

## Sensemaking in an online community after financial loss: Enterprising Jamaican investors and the fall of a financial messiah

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### **Abstract**

Online communities are popular sites for collective sensemaking. This study explores sensemaking in one such community following the closure of Olint Corp, a highly-successful Jamaican investment club. After Olint's disbanding, Jamaicans reconnected through online communities to make sense of their financial losses; to make sense of Olint – seen variously as an altruistic endeavour, a global currency trader, or Ponzi scheme – and to make sense of themselves as enterprising investors. This narrative inquiry unveils their rich, multi-voiced, fragmented storying of Olint and its founder, once praised as a 'financial messiah'.

### **Keywords**

Enterprising investors, Jamaica, narrative, online communities, Ponzi schemes, sensemaking, speculation.

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### **Introduction**

For the citizens of developing nations, says Cox (1997: 87) the key phrase in the market revolutionary vocabulary is ‘not yet’. These citizens are admonished by international financial institutions to have patience for yet another ‘development decade’, whereupon ‘everyone’s cup will run over’ (Cox, 1997: 87). But for citizens of developing nations, ‘not yet’ has taken too long. Surrounded by ever-greater inequality within their own countries, many turn to speculative investment vehicles in pursuit of too-good-to-be-true investment return.

Krige (2012) locates such proliferating schemes within the logic of financialisation of everyday life, embracing as it does everyday speculation and risk-taking. According to Krige, such logic transforms finance ‘into a field of dreams as well as a field of schemes’ (2012: 73), opening up spaces for financial tricksters to flourish where there are rampant structural inequalities. Krige’s view is borne out by the scale of national fraud perpetuated by schemes in developing countries since the 1990s; from Albania to Colombia, Romania to Serbia, and Lesotho to South Africa (Carvajal et al, 2009; Krige, 2012).

During 2004-2008, the Caribbean island of Jamaica cultivated its own field of schemes when scores of unauthorised, self-styled ‘investment clubs’ acquired singular prominence and trust by tapping into two narratives governing contemporary Jamaican realities. Firstly, investment clubs promoted global capital markets’ allure and capacity to yield higher returns than traditional banking instruments. Secondly, many investment clubs aligned with popular charismatic churches supporting Jamaica’s poor. In a society heavily-stratified by social class and a never-ending wait for global economic status, investment clubs took Jamaica by storm. High-risk investing was presented as the ‘saviour’ of the poor (Dawes, 2004; Hall, 2010; Investforlife, 2008b). Jamaicans from all walks of life rejected authorities’ warnings, accepting the financial risk of investment clubs into their homes, and into many churches, where ‘prosperity gospel’ had become an extension of a grand narrative of market revolution (Cox, 1997).

Of all the Jamaican investment schemes operating in the 2000s, none equaled the status of Olint Corp. Its founder, David Smith, an established currency trader, even came to be described as a ‘financial messiah’ (Reid, 2009). However, the club’s unauthorised status led to protracted struggles with the financial regulator. In July 2008, Olint shut Jamaican operations without warning, effectively disbanding the club.

Bewildered investors reconnected via online communities, struggling to make sense of investment club mania and Olint's closure, in the face of competing interpretations from the media, banks and the regulator. Jamaicans negotiated different versions of events, producing a series of polyphonic stories to make sense of Olint's fall, and of themselves as enterprising investors. As Jamaicans struggled to come to terms with financial loss, these polyphonic stories served as memory aids, diagnostic tools, a means for social control, and expression of liberation (Brown et al, 2009).

The article offers rare perspectives on mediations of finance in a developing country at the margins of global markets, using narrative analysis to highlight the dualities of global-regional financial discourses. Building on previous work (Berger and Messerschmidt, 2009; Campbell et al, 2008; Herrmann, 2007), the study offers deeper understandings of authorship and power relations in online communities, and their links with wider sociocultural and political conditions. The article further provides a voice to those twice-marginalised – by citizenship in a small, developing state and by speculation in unauthorised schemes – thus building on previous work exploring everyday investors' engagement with informal finance (Austin, 2004; Krige, 2012; and Meagher, 2009). However, the article's *unique* contribution stems from its innovative insights into everyday investors' use of online forums to make sense of economic events and their own relationship to them; renegotiating their investor subjectivities through online conflict and public deliberation. I begin first by discussing three key theoretical concepts: enterprising investors, online communities and sensemaking, before presenting the background to the data set – exploring contemporary Jamaican financial narratives, investment club mania and the rise and fall of Olint. Thereafter, I introduce my selected method of narrative inquiry, using online forums as data; discussing findings thematically, together with implications and contribution.

### **Online financial communities – Sensemaking while speculating**

The theoretical discussion links three integral concepts – enterprising investors, online communities and sensemaking. Following Langley (2007: 74), I position investment as a technology-of-the-self under neoliberal governmentality. The small, developing state of Jamaica is itself a neoliberal economy where the 'enterprising self' increasingly involves acquiring financial asset portfolios, and where calculated financial risk 'holds out the prospect of pleasure through returns' (Langley 2007, 74). In the Jamaican context, investment clubs are an extended technology-of-the-self, helping to constitute enterprising investors; as are new enterprising communicative practices such as online financial communities, where investors research and share investment information (Herrmann, 2007).

While orthodox neoliberal narratives present investing as an empowering activity, when substantial losses occur, investing can *disempower* its subjects. The conventional view of the enterprising investor as active, independent and bold must therefore be problematised (French and Kneale, 2009; Langley, 2007; Martin, 2002). The financial self is never undivided, overlapping with other biopolitical domains – Jamaican investor subjectivity cannot be clearly demarcated from other subject positions as workers, consumers, churchgoers or citizens (French and Kneale, 2009; Langley, 2007; Martin, 2002).

Online communities are large collectives of voluntary members debating common interests, experiences or convictions (Sproull and Arriaga, 2008: 898). Investment is itself a social activity where people often make decisions collectively. Consequently, online financial communities can be educational forums where novices access and share expert investment tips, tutorials and pre-purchase information (Berger and Messerschmidt, 2009; Campbell et al, 2009). Through online forums people can develop far-flung communities that assemble and disperse quickly, while allowing everyday citizens to break public silence through debate on multiple sites, invoking the notion of the ‘town hall’ (Weger and Aakhus, 2003). Online communities can be consumer-based, vocation-based or place-based; linked with common conditions, shared concerns or collaborative work, though rarely mutually exclusive in remit (Sproull and Arriaga, 2008). For example, online communities debating Jamaican investment mania included political forums and business forums (e.g. [onejamaica.blogspot.com](http://onejamaica.blogspot.com) and [siliconcaribe.com](http://siliconcaribe.com)). Of the dedicated online *financial* communities, some promoted wealth generation (e.g. [invest4life.wordpress.com](http://invest4life.wordpress.com))<sup>1</sup>, others were investment club ‘fan’ communities (e.g. [wealthmax.wordpress.com](http://wealthmax.wordpress.com)), still others were launched by concerned citizens keen to prevent Jamaicans from *losing* money through investment clubs (e.g. [investforlife.wordpress.com](http://investforlife.wordpress.com)).

Online communities are also sites of power, where conflict is rife (Campbell et al, 2009). Members adopt specific roles, attacking or defending standpoints. In online financial communities, members may generate mutual investment strategies one moment, taking adversarial positions the next. Deceptive, manipulative behaviours are readily observable; while dishonest participants use multiple messages or identities for personal gain. Such cycles of conflict help sustain online financial communities, since power struggles can enhance the quality of information available (Campbell et al, 2009; Weick, 1995). Online financial communities can also be spaces of resilience and resistance, with social and political edge.

One typical activity for online communities is *sensemaking*, a process of meaning-production wherein people reflect on and interpret phenomena, producing intersubjective accounts (Weick, 1995). Jamaica’s online financial communities served a number of sensemaking purposes during the country’s investment mania. Firstly, like

most online financial communities, Jamaican forums made sense of financial markets through stories by selecting and interpreting available information (Abolafia, 2010; Tarim, 2012), thus reducing the ambiguity of ‘mass amounts of equivocal financial messages’ from innumerable sources (Herrmann, 2007: 14). However, engaging with an opaque, informal organisation like Olint meant Jamaican investors lacked conventional financial sensemaking tools such as analyst reports, shareholder letters, stock market news and other published, accessible ‘conventionalised’ indicators (Tarim, 2012; Abolafia, 2010; Herrmann, 2007). To this end, Jamaican investors used sources of unconventional wisdom – rumour and black market knowledge – to make sense of Olint’s opacity.

Secondly, in sensemaking terms, Olint’s demise represented what Weick (1993: 633) calls a ‘cosmology episode’ when people suddenly, deeply feel the universe is ‘no longer a rational, orderly system’. The cosmology episode for Jamaican investors was triggered when Jamaica’s regulator threatened investment clubs’ legitimacy; the episode intensified once Olint’s monthly payouts faltered. Jamaicans flocked to online communities to make sense of conflicting messages about schemes, and to make sense of their own enterprising efforts as ‘rational investors’ versus morally-questionable ‘speculators’ (Preda, 2009: 3), arriving at different story outcomes based on market-based *and* social experiences, relationships and positionalities (Tarim, 2012). Members justified investment choices, deflecting blame for financial loss, while engaging in imagination and conspiracy (Tarim, 2012): Were investment schemes simply private members’ clubs? Sophisticated global trading outfits? Were they intent on national development? Or merely a façade for fraudsters? Worse still, were the clubs engaged in international money laundering, thus posing a threat to Jamaica’s *entire* financial system? Ultimately, online financial communities generated explanations retrospectively (Weick, 1995) to justify investment mania, making sense of massive investment losses following the clubs’ demise.

### **Jamaican financial narratives**

The Commonwealth Caribbean, a region of small, mainly island states, black populations and parliamentary democracies, represents an atypical Third World region (Stone, 1985). As with other Anglophone states in this sprawling area, Jamaica has cultural, economic and political links with Europe and North America, enjoying middle-income status as a ‘semi-peripheral’ state: rapidly-modernised, and deeply incorporated into the world capitalist system as a tourist mecca, agriculture and mineral exporter; supplying cheap migrant labour, while consuming western culture and commodity

exports (Stone, 1985). Within this context, Jamaican financial narratives pose a series of dualities chronicling success and failure intertwined.

Firstly, Jamaica is a highly-open market, reasonably competitive in world trade, and connected with the global financial system. Deregulation during the 1980s opened up Jamaica's financial sector to global activity. Financial services remains important to Jamaica's economy, despite a highly-damaging domestic financial crisis in 1996 when 21 of 37 banks failed. However, Jamaica's financial sector remains essentially disarticulated from its *surrounding* region (Gayle, 2002). Caribbean stock market activity, for example, remains restricted to cross-listings between Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad & Tobago. Geography and language are contributing factors: Jamaica lies near Spanish-speaking Cuba and Francophone Haiti, hundreds of miles away from much of the Anglophone Caribbean, yet Latin-American integration remains low on Jamaica's political agenda.

Jamaica's investment club mania was heavily-intertwined with financialisation. Many Jamaicans began investing in equities and fixed income products after 1980s deregulation, when banks and brokerages mushroomed. The authorities, together with the banking sector, controlled Jamaica's investment domain, determining what investments were 'legitimate and accessible' (Preda, 2009: 17). Anything outside this domain was deemed speculation – gambling dressed up as investment. However, Jamaican asset values were constantly threatened by currency devaluation, a shrinking economy, indebtedness, weakening trade relations, poor infrastructure and high crime rates – outcomes that weakened the state's legitimacy (CaPRI, 2007). State efforts to control money supply through high interest rates 'hooked' Jamaican investors on double-digit investment returns<sup>2</sup>, subsequently fuelling the collapse of the domestic financial sector in 1996. Bank savings rates fell steeply thereafter but lending rates did not, weakening the banking sector's legitimacy (CaPRI, 2008). By the late 1990s<sup>3</sup>, entrepreneurial activities such as do-it-yourself currency trading began to fill the gap, while the first investment clubs emerged.

The clubs were unauthorised, yet they cannot be neatly confined to Jamaica's informal economy. Indeed, attempts to separate formal and informal sectors are problematic since state and bureaucratic mechanisms governing these distinctions are themselves 'blurred and disputed terrain' (Hull and James, 2012: 8). This highlights a further duality, namely the status accorded investment clubs within the Jamaican financial sector. As unauthorised vehicles, the clubs were informal schemes operating in the shadow of the *formal* banking sector (Carvajal et al, 2009). For example, it may be assumed that investment club members had bank accounts, mortgages and insurance policies, firmly integrating them as customers within the formal financial sector (CaPRI, 2008). Further symbiosis existed between the banking sector and unauthorised schemes, since banks benefited from accounts set up by investment club members and

operators. Banks lent to more than a fifth of people who went on to invest in schemes, thus earning associated interest (CaPRI 2008). Some brokerages reportedly invested in the clubs via 'feeder funds', while domestic and international financial institutions benefited from trading fees earned from investment club-related fund flows (KYC News, 2008).

The final duality explored concerns investment clubs' religious affiliations vis-à-vis the state's weakening legitimacy (CaPRI, 2007). The Church has long-played an important structural economic role in Jamaica, maintaining a powerful voice in political affairs, operating several media houses, and active in financial services through the credit union movement. The expansion of Jamaica's informal economy was further accompanied by a proliferation of similar religious movements noted in other developing nations (Meagher, 2009). Jamaican investment club mania drew on this duality of religious and economic contexts.

### **Jamaican investment club mania – Charismatic capitalism**

While little was known about Jamaican investment clubs at the height of the mania, some 50,000 investor accounts were opened between 2004-2008 representing US\$1 to 2 billion (Carvajal et al, 2009). Most schemes were unregistered, unlicensed and unregulated affinity schemes, based on 'exclusivity', often promoted through churches. New members were admitted via referral, as enterprising investors leveraged their social networks for profit. Several clubs were founded by charismatic personalities, actively promoting a vision for national development; conjoining investing with 'prosperity gospel', promising God's generosity here on earth (Hunt, 2000). High-risk investments were 'storied' as the 'saviour' of poor Jamaicans (Dawes, 2004; Hall, 2010; Investforlife 2008b). In many churches, clergy shared the investment club promise of 'heaven on earth' with their congregations, shifting church tithes from formal bank accounts into investment clubs (Hall, 2010). One government minister heralded the investment club era as one of 'financial enlightenment', releasing Jamaica's masses from the 'hegemonic control of the high priests' of the formal banking system (Ennis, 2007), suggesting tensions between the regulator and the political directorate.

Like formal investment houses, the clubs promoted the allure of global capital markets, promising much higher financial returns than standard investments could deliver. Investment club members signed contracts to 'invest' in various 'high yield' securities such as currency funds or commercial property. Many clubs had registered offices, staff and mechanisms allowing them (at least initially) to replicate a façade of

efficiency, professionalism and customer service offered by formal financial institutions. Clubs also sponsored high-profile events from football to beauty pageants (Carvajal et al, 2009). Club founders had discretion over where funds were allegedly invested, and wielded a highly-effective control strategy, delivering monthly returns between 6% and 20 %. At the height of the boom, some schemes delivered annual returns as high as 728% (CaPRI, 2008; Carvajal et al, 2009). While the formal banking sector denounced too-good-to-be-true returns (Meikle, 2006), this only fuelled investment mania, as did the regulator's efforts first to regularise, then 'quash', unauthorised schemes. The clubs' impossibly high returns, opaque business models, and eventual discarding of exclusive membership criteria triggered suspicion. In this environment, a number of online financial communities emerged to make sense of Jamaica's investment club mania.

### **The rise and fall of Olint**

Of all the investment clubs operating in Jamaica in the 2000s, Olint had the most meteoric rise and fall. The club was founded around 2003 by 34-year-old former currency trader, David Smith, an active member of a well-known charismatic church. During Olint's start-up period, select membership was drawn from Smith's social network, particularly church circles where Smith was soon regarded as a financial 'messiah' sent by God to make Jamaicans rich (Espeut, 2011; Reid, 2009). The club incorporated in 2005 as Olint Corp; and its reputation for delivering 10% monthly return attracted many prospective members. Olint expanded into the Caribbean, and to South Florida with its large expatriate Jamaican community. The various Olint entities together attracted more than 6,000 clients. By the time Smith was indicted in 2010, Olint had amassed assets of at least US\$220m (US District Court, 2011).

From the start, Olint's founder positioned the club as an indigenous institution on the side of 'average Jamaicans' (Investforlife, 2008b). Olint would end poverty and inequality where successive governments had failed. Olint aligned with Church communities, launching the Olint Foundation with US\$1 million to help the poor (Carvajal et al, 2009). The club sponsored international music festivals and major sporting events; wielding further influence through donations to Jamaica's political parties (Carvajal et al, 2009). Olint also promoted financial sophistication and expertise through its Member Care Office in Kingston's financial district, its password-protected website for client accounts (US District Court, 2011); and through Smith's past experience as a currency trader at a well-known money market brokerage, where he claimed never to have sustained a monthly trading loss (US District Court, 2011). For many, this expertise made Olint the 'safest' of all the investment clubs (CaPRI, 2008).

Yet Olint provided no operational transparency. Its member agreement stated only that Olint placed client funds in the currency exchange market for ‘investment in leveraged foreign exchange transactions’ (Olint TCI, 2008). No one knew how Smith achieved such high returns.

Olint faced its first real challenge in 2006 when Jamaica’s financial regulator, the Financial Services Commission (FSC), executed search warrants on Olint’s office, seizing documents and issuing a ‘cease and desist’ order prohibiting Olint from dealing in unlicensed securities or investment advice (FSC, 2006). In 2007, Olint’s bankers, the National Commercial Bank (NCB), closed Olint’s accounts after the club repeatedly failed to provide audited financial statements, in breach of regulatory requirements. Olint filed suits against both the FSC and NCB, but resulting litigation took its toll. By mid-2008, Olint had failed to make several monthly payments to members (Investforlife 2008b). On 14 July 2008, Olint closed its Jamaican offices, announcing the decision to members by email. Citing ongoing problems with frozen international trading accounts, Smith portrayed Olint as the object of a grand conspiracy (Investforlife 2008), while failing to say when Olint would make good on outstanding member payouts.

### **Disbanding and reconnecting: Investforlife**

Investforlife, an open-access community hosted on WordPress.com, quickly became a popular online forum for sensemaking activity following Olint’s retreat from Jamaica. Investforlife’s stated mission is to educate Jamaicans about risky, speculative investment vehicles, promoting ‘real’ investments while exposing investment clubs as scams (Investforlife, 2008a). The forum’s moderators launched the community after being barred from more ‘Olint-friendly’ communities (Investforlife, 2008b). Investforlife’s decision to publish Olint’s 14 July letter triggered the forum’s longest-ever discussion thread. The growing online community struggled to make sense of events through deliberation, conflict and collective storying. In the following section, I examine these sensemaking positions in detail, first outlining my methodological approach before discussing my findings.

### **Material and methods**

The study explores antenarratives constructed about Olint by Jamaican investors in an online community. My data is drawn from an archived discussion thread generated by members of ‘Investforlife’, a popular online financial community at the time of

Olint's collapse. I am guided by Boje (2001) who describes antenarrative as a polyphonic or 'multi-voiced' way of telling stories 'rich in fragmentation' and 'lacking in linearity' (Boje, 2001: 9). In order to deconstruct Investforlife community members' storying of Olint and of themselves as enterprising investors, I draw on Jamaican dualities discussed earlier, including the growing influence of prosperity gospel and informal finance, the weakening legitimacy of state and banking mechanisms, and the contradictory yet symbiotic relationship between Jamaica's informal and formal financial sectors.

### *Analysing Social Media Data*

Online communities allow everyday citizens to discuss public issues at a distance, creating stories and shared meanings, systematising needs, values and concerns (Weger and Aakhus, 2003). Investforlife connected Jamaicans through a self-regulating online community; an organised public (Weger & Aakhus, 2003) where Jamaicans shared investment tips, vented pent-up frustrations and contributed to narratives of investment clubs as either 'genuine' or 'scams'. For Jamaican investors coming to terms with financial loss, stories told via Investforlife served as memory aids and diagnostic tools; a means of social control and liberation (Brown et al, 2009). The Investforlife community may also be understood as a site of collective Jamaican memory for Olint and other collapsed schemes.

Investments are often shrouded in confidentiality; Olint compounded this by engaging in heavily-concealed activity without publishing audited accounts. Collecting data from online communities therefore provides a useful, if unusual, form of access to a partially-hidden financial scheme and the secrecy over its missing funds. Investforlife was just one of several free-to-view online communities debating Jamaica's investment club mania; their discussions were often cited in media reportage (Investforlife, 2008b). Nonetheless, publishing online community discussions presents confidentiality issues. While there are parallels with publishing a letter in a newspaper or speaking in a public meeting, online communities combine those seeking visibility and those with private intent. However, the data supports *public* intent, since Investforlife is hosted on WordPress, a widely-used free, self-hosted non-synchronous blogging tool. I myself had no connection with Olint, and neither participated in nor monitored Investforlife at the time the discussion took place; encountering the discussion thread later on.

Intense public reaction followed the publication of Olint's letter on 14 July 2008. Investforlife registered some 100,000 hits by midday (Investforlife, 2008b), with

comments peaking after 72 hours. The resulting discussion is naturally occurring data enabling me to examine antenarratives produced ‘in situ’ (Whittle and Mueller, 2011) from active Investforlife posters. My data set consists of 586 archived comments posted between 14 July and 21 August 2008. Posts were contributed from 100 separate pseudonymous user names<sup>4</sup>. Most were abstract such as ‘*fxtrader*’, ‘*lostmymoney*’, ‘*reallydepressed*’ and ‘*sickolintclient*’, but others might give clues to identity, so I preserved anonymity by not identifying speakers. I further screened the data, setting aside ‘flaming threads’ where the discussion descended into personal attack (Weger and Aakhus 2003; Herrmann, 2007). Where necessary, I paraphrased certain colloquial or ungrammatical comments typical of online threads (Weger and Aakhus, 2003). Where participants switched between English and Jamaican language, most Jamaican language is left intact for authenticity.

### *Analytic procedure*

Narrative inquiry is a field with multiple strands (Brown et al, 2009). While I acknowledge varied approaches, I draw primarily on Boje’s (2001) perspective of antenarrative, described as ‘multi-voiced ways of telling stories’, ‘rich in fragmentation’ and ‘lacking in linearity’ (Boje, 2001: 9). Antenarrative aptly describes the collective storytelling via Investforlife where performing stories is a key part of members’ sensemaking, characterised by polyphony – many overlapping, interweaving, sometimes competing storylines (Boje, 2001). The ‘ante’ in antenarrative has a double meaning: both being ‘before’ a coherent and complete narrative is finalised with an agreed plot; as well as being about ‘speculation’ – the ambiguity of trying to narrate the flow of events as they are experienced (Boje, 2001; Whittle and Mueller, 2011).

Antenarrative therefore captures the lived experience of storytelling in online communities where stories are constructed in fragmented, piecemeal fashion by multiple authors, never finalised, and open to new ‘twists’ in the re-telling. By recovering the polyphonic qualities of Jamaican investors’ storytelling and the discursive struggles triggered by catastrophic financial loss, I seek to improve our understanding of the narrative of marginalised investors for whom meanings are indeed fragile (Brown et al, 2009). Stories constructed via the Investforlife community helped ‘make sense of change, explain it, domesticate it’ (Brown et al 2009: 328), perhaps even diminishing the emotional power of Olint’s closure while helping investors to diagnose problems and make decisions. I have deconstructed the text in line with Jamaican financial dualities – examining how ‘fleeced’ investors renegotiated Olint’s utopian narrative. I further highlight alternate stories; reinterpreting subtle hegemonies and

deconstructing occluded meanings (Boje, 2001; Brown et al, 2009) in the Investforlife discussion.

The issue of narrative ownership was central in analysing and presenting the material. As researcher, I have effectively re-narrated investors' lives unasked, interweaving Jamaican investors' stories into the larger phenomenon of financialisation. Yet the study is intended to be emancipatory, thus ethical (Brownlow and O'Dell, 2002), by faithfully reflecting the narrative's momentum while shining a light on investor sensemaking online.

Since Investforlife is itself a site for power, its participants – while anonymous – may reflect diverse groups exerting various positions of influence (Brownlow and O'Dell, 2002) ranging from wealth, education, social and professional position and financial expertise, giving them varying degrees of proximity to the 'truths' about Olint. I was further conscious that different narratives could be simultaneously produced through the same initiative, that participants might follow multiple sensemaking and sensegiving strategies. My close reading of the text (see Investforlife, 2008b) resulted in five broad deconstructions, fundamentally interdependent, but presented individually for clarity.

### **Analysis: Olint investors – making sense of loss**

#### *Narrating the 'other' investor: faith versus reason*

The first antenarrative theme draws on conflicting presentations of investing in general, and Jamaican investing in particular. As Preda (2009) argues, whoever controls the domain of investment activity determines what constitutes rational investing versus speculation or gambling. Where the state and banking sector once controlled Jamaica's investment domain, the legitimacy of these institutions had weakened in the face of a growing informal economy (CaPRI, 2007). Investment clubs also had religious backing from the Jamaican Church, which retains its centuries-old legitimacy. Religious association was integral to Olint's promotional activity, with earlier members recruited from charismatic churches preaching prosperity gospel. Olint's corporate identity drew on prosperity gospel narratives, promising riches here on earth rather than the 'hereafter'.

Against this background, conflict emerged within the Investforlife forum as one set of investors narrated the 'other' disparagingly; pitting 'rational', pragmatic investors against faith-led 'true believers' and 'speculators'. Those Investforlife participants who

were true believers declared Olint had been founded on a ‘prophetic word...not fly by night Ponzy scheme as the white collarist are saying’ (Investforlife, 2008b). One participant insisted he/she was ‘just a believer in [DS]’<sup>5</sup>, protesting that David Smith, Olint’s founder, had ‘done wonders for a lot of Jamaicans’; ‘the poor guy a try him BEST fi get weh money back’. Another implored participants to pray for Smith:

‘This is truly a Test...all bloggers must pray for DS and his vision to break the back of Poverty for many people. Therefore let’s declare that: no weapon forged against DS and Olint will prevail...’

Olint’s supporters maintained that by helping Jamaica’s poor, Smith had shown ‘too big a heart’, issuing ‘biblical’ warnings to his detractors: ‘Too much “society” people... cant say how THEY earned THEIR money. AS i say, who God bless no man curse... unu be careful.’

Other true believers prayed for outstanding funds to be miraculously restored. By contrast, more sceptical Investforlife members queried Olint’s links with the Church, objecting that religion and money ‘don’t mix’. For some, Olint’s virtuous image was nothing more than good marketing. The sceptics reasoned that seven months without investment payouts was an unacceptable level of ‘blind faith’. Others heaped scorn on ‘faithful Olinters’ for believing in Olint’s ‘messiah’ and refusing to see the truth. ‘Never trust anyone who asks you to pray for a solution’, scoffed one naysayer. Some accused Olint of hypocrisy, describing the 14 July letter as a callous communication, out of step with Olint’s virtuous image, causing investors undue stress. Smith’s character came under particular scrutiny:

‘We all knew that he partied and drank a lot, yet we never asked ourselves, what type of trader always gambling, partying and coming home drunk? I see ppl saying that he is a Christian. Whateva. DS was a lowly money trader...Suddenly “fool fool” ppl start giving him billions.’

While this anternarrative pits ‘rational’ investors against ‘faith-based’ investors, a closer reading suggests that ‘rational’ and ‘faith-based’ views are neither separate nor othered, but intertwined, since faith and belief supply the cultural values needed to drive investment mania and wider market revolution (Hunt, 2000; Cox, 1997).

### *Narrating status through one's 'investor self'*

The second antenarrative theme illustrates Investforlife participants' efforts to narrate *themselves* (Weick, 1995). Participants' storying of Olint's collapse is contingent on how they constitute their own identity as investors, and how they define their status within Olint and wider Jamaican society. Investforlife members reduced discomfort and repaired their own investor subjectivity by associating or *disassociating* with Olint's collapse (Weick, 1995; Boje, 2001). What began as a narrative about Olint's status as a biblical 'David' to the banking sector's 'Goliath' developed into a narrative about investors' *own* status within Olint, accentuated by self-narratives of social status and professional expertise. This is most apparent in comments concerning a 'run' on Olint in December 2007, when many investors withdrew funds. Investforlife members speculated that spiralling redemptions had triggered international anti-money laundering (AML) investigations, effectively 'freezing' Olint's funds. Some Investforlife participants positioned themselves as financial 'experts'<sup>6</sup> able to explain events:

'Although a run should not cause liquidity problems it can cause red flags to be raised in the system. ...the broker ...probably started to ask more questions [about Olint] in order to release the funds in keeping with AML procedures. Technically the "run" alerted the financial institutions to DS...'

Another Investforlife member offered 'expert' advice:

'Guys, Get a lawyer. Currency trading funds trade in the most liquid asset class in the word – cash. [There is] no reason a fund invested in cash should ever have problems meeting redemptions... You've been had.'

Other Investforlife members assert their status by claiming inside knowledge, itemising 'facts' supposedly gleaned from those 'in the know'. One Investforlife member claimed he/she 'was told personally' that investor funds were safe because Olint only traded 'with 1% of the money'. Another reported conversations with 'extremely large investors' confirming Olint funds were intact on 'the trading platform' (Investforlife, 2008b). Still others proffered pessimistic 'insider' sources, alleging that Olint was bankrupt; that having lost '20 percent' of its funds, Olint's frenetic trading

had severely depleted the balance. Investforlife participants who provided ‘facts’ or useful hearsay to the online community thus acquired status in the discussion.

Equally intriguing was the investor status narrated by the *original* Olint members, the ‘inner sanctum’, who maintained that all was well before Olint abandoned its exclusive membership criteria; that investment mania’s latter-day speculators were the root of Olint’s downfall. A schism developed between ‘Pro-linters’ and ‘Anti-linters’ – those supporting Olint’s founder ‘as saviour’ and those denouncing David Smith as ‘common thief’ (Investforlife, 2008b).] In this antenarrative fragment, Olint’s founder is portrayed as a martyr, betrayed by those ‘he thought were loyal’. ‘Pro-linters’ in the discussion thread were adamant that Smith’s fear of further betrayal (through disclosure of proprietary information) was the main factor behind Olint’s sudden, distressing communiqué on 14 July 2008. No one ‘had anything negative to say about DS before last month’, maintained one Pro-linter. Another implored the online community to accept that:

‘David does not want to disclose certain things at this time because...he has a case pending and...a lot of traitors in his club...Why U people put U money in something that was not regulated, that is a risk...so stop crying’.

Hierarchical expressions of professional expertise, ‘insider’ knowledge and status supports Weick’s (1995) view that in sensemaking, the self, rather than the environment, is the primary text in need of interpretation. Investforlife subjects were ‘produced’ by neoliberal pressures to be entrepreneurial, to engage with investment markets, calculating the risks of building asset portfolios against the ‘prospect of pleasure through returns’ (Langley, 2007:74). Such orthodox narratives present investing as an empowering activity. Within this orthodoxy, Investforlife members were keen to represent aspirational ‘investor selves’. In reality, many Olint members lost everything after mortgaging homes or emptying retirement funds (NIA, 2013), thus crushing the dream of the ‘investor self’.

### *Storying oppression of enterprising Jamaican investors*

A third antenarrative storying Olint’s rise and fall was constructed by ‘conspiracy theorists’ within the Investforlife community, keen to identify a hidden power behind Olint’s closure. Weick (1995: 57) contends that sensemaking does not rely on accuracy for coherence or plausibility, but on creation, invention, ideology and

emotional appeal. Hence there is plenty of room in sensemaking for conspiracy. In Jamaica, conspiracy theories about the rich abound, because of the secrecy with which Jamaica's elites conduct their affairs (Stone, 1994). In this third antenarrative, Olint was positioned as a haven for Jamaicans struggling to access traditional finance. According to conspiracy theorists; Olint's rapid success in a tiny marketplace posed a threat to Jamaican banks and brokerages, which sought revenge after losing customers. Two financial institutions came in for sharpest criticism – Jamaica Money Market Brokers (JMMB), David Smith's former employer; and National Commercial Bank (NCB), Olint's former bankers – illustrated by this poster's comment:

'You really think the bank CEOs of Jamaica is gonna let DS run away with all their members? You don't think they trying to put a stop to it? People who work in NCB or JMMB can TELL YOU how many members was leaving to go join OLINT.'

Dissenters argued that Olint's trading accounts were offshore, thus frozen by US institutions *not* Jamaican ones. They also pointed out that the banking sector had rejected accusations of interference in Olint's affairs. But conspiracy theorists argued, 'did anyone expect NCB or JMMB to say anything else?' 'They would never admit to having a hand in dismantling Olint'. Other Investforlife members suggested that a *political* conspiracy was at work. One blamed Olint's downfall on the JLP government, speculating that the previous PNP administration might have prevented events from unfolding as they did. For another Investforlife member, the real conspiracy was a larger, more *international* one, with hidden power orchestrating events in Jamaica via the International Monetary Fund (IMF):

'...the report from the IMF indicating that all "unregulated" schemes be closed – you need to pay attention to that. Who funds the IMF? The World Bank. This thing is bigger than Jamaica...When was the last time you had an investment in a 3rd world country giving this type of returns and member banks of the World Bank are not making anything out of it?'

Still other Investforlife members lamented that no matter who was to blame, the national fallout amounted to 'one billion [lost from] the economy'. According to this antenarrative, Jamaican investors had *not* been greedy to want 10% monthly return on their money. With Olint now closed, they argued, there would be no middle class left, since too many had mortgaged homes and withdrawn life savings for Olint investments.

Olint's demise highlights bitter resentments fueled by increasing wealth concentration within Jamaican elites, through their privileged access to global markets. Investforlife participants drew on imagined market positions to influence how Olint's fall would be storied, which versions accepted and rejected (Tarim 2012).

### *Deflecting blame: Turning the mirror on Olint*

Further deconstruction of Investforlife antenarratives suggest the rise and fall of Olint can be 're-storied' (Boje, 2001) to blame Olint for its own downfall. While Olint's collapse certainly panicked investors, Weick (1995) contends there are ways for stories to slow escalating pressure, simplifying the tasks ahead. To this end, Investforlife participants turned the mirror on David Smith's subjectivity as 'expert', discarding the narrative of 'fallen messiah' for a more prosaic tale of managerial incompetence. In this antenarrative, Investforlife members argued that while Smith may have been 'one of the best forex traders in the world', he was a 'terrible businessman'; 'not a crook or a thief', but 'way over his head' (Investforlife, 2008b). Members criticised Smith for opening up the club to wider membership too quickly, accepting 'more members than its customer service and back office support could handle'. This move proved fatal, members argued, since no organisation is equipped to field calls from thousands of investors 'calling or showing up for their money'.

Other Investforlife participants were harsher still, describing Olint as little more than a 'patty shop'<sup>7</sup> with disastrous record-keeping and procedures. 'Even hedge funds' must produce annual reports 'to show their investors the bottom line', argued one member. According to this antenarrative, had Olint chosen transparency and legitimacy, its members would not have been left penniless. 'Instead this attitude of rejecting all authority and the outlaw behaviour is why no one wants to touch Olint'. Another member concluded that:

'[Smith] acts like he has something to hide, now people are believing he does! International auditors [don't] want to touch him, local banks don't want to touch him, St. Lucia, Panama doesn't want Olint in their country...If Olint had chosen to operate within the law...then [the banks] could not...touch David Smith...'

This excerpt transposes self-seeking stories with nationalist narratives. Olint, through its access to global currency markets, was supposed to supply

Jamaicans with new forms of subjectivity; new avenues for endurance, expression and racial progress. Instead, Olint's fall destroyed billions in GDP, denting the reputation of Jamaica's judiciary for failing to discipline Olint (NIA, 2013).

*Collaboration and Resistance: Investors as enterprising citizens*

Orthodox neoliberal narratives present investing as empowerment – fair play and progress through hard work. Yet, when substantial losses are incurred, investing can *disempower* its subjects. In this fifth and final theme, Investforlife members found new avenues for survival by re-storying themselves as enterprising citizens, shifting Olint antenarratives in new directions. One member recommended an independent audit of Olint's accounts, others advised appointing law firms experienced in 'going after money across different jurisdictions'. Members discussed useful internet sources on cross-border insolvency, agreeing 'to seek legal counsel' collectively to reduce fees. Members also proposed organising meetings in Jamaica and neighbouring South Florida to establish 'what rights we have'. 'Like-minded people' were encouraged to establish email contact; and to 'download and save...statements from web-based sources', storing receipts, wire transfers and contracts. One voice implored US-based investors to lead the way:

'If you are a US person, get your documentation ready, we might need to get US law enforcement involved....Americans are very aggressive when it comes to claiming jurisdiction when their citizens and banking systems are involved. We will get no help from the inept Jamaican state...'

The final antenarrative fragment also renegotiates investor subjectivities for the future, as Investforlife participants re-story themselves as optimistic and self-reliant; determined to learn Olint's lessons while *continuing* to speculate in the currency markets. 'Anyone', can open an overseas account, one speaker proclaimed, 'it just means that you pay taxes where the account is being held', rather than to the Jamaican government and its 'archaic banking system'. Another participant roused the group:

'If everyone gets their money back they should learn to trade for themselves, or get into a registered forex hedge fund – they do exist, most of the big investment houses and private ones have them.'

There is no proof that Investforlife participants influenced future events, yet many investors subsequently filed suits against Olint in the Florida court system<sup>8</sup>. Meanwhile, enterprising Jamaican investors continued their quest for the ‘field of dreams’ in a ‘field of schemes’ (Krige, 2012), despite setbacks with Olint.

## **Concluding discussion**

This study has engaged in a detailed interrogation of archived material from an online financial community; yielding rich, empirical data of multi-storied sensemaking following the collapse of an unauthorised investment scheme. The Investforlife data underscores the importance of online financial communities as sites for research, providing insight into how investors make sense of financial messages and reduce equivocality, while enabling the exploration of ‘porous connections’ (Herrmann, 2007: 14) between investor discourses and societal discourses. The data also highlights simultaneous pressures for collaboration and conflict as an integral element of social inter-relations in online communities as they make sense of market events (Campbell, 2009).

The antenarratives explored here reveal many ways to ‘story’ Olint and Jamaica’s investment club mania; emphasising Jamaica’s financial markets as ‘blurred and disputed terrain’ (Hull and James, 2012: 8), where conflicting stories are enabled by struggles to retain investment capital within Jamaica when more enticing investment returns beckon beyond its shores. Conflicting stories are further enabled by struggles between formal financial institutions and unregulated schemes in the battle for customers in a shrinking economy.

The study also shows that no matter what stance investors adopt in their sensemaking, there can be ‘no moment of respite from the exertions of financial activity’ (Martin, 2002: 37). Many investors placed blind faith in Olint as a viable investment scheme and virtuous endeavour, well after the club’s reputation was cast in doubt. One might argue that blind faith allowed such investors to cope with financial losses, the toppling of their financial messiah, and a future filled with uncertainty. Yet other investors were unmoved by Olint’s religious narratives. In line with other studies (Krige, 2012; Austin, 2004), the Investforlife data suggests that many Jamaicans chose to believe in Olint *because* they were deeply suspicious of their own government and institutions. They were even less inclined to trust the motives of international financial institutions such as the IMF, which had denounced Caribbean investment mania. Yet for every ‘Pro-linter’ there was an ‘Anti-linter’ imploring Investforlife members to see reason, to recognise Olint for the Ponzi scheme it was eventually proved to be.

Can online financial communities yield long-term consequences for consumer empowerment, or indeed for democracy? Certainly, in the Jamaican environment where there is a culture of secrecy among elites, and weak market surveillance by financial intermediaries or specialist financial media, online financial communities provided an important channel for unheard voices to ‘erupt’, through simultaneous collaboration and conflict, highlighting polyphonic stories as exercises in power. Yet online communities offer paradoxical purpose and efficacy (Campbell et al, 2008). The Investforlife forum may have been a useful tool, but it is unclear whether its hosts succeeded in either empowering investors or diverting anyone from Ponzi schemes.

By recovering the polyphonic qualities of Jamaican investors’ storytelling through antenarratives triggered by Olint’s downfall, I have improved understandings of how investors make sense of the ‘shadowy’ corners of finance. More specifically, I have given voice to marginalised investors in the global periphery. I have further problematised the conventional view of the ‘enterprising investor’ as active, independent, bold and self-managed, by exploring investor subjectivities at their intersection with citizenship in a small state, where development status remains ‘not yet’.

At the same time, this particular form of narrative inquiry has, through its analysis of antenarratives, provided unique understandings of how finance is mediated in a digital age. The visions and counter-visions of finance conjured up by Jamaican investors online reveal the fragmentary nature of sensemaking, and the competing moralities of rational investing versus blind faith and speculation used to make sense of financial catastrophes in the Jamaican context. Above all, the study offers new insights into how people collectively come to understand economic events, and understand *themselves* as ‘investors’ through conflict and deliberation online.

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### **Footnotes**

1. Not to be confused with rival site, Investforlife.wordpress.com.
2. Bank of Jamaica (2015) statistics show savings rates reached 15.6% in 1996 (up to 44% on overnight instruments). By 2001, savings rates fell to 8%, falling further throughout investment mania.

3. Approximate date; the first documented scheme collapse was in 2001 (CaPRI, 2008).
4. A site administrators' warning suggests some users adopted more than one identity (Investforlife, 2008b)
5. Investforlife participants frequently referred to David Smith as 'DS'.
6. Expert claims are plausible: court documents reveal names of bankers, brokers, fund managers and corporate lawyers among Olint plaintiffs (US District Court, 2011).
7. A derisive term for poor management; referring to Jamaican patties, a cheap, tasty fast food requiring little skill to sell profitably.
8. David Smith was imprisoned by Turks and Caicos authorities in 2010, then extradited to the USA in 2011 to serve a concurrent 30 year sentence.

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