The Crypto Pill

There has been a recent craze online over the rise of cryptocurrencies and NFTs. For the general public, cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin or Ethereum are precisely what they sound like -just a digital form of money. However, not everyone holds such a view. People who have been actively coding with cryptocurrencies believe that the future of the internet itself will be found on a decentralized blockchain. Over the last couple of months, I have been going to talks held by people in the crypto community to grasp the opportunities in crypto better. From those talks, I began to piece together a vibrant culture full of excitement for the future of modern technology. Every person that I had talked to at these events spoke with a fervor that you would only see in recent religious converts, and this fervor was different from any other academic community I had witnessed in the past in the field of computer science. This fervor is so intense that joining the community has been referred to as "taking the crypto pill," which in of itself is a reference to the popular movie *The Matrix*. The strangeness of the community naturally led to many questions about how the community came to be and what it had to offer to its members. After spending time collecting data at various talks and gatherings, I came to understand that the community's religious, almost cult-like identity resulted from the pursuit of professional freedom, the search for meaning in work, and the stigma of crypto being entirely money-oriented.

The crypto community is full of a particular archetype. Many in the community are young intellectuals from all around the world that are highly talented in programming. Much of

the community is decentralized and connected via popular online chat rooms on Discord or Signal. These young people have largely rejected the more traditional paths out of college, such as getting a high-paying job in big tech or going through academia. They believe that taking these more conventional paths would be equivalent to selling out. There is almost a culture of encouragement to drop out and work on independent projects instead. Since much of the crypto community is decentralized, much of the work is done remotely and funded by the increased speculation of crypto tokens. Therefore, many of the crypto community members are essentially wandering professionals. The rejection of traditional paths is a prerequisite for "taking the crypto pill" and establishing yourself as a community member. This rejection demonstrates your seriousness to look for meaning within your work through the disenchantment of the tech industry as a whole, and it presents an openness to connect with like-minded people from all around the world.

In the last couple of years, technological advancements in computer science have become incredibly quick to iterate, which has resulted in a professional space crowded with new waves of young intellectuals. Therefore, it has become increasingly difficult for any single person to make an impact that can push the field forward. Much of the old days of computer science is often romanticized in the mind of all young computer scientists. For example, there is a sense of mysticism for the start of the internet era because it was easy to make transformative changes when the field was in its infancy. There are many quotes of the legendary stories tied to pioneers in the field within many MIT computer science lectures. There are stories of famous philosophical lectures pinpointing the issues that need to be addressed and stories of ski trips that resulted in landmark discoveries. In many ways, there is a romanticism for being in a position

where you can dictate where the field will go. And you can only be in such a position if you aren't tied down by convention.

Therefore, the pursuit of professional freedom can not be siloed from the pursuit of professional meaning. When I went to a dinner organized by those in the crypto community, I was surprised by the sheer amount of philosophical debates taking place. These debates explored the morality of working with crypto technologies, the loom of a developed artificial general intelligence, and the future of a decentralized world. The nature of these debates insinuated that everyone cared deeply about the philosophical aspects of their work and was searching for a rope of meaning within it. Their conversations would mirror the exchanges often quoted from the field's pioneers, and I found myself drawing an analogy between this community and the rise of American utopian communes during the 1960s in the way they held onto their beliefs. These discussions, specifically the discussions about "The Singularity," have subtle religious undertones that Farman has previously noticed in some of his prior work[1]. Although there is less of an emphasis on obsolescence in the narrative of these discussions compared to what Farman found, there is still a sense of duty and moral responsibility to realize the potential of blockchain technologies which gives the community its religious flavor, much like there was a sense of responsibility among computer scientists in Farman's article to prepare for artificial general intelligence. The priority to push the field forward to more extraordinary lengths than ever before gives incredible meaning to their work and lives.

Nevertheless, despite the frequency of philosophical debates, certain aspects of the community make it seem like an echo chamber for particular beliefs and values due to the stigma that blockchain as a technology is only helpful as a financial instrument. For example, in the

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[1] Farman, Abou. 2012. "Re-Enchantment Cosmologies: Mastery and Obsolescence in an Intelligent Universe." Anthropological Quarterly 85(4): 1069-1088.

community, there is a staunch belief in the supremacy of decentralized blockchains in ushering in the next age of the internet. And although many of these viewpoints have their merits and are quite convincing, there are also times in some of the presentations where I felt very disenchanted by the promises that some of the presenters would make about the benefits of decentralization. The stigma of blockchain technologies by the general public as only being useful as a financial instrument mischaracterizes this community as being selfish and money-oriented. However, this is far from the truth. As mentioned previously, many people in this community are highly against "selling out" and honestly believe in blockchain technologies' potential to shift the current paradigm of internet use.

This stigma results in fear of being misunderstood by outsiders, which pushes the community into its own bubble. Stigma has been known to encourage the formation of belief communities. For example, forming a community of scientific UFO believers parallels the formation of the crypto community[2]. Many of the people I engaged with at these meetups are passionately obsessive in many ways that the scientists studying UFOs are in Pasulka's article. And there is a very similar fear of public skepticism over the nature of their work. To assume that those in the crypto community are only working with selfish intentions to make money directly undermines the reality of their search for greater meaning and professional freedom. Thus, the community has formed a naturally tight bond within itself and has drifted far away from other more conventional computer science communities that more or less have the same goal to advance the field of computer science.

In conclusion, the crypto community is a vibrant community formed out of a collective need for greater professional meaning and professional freedom away from a stigma that labels

[2] Pasulka, Diana Walsh. 2019. Introduction. American Cosmic: UFOs, Religion, Technology. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. Pp. 1-19.

those in the community as "sellouts." The community is tight-knit yet spread out to all the corners of the world and has a cult-like mysticism to their meetups. The introduction into the community has been compared to taking the red pill in *The Matrix*, i.e., leaving behind all the more traditional conceptions about the tech industry and crypto. The crypto community reminisces on the pioneers of the internet when computer science was still in its infancy and feels obligated to advance the field forward through decentralized blockchains to achieve a greater sense of meaning for the field and the individual. Like the formation of communes in the 1960s and 70s, the crypto community can be characterized by its search for meaning in an ever-changing technological landscape that gets more crowded every year. It represents the confusion and hope of young computer scientists who have found a tribe that believes that they can change the future of computing.

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