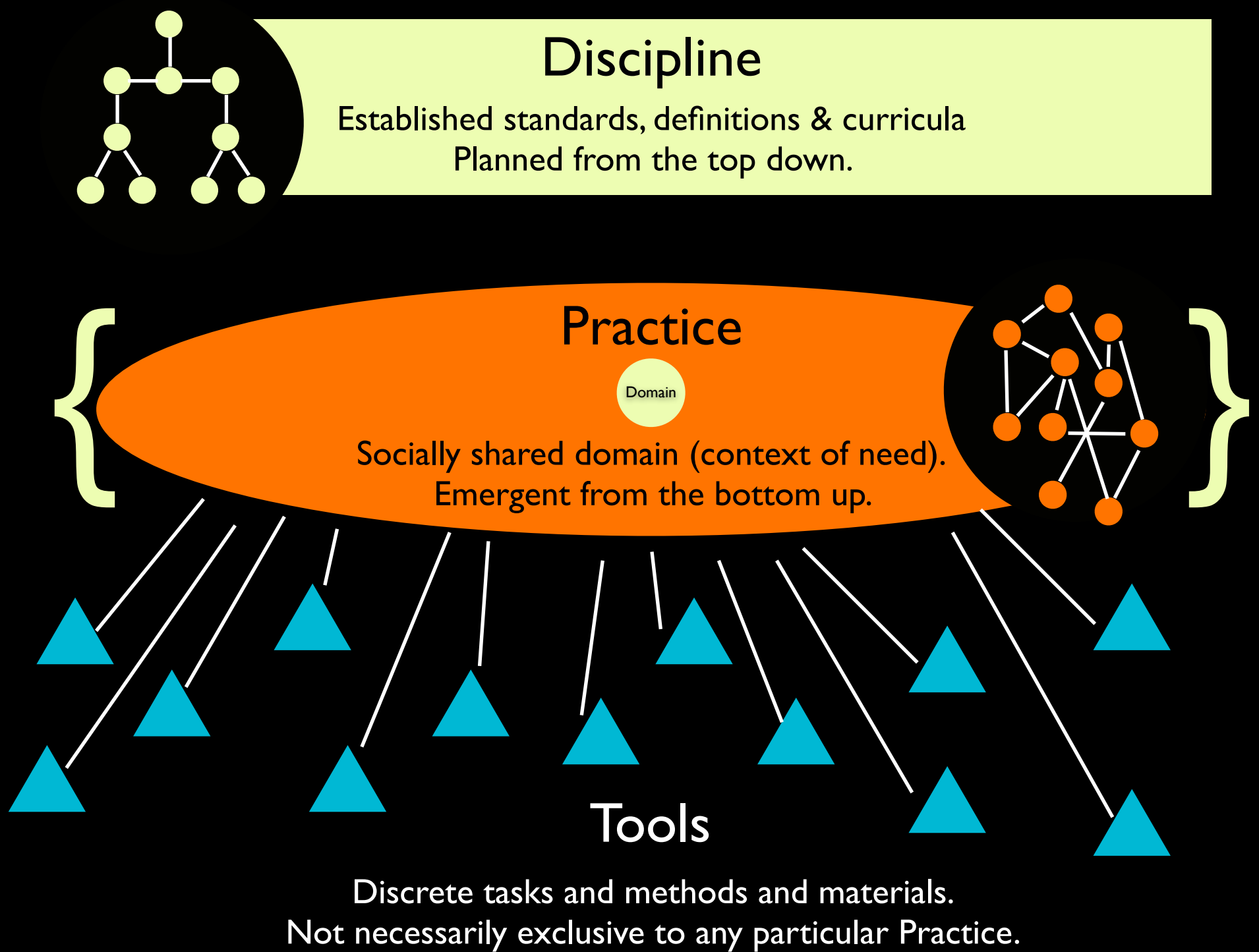
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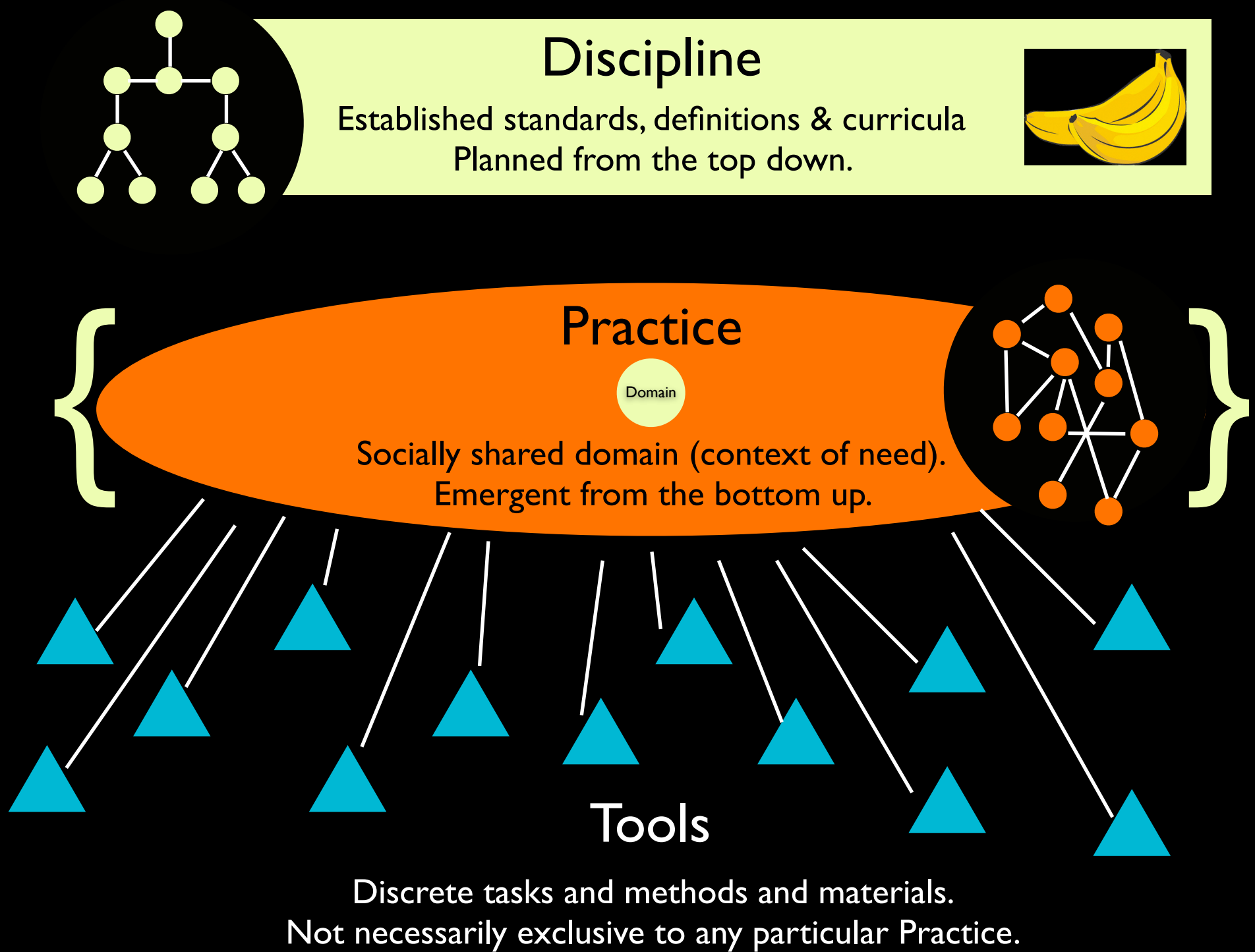
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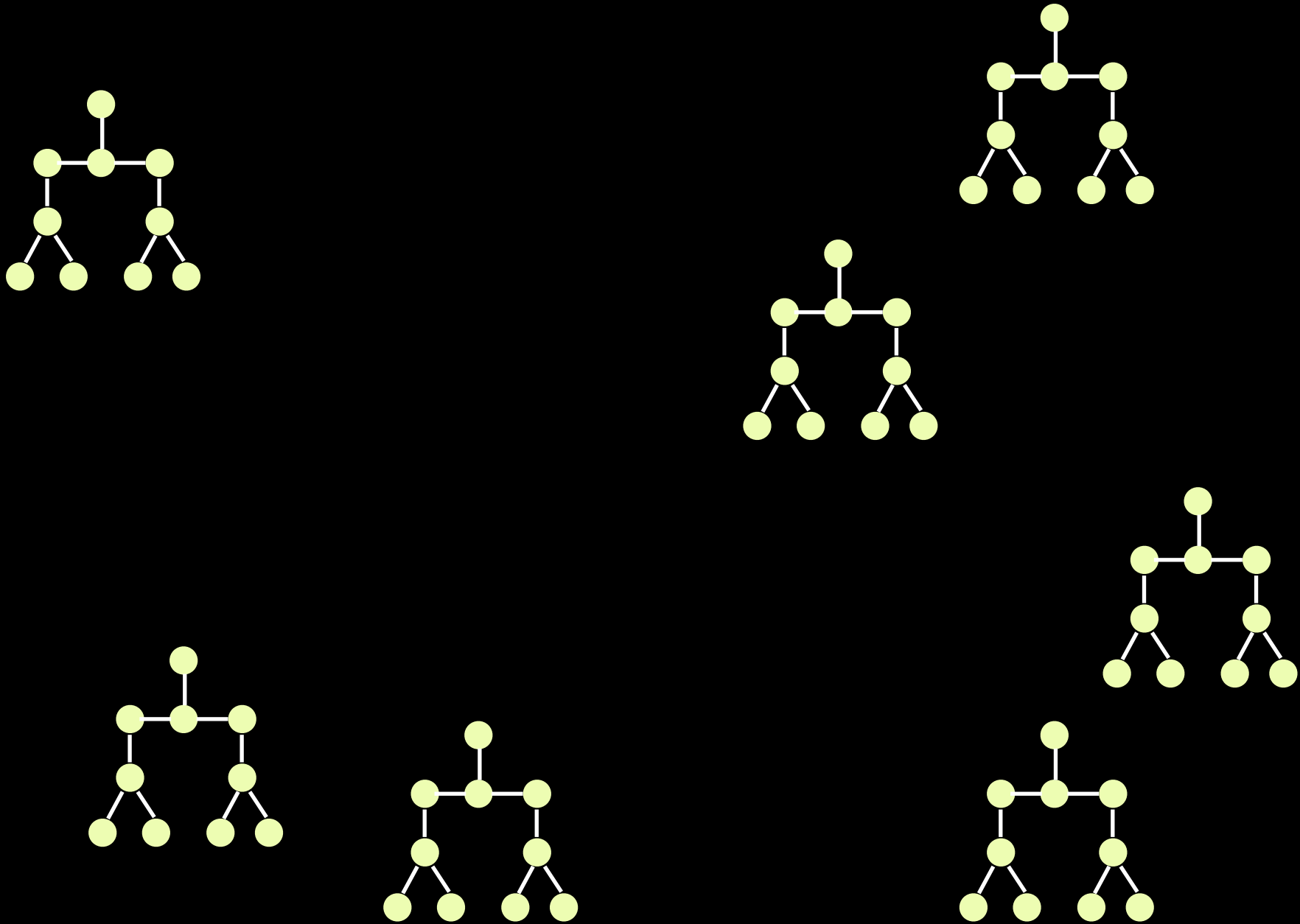


A Discipline is something you follow.

A Practice is something you do.

# So what's our Domain?

So the question remains, what is our domain?  
What shared concern caused our community to coalesce?



I think it has to do with something new in the world that just didn't exist before.

Not long ago most information systems were isolated.

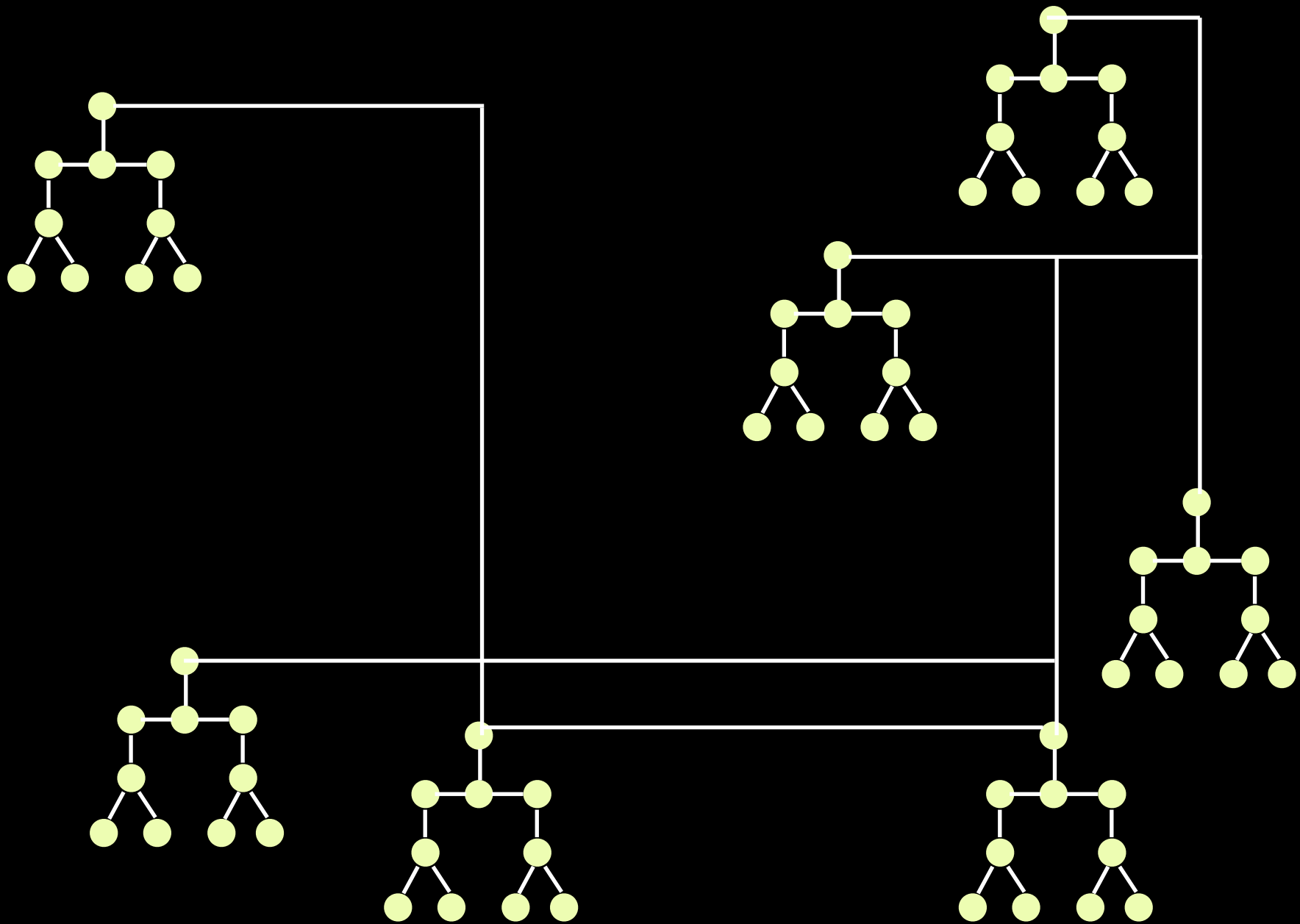
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But then they started being connected together. Still this was somewhat isolated; only certain people had access, and even fewer could change or write to the system.

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The practices and disciplines in existence could deal with most of what these systems did.

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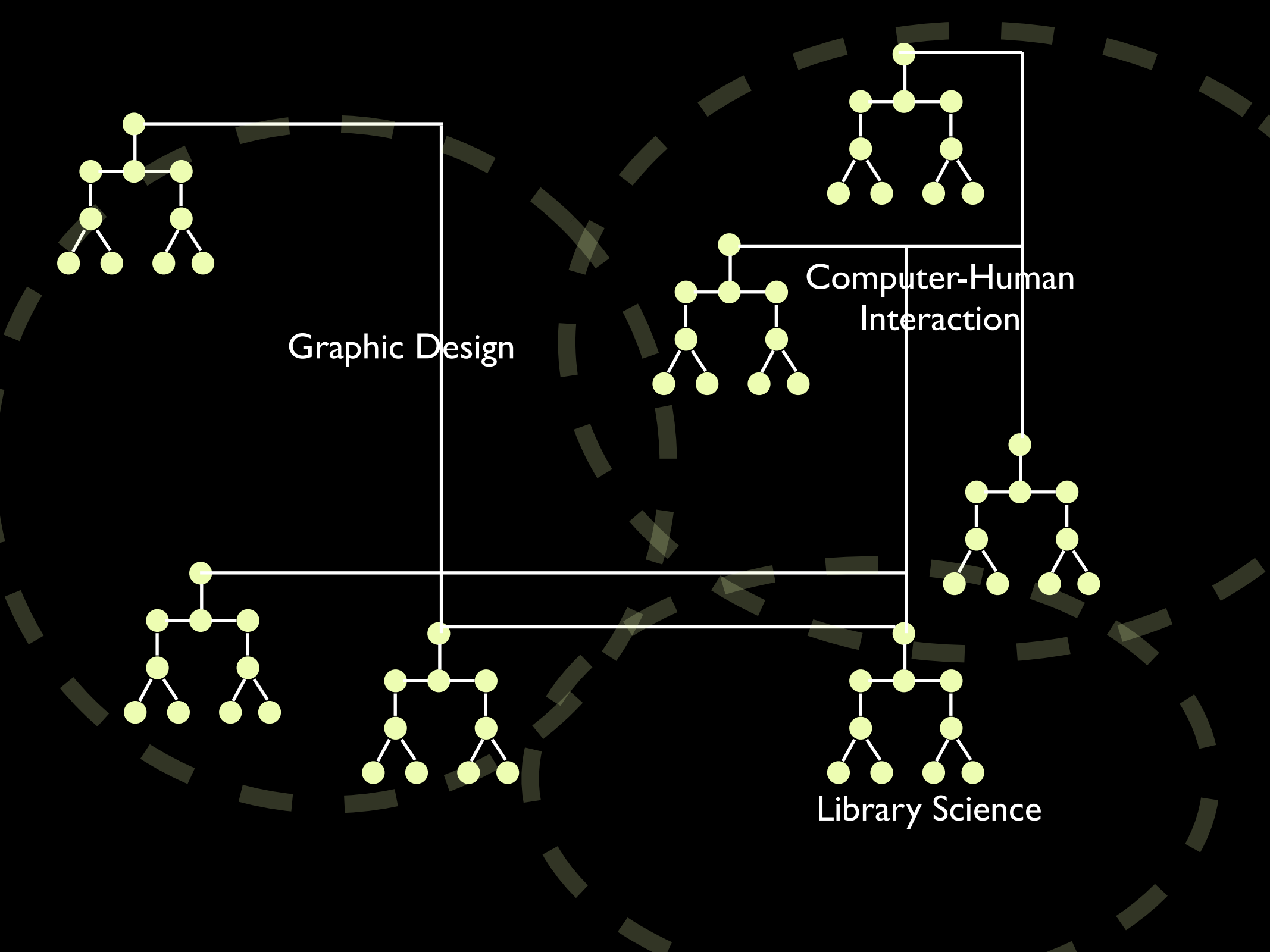
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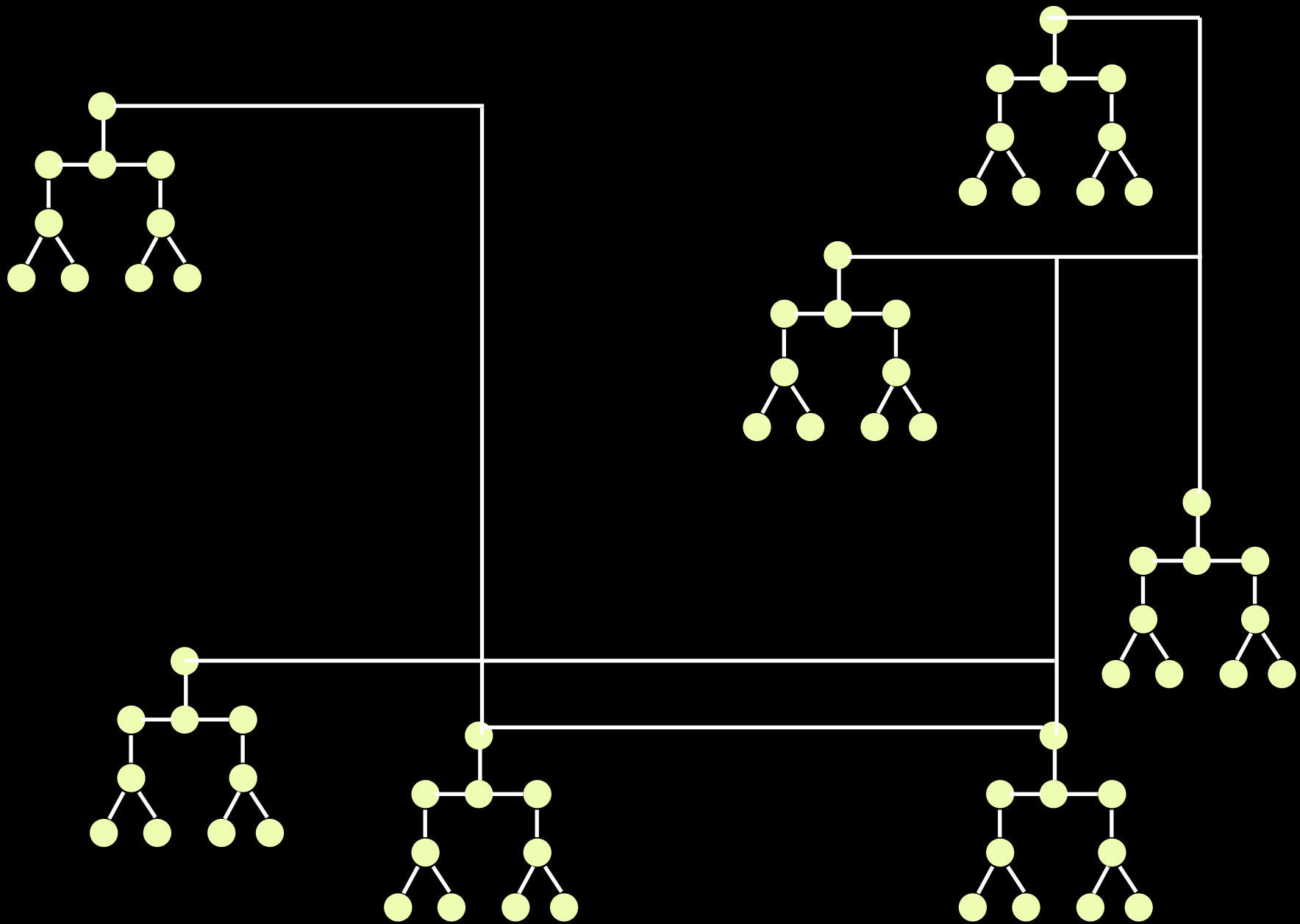
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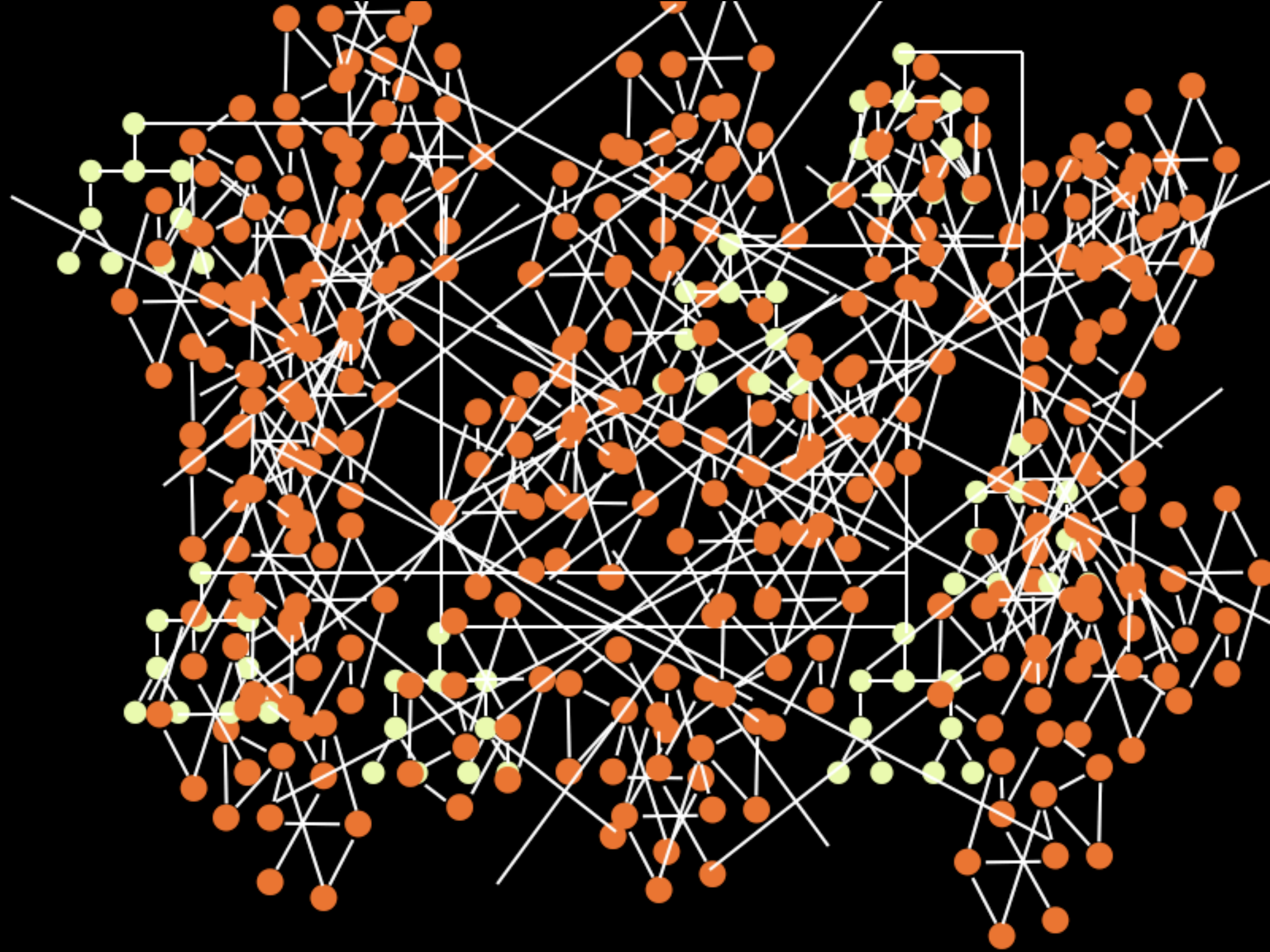


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And it brought something new into the world.

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But if you think of each of these white lines as a conversation, it actually looks kind of beautiful.



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Massively shared, persistent, digital-semantic space.

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Massively shared, persistent, digital-semantic space.

Massively shared means that, whereas in isolated systems what you did could only mean something to a few people, on the web it can mean something to everyone. It becomes a lot more like geography.

Persistent means that the things you do there stay there.

Digital-semantic meaning that it's not made of atoms, it's all made of language, and relevance.

For the sake of brevity,

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I'll call this InfoSpace. [HURRY!!!!]





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InfoSpace is shaped by Information ...  
but it is made of Conversation



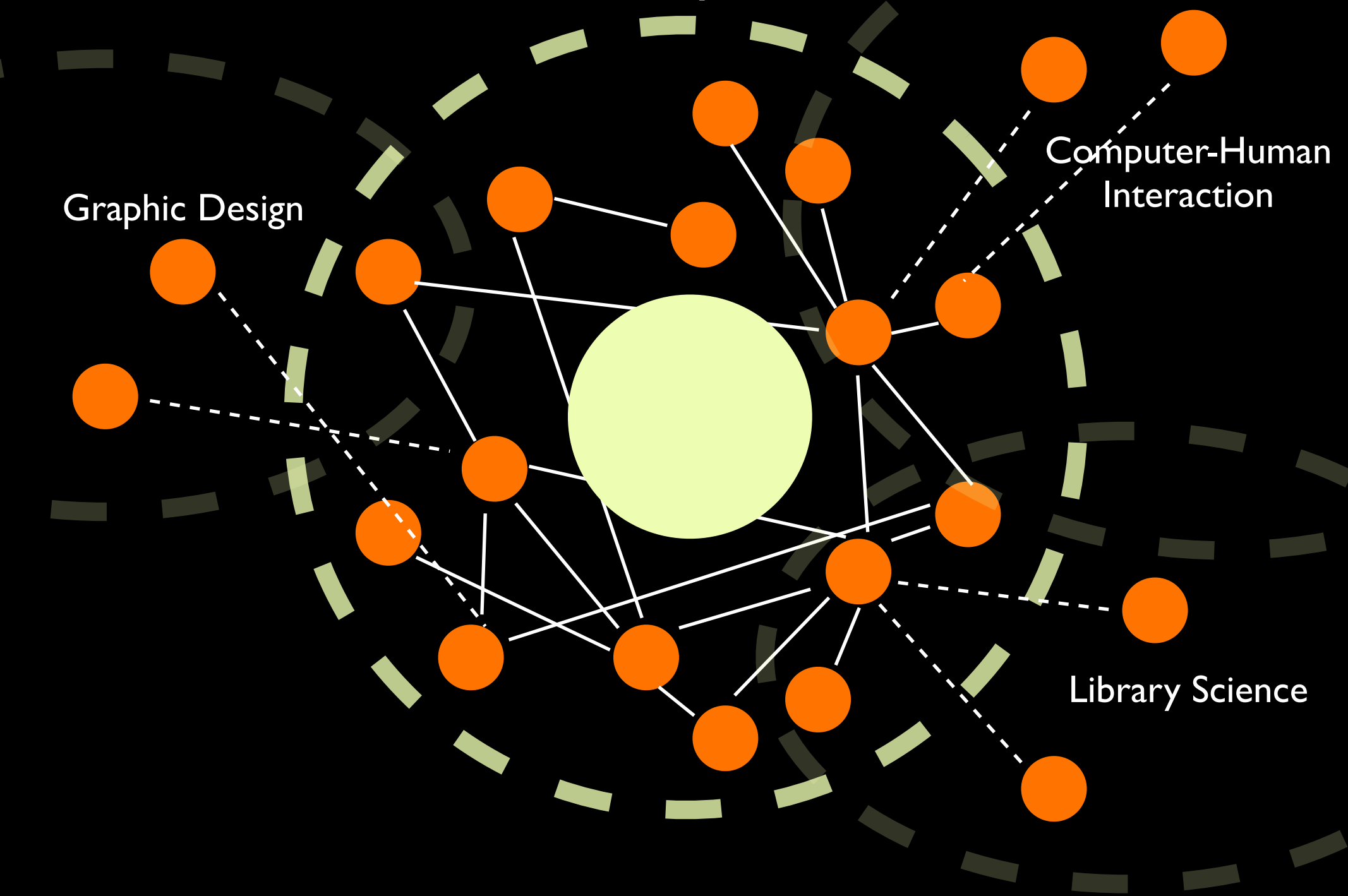
InfoSpace is shaped by Information , but it is made of conversation.

Like a vessel holds water, information holds conversation.

We manipulate information to shape the space for Conversation.



# IA Community of Practice

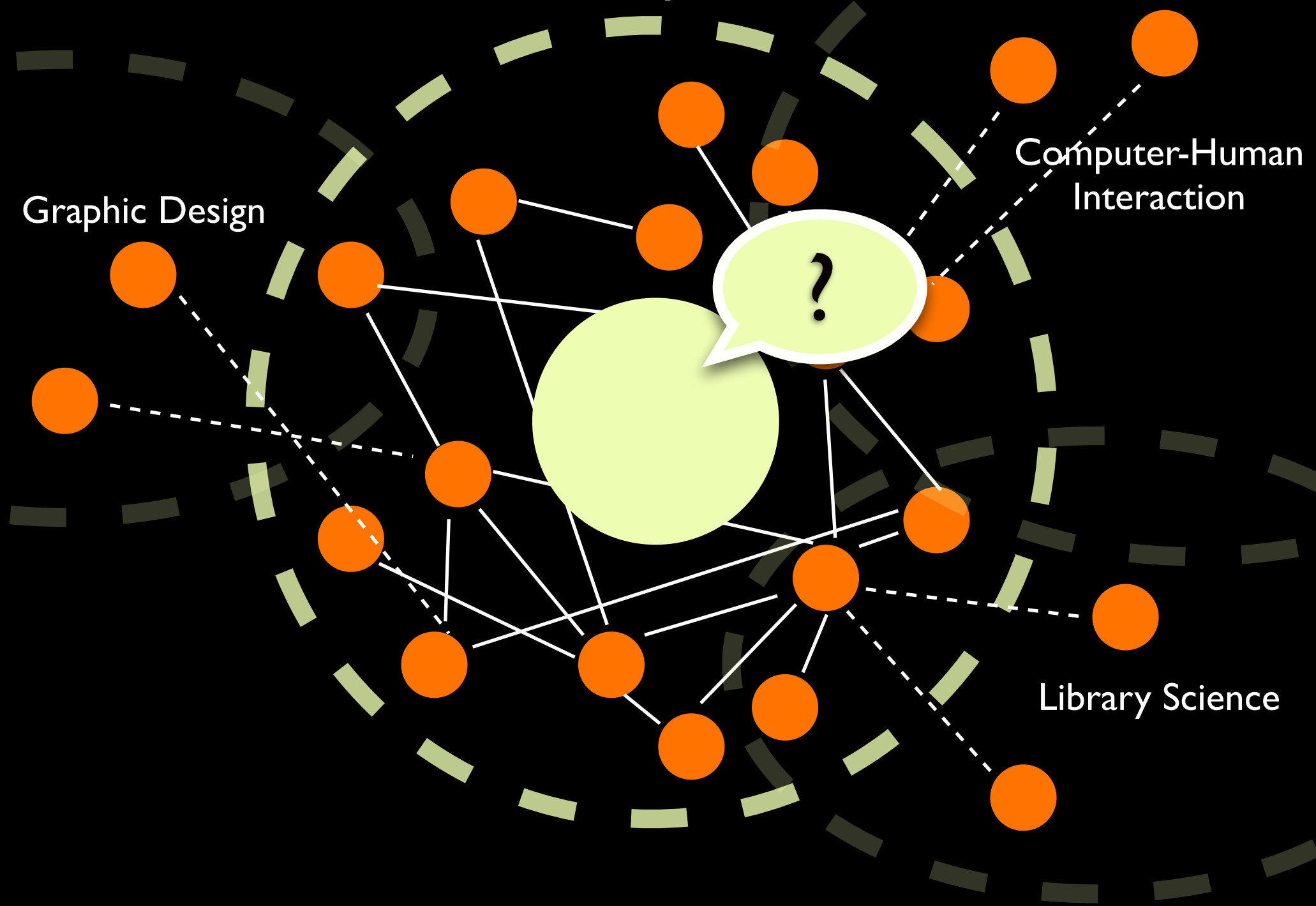


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So what is the domain of our community of practice?  
I think that when the web happened, some of us in different practices felt something was missing -- that something behind the interface and behind the surface interactions needed shape. That's why we coalesced .. and that's our domain.  
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I think it's about infospace.

# IA Community of Practice

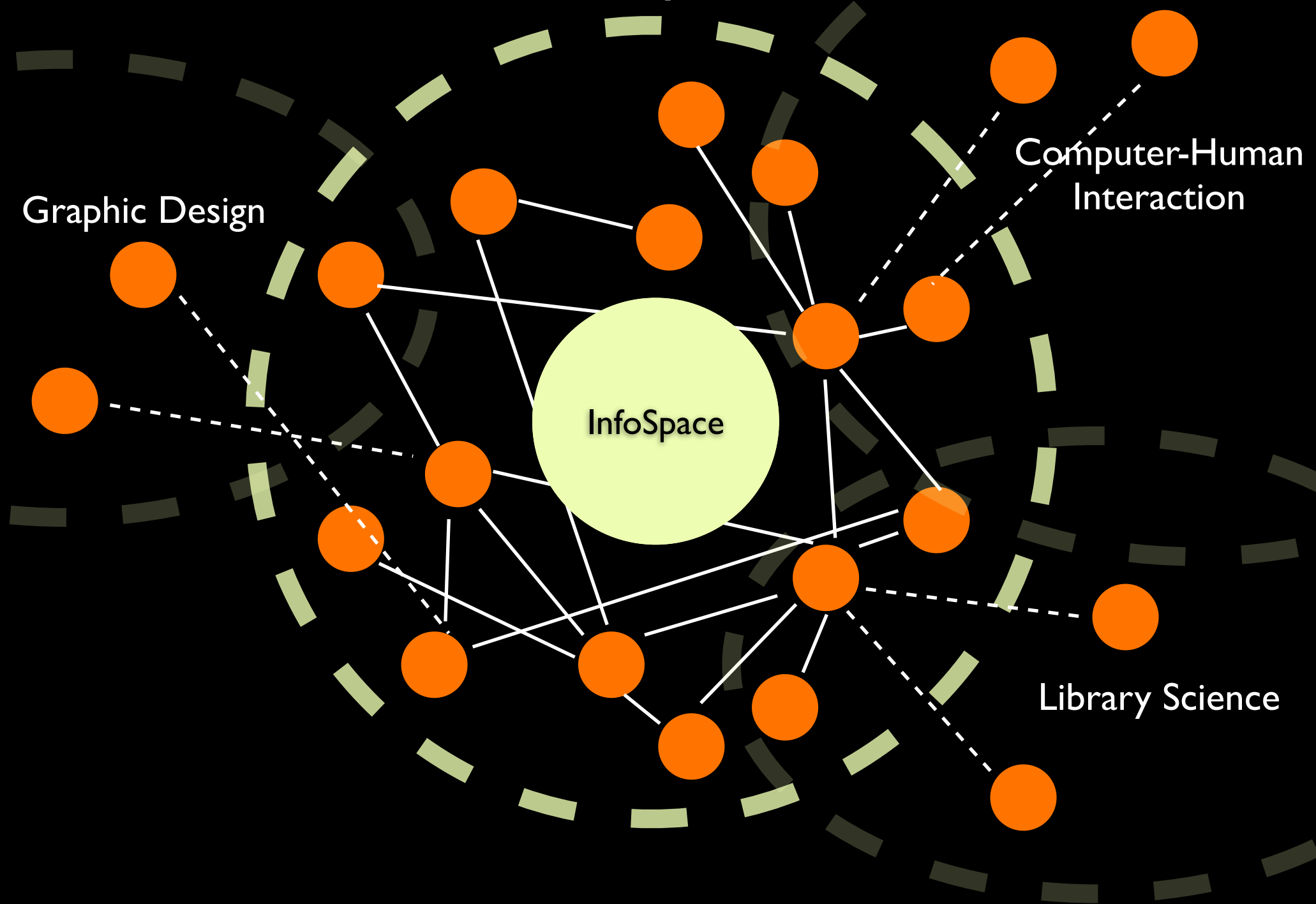


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# IA Community of Practice



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I think it's about infospace.

Thank You

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