Speaking Out

In defense of digital commoning

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Abstract

This article is a reply to 'The illusion of the digital commons', an idea introduced by Ossewaarde and Reijers. Their criticism challenges those of us arguing that digital commons are emancipatory, exhibiting post-capitalist dynamics. From the perspective of the digital commoner as well as that of the scholar who studies commoning practices, my thesis is that digital commoning is not grounded in a-political principles as the authors claim. But rather it introduces a political platform upon which various progressive movements are converging.

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Ossewaarde's and Reijers' criticism is multifaceted. At its core is the argument that digital commoning creates an illusion of 'post-capitalist resistance to neoliberal hegemony' (Ossewaarde and Reijers, 2017: 611). According to them, digital commoning actually 'results in a form of "false consciousness" that Sloterdijk (1984) identifies as deeply rooted cynicism' (Ossewaarde and Reijers, 2017: 611) which 'keeps digital commoners from resisting neoliberal hegemony in a meaningful way' (p. 618). This article argues that digital commoning goes beyond mere critique. It

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is rather a creative resistance and a seed form of a new alternative paradigm—not without its serious problems and challenges—to the dominant order (Arvidsson, 2010; Bauwens, 2009; Benkler, 2006).

The renting economy should not be confused with digital commoning

To begin with, I share with Ossewaarde and Reijers the same working definition of the commons that puts the practice of 'pooling common resources' at the center. Therefore, the commons is seen as a shared resource that is co-governed by its user community according to the rules and norms of that community (Bollier, 2014; Helfrich and Bollier, 2015).

So, the digital commons is a shared informational resource (e.g. software, knowledge, and design) that is more inclusive and offers more freedoms than a typical copyrighted or patented resource (Fuster Morell, 2010; Stalder, 2010). Think of the free and open-source software projects that are free to use either unconditionally or, most often, under certain conditions. For example, reuse and build on the software commons under the condition that the new product is distributed under the same sharing conditions. In line with the definition of the commons, the conditions under which a digital commons is distributed are decided by those who create, enrich, and manage the commons. It is important to highlight that the definition of the digital commons is a work in progress as it encapsulates a rapidly evolving phenomenon.

Ossewaarde and Reijers begin with discussing how the digital commons relate to the overall notion of alternative economies. In the 'Commons and digital technologies' section, the authors present their exemplary cases that they next use to shed light on the illusion of the digital commons. They consider hospitality exchanges platforms (Airbnb, CouchSurfing, and BeWelcome) as digital commoning projects.

My objection with regard to the instrumental use of hospitality platforms is twofold. The authors write that 'the common-pool resources in question, namely, the openly shared digital representations of actual living spaces, to a large extent adhere to the two characteristics of the commons as offered by Ostrom' (Ossewaarde and Reijers, 2017: 612): the property of rivalness and the practice of commoning.

First, at least in the case of Airbnb, no sharing or commoning is taking place. Airbnb is not related to 'openly shared digital representations of actual living spaces' (Ossewaarde and Reijers, 2017: 612) but rather to openly *rented* digital representations of such spaces. Moreover, depending on the definition of hospitality, platforms like Airbnb may not even be considered hospitality platforms. Hence, profit-oriented organizations such as Airbnb, Uber, or TaskRabbit clearly misuse the term 'sharing'. The type of the economy they really celebrate is that of a renting economy (Kostakis et al., 2016; Scholz and Schneider, 2016) that struggles to be regulated as less as possible.

Second, considering the commons that Ostrom mainly studies, Ossewaarde and Reijers state that the hospitality commons

> have the property of rivalness, meaning that a person who opts for using the resource subtracts from the ability of someone else to do the same. The material goods and services involved in the practices of digital commoning are intimately linked to their digital representations. (Ossewaarde and Reijers, 2017: 612)

Therefore, the hospitality platforms, the authors refer to, in principle include no digital commons. The actual living spaces may follow the 'practice of "commoning" as characterized by the active process of "pooling resources"' (Ossewaarde and Reijers, 2017: 613); however, they are not digital commons.

Ossewaarde and Reijers (2017) are equally mistaken when, referring to the hospitality commons, they say that 'one can defend the claim that resources are taken care of by a community of digital commoners' (p. 613). Who is the community and who are the digital commoners? If I rent a flat or if I am hosted, am I considered a digital commoner? What commons is digitized, produced, and managed? The authors echo Benkler and Nissenbaum (2006) to argue that 'these digital commoners actively engage, through discrete individual efforts, in the pooling together of digitalized living spaces' (Ossewaarde and Reijers, 2017: 613). Is the flat I rent via Airbnb a digitalized living space? The flat is a material resource and cannot be a digital commons. The representation of the flat on the renting platform of Airbnb is just a digital item to click on; nevertheless, no sharing takes place and no digital commons is being produced. So, no community of digital commoners exists.

Therefore, it is problematic to use the ambiguous case of 'hospitality' platforms as a solo case to argue in relation to the digital commons. Airbnb, CouchSurfing, and BeWelcome have little to do with digital commoning. Ossewaarde's and Reijers' argument thus rests on a questionable premise.

The next two sections, titled 'Technological mediation of digital commoning' and 'The promise and illusion of the digital commons in hospitality exchanges', are to a great extent irrelevant to digital commoning for the same reasons. One might agree with their critique on the selected cases (Airbnb and CouchSurfing). It unmasks the misuse of 'sharing' and, hence, it does not refer to the digital commons. If there is no sharing, there is no commoning. The third case of BeWelcome that the authors discuss builds on digital commons since the software behind the website is free and open-source software.[1] But again, BeWelcome per se produces no digital commons but rather suggests a novel way to manage material and, thus, rivalrous resources.

Digital commoning is not a-political

Ossewaarde and Reijers (2017) define capitalism 'as a modern world organized by a free market economy (appropriation and growth of resources, trust in the future, reinvestment of profits in production and new technologies, and consumerism) and work in exchange for money' (p. 610). Using this definition and some initiatives from digital commons movements, I claim that digital commoning is both immanent and transcendent vis-à-vis capitalism and not just a false consciousness that 'recuperates radical energy and renders it passive' (Ossewaarde and Reijers, 2017: 611).

Through digital commoning a new mode of production is emerging: commons-based peer production (CBPP). The peer-to-peer capacity to relate each other over the Internet entails the emergence of what Benkler (2006) first called 'commons-based peer production'. CBPP is a new pathway of value creation and distribution, where peer-to-peer infrastructures allow individuals to communicate, self-organize, and, ultimately, co-create non-rivalrous use value in the form of digital commons of knowledge, software, and design (Bauwens et al., 2018). Think of the free encyclopedia Wikipedia, the myriad of free and open-source projects (e.g. Linux, Apache HTTP Server, Mozilla Firefox, and Wordpress) or open design communities such as WikiHouse, RepRap, and Farm Hack.

CBPP is fundamentally different from the incumbent models of value creation under industrial capitalism (Bauwens et al., 2018; Benkler, 2006). In the latter, owners of means of production hire workers, direct the work process, and sell products for profit maximization. Such production is organized by allocating resources through price signals, or through hierarchical command.

In contrast, CBPP is in principle open to anyone with skills to contribute to a common project: the knowledge of every participant is pooled. These participants may be paid but not necessarily. Precisely, because CBPP projects are open systems in which knowledge can be freely shared and

distributed, anyone with the right knowledge and skills can contribute, either paid by companies, clients, or not at all. In these open systems, there are many reasons to contribute beyond or besides that of receiving monetary payment (Benkler, 2006).

CBPP allows contributions based on all kinds of motivations but most importantly on the desire to create something mutually useful to those contributing. This also generally means that people contribute because they find it meaningful and useful. From the point of view of the productive communities as well as simple users, the orientation of their work is most often on use value creation, not exchange value (Bauwens, 2005).

With CBPP, new forms of commons-based property (see the General Public License, the Peer Production License and the Creative Commons Licenses) and new forms of governance are emerging, what have been called 'peer property' (Bauwens, 2005) and 'peer governance' (Kostakis, 2011).

The authors also claim that digital commons do not embody the notion of communitas (Bittencourt, 2014) and the ethos of workers' cooperatives. So, 'the main ideals of the digital commons are grounded in a-political principles and typically resonate as technical terms: open source, peer-to-peer, decentralized applications, network neutrality, and so forth' (Ossewaarde and Reijers, 2017: 612). First, 'open source', 'peer-to-peer', and 'network neutrality' are not a-political terms. Technology is not neutral and these terms are objects to contestation, reconstruction, and democratic participation that individuals and communities can influence and change their designs and meanings (Feenberg, 1999). However, the discussion of the political economy of each of these concepts goes beyond the aim of this article.

Communitas is defined as 'liminal organizations live in contradiction as organizing processes in which structure and anti-structure are permanently tensioned' (Bittencourt, 2014: 713). Ossewaarde and Reijers (2017: 622), based on Bittencourt, claim that 'networking digital commoners have limited reflexivity because they operate within the bounds of digital exchange mechanisms' and thereby, they do not embody the communitas of informal solidarity economy.

Even drawing from the cases used by the authors, which do not well represent digital commoning, an interesting insight can be provided. BeWelcome was developed after CouchSurfing became a for-profit organization in 2011. Special attention was paid to BeWelcome's legal structure so that it is 'highly unlikely that BeWelcome will ever be sold out in the way that CouchSurfing has'.[2] Recently, a new initiative called Fairbnb was developed counteracting the rise of Airbnb with the aim to address the challenge of 'putting the "share" back into the sharing economy' (Fairbnb Manifesto).[3] The above cases show a high reflexivity within digital communities and the contradiction between digital renting structures and digital sharing structures that keep the latter to liminality and constant transition.

Bittencourt (2014) proposes 'an understanding of workers' praxis as situated and constrained but also rebel and insurgent' (p. 714). Digital commoners can be seen under the same perspective. As Arvidsson et al. (2008: 18) observe in digital commons communities, 'normal life could be a continuation of both voluntary passionate production and for profit work' and that is part of what happens in the solidarity economy initiatives that are described by Bittencourt as well. Within the rich ecosystem of digital commons communities there are myriads of similar examples (Bauwens et al., 2018; Benkler, 2006; Pazaitis et al., 2017). Therefore digital commons embody communitas and are characterized by rapidly evolving liminal or not so liminal structures, constantly interacting with the dominant capitalist superstructures.

Concerning the absence of a cooperative ethos within and of the digital commons communities, the discussion and the efforts for a platform (Scholz and Schneider, 2016) and open (Pazaitis et al., 2017) cooperativism refute their argument. For example, the concept of 'platform cooperative' is proposed as an alternative to 'renting economy' initiatives as Ossewaarde and Reijers

discuss. A platform cooperative is an online platform (e.g. website and mobile app) that is organized as a cooperative and owned by its employees, customers, users, or other key stakeholders. The Internet of Ownership[4] website contains a directory of more than 200 platform co-ops around the world.

We are living through a moment in which networked and relatively horizontal forms of organization are able to produce complex and sophisticated products. These products are often better than the artifacts produced through state-based or market-based mechanisms alone. Consider how Wikipedia displaced the corporate-organized Encyclopedias Britannica and Microsoft Encarta, how Apache HTTP server outcompetes Microsoft server software. The hybrid forms of organization within digital commoning do not primarily rely on either hierarchical decisions or market pricing signals but on mutual coordination mechanisms, which are remarkably resilient (Bauwens, 2005; Benkler, 2006).

These emerging mutual coordination mechanisms, however, also become an essential ingredient of capitalism. This is the 'immanent' aspect of digital commoning that changes the current dominant forms. But such mechanisms can become the vehicle of new configurations of production and exchange, no longer dominated by capital and state. This is the 'transcendent' aspect of digital commoning as it creates a new overall system that can subsume the other forms (Bauwens, 2009). In the first scenario, capital and state subsume the commons under their direction and domination, leading to a new type of 'commons-centric' capitalism. In the second scenario, the commons, its communities, and institutions become dominant and, thus, may adapt state and market forms to their interests (Bauwens and Kostakis, 2015; Kostakis, 2011).

Common ground

Disregarding the mistaken premises of the illusion of the digital commons, the critique and proposals of Ossewaarde and Reijers can be constructive to the digital commoning narratives. First, as mentioned above, the authors provide a valid critique on the selected cases (Airbnb and CouchSurfing) of the so-called 'sharing economy' and unmask the misuse of 'sharing'.

Second, commoners should be aware of the ambiguity of technology. Technology is not a-political. As the authors emphasize, 'in capitalist worlds, cultural environments are dominated by these [digital] technological systems that enforce their own schemas and codifications, and critical energies are dispersed' (Ossewaarde and Reijers, 2017: 622). The commoners should always question the infrastructures upon which they produce and manage their digital commons. A radical rethinking of alternative economies through a critique of technology is required, the authors postulate. So they propose, as a first step, to create 'a political process of organizing digital commoners in ways that would allow them to democratically govern the digital platforms through which they interact' (Ossewaarde and Reijers, 2017: 623). This is in-line with the digital commons and platform cooperative movement as was discussed before.

Third, the authors confer that 'only a symbiosis of the old and new ways of commoning without the domination of technological systems can lead to a "free" relation to technologies in our alternative economic practices' (Ossewaarde and Reijers, 2017: 623). Hence, digital commoners 'need to strive to gain a "free" relation with technologies, which requires new imagination and radical organizational change' (Ossewaarde and Reijers, 2017: 623). Digital commoners need to understand that technology has such an over-dominating power and that a 'releasement' from it is often required (Ellul, 1964; Heikkurinen, 2017). At the same time, it is important to highlight that by (re)appropriating and creating technology, commoners may destabilize the hegemonic order of the capital-driven technological regime and enable new modes of economic (re)production (Likavčan and Scholz-Wäckerleb, 2017).

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Notes

1. http://trac.bewelcome.org/ (accessed 31 October 2017).
2. https://www.bewelcome.org/wiki/Can_BeWelcome_be_sold (accessed 31 October 2017).
3. https://fairbnb.coop/ (accessed 31 October 2017).
4. https://ioo.coop/directory/ (accessed 31 October 2017).

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