DIGITAL COMMONS

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With the adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs), communities of individuals are following common goals and are collaboratively building resources through technologically mediated communication (Benkler 2006). We define as digital commons (DC) those "online creation communities" (OCCs) which share non-exclusive digital information and knowledge resources that are collectively created. Generally these resources are owned and/or used freely between or among the community, and are also available for use by third parties. They are used and reused but not exchanged as commodities. The people who are part of an online community that is building and sharing digital commons can intervene in the governance of their interaction processes and shared resources (Fuster Morell 2010).

A first root of the digital commons community is the hacking culture. The hacker ethic is characterized by a passion for creating and sharing knowledge. In the 1950s most software circulated freely between developers. However, in the 1970s a proprietary sense towards software started to grow. In order to preserve the free character of the software Richard Stallman (founder of Free Software movement) established the "General Public License," a legal frame for free software. Another root of the DC and cyber-culture more generally, is the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s (Turner 2006). **Back-to-the-landers** communities were among the first to see a social use for the Internet and created "virtual" communities such as The Well, which influenced digital culture. **Environmentalism** and ecology were important inspirations – present in the language, terminology, and ecosystemic thinking of Internet communities.

The spread of the Internet and personal computers lowered barriers, and expressions of a new "free culture" emerged, with the aim of collaboratively creating cultural content and generating universal access to knowledge. The most well-known example is Wikipedia.

Another prominent case of file-sharing and peer-to-peer architecture that facilitates access and exchange of cultural products is the Swedish Pirate Bay.

DC ideals have also reached the scientific world, with struggles over access to anti-retroviral drugs to treat HIV/AIDS in South Africa during the 1990s and the movement to reclaim the public character of research through open access, such as the Public Library of Science, an open access set of scientific journals.

Finally, social movements against "software patents" have been able to stop the creation of such patents in Europe. A huge range of legislative efforts to put the Internet under the control of corporate

interests has been stopped in Europe and elsewhere.

After the "dot-com" crash in 2001, a new commercial model – ex-post known as the information economy, Web 2.0, or Wikinomics – emerged, which was based on providing services and infrastructures for online collaboration (Tapscott and Williams 2007). Examples include YouTube, provided by Google, and Flickr (a photo sharing platform), provided by Yahoo. Such sites popularized online collaborative infrastructure but changed the conditions of their use from a logic of commons to one where corporations are the main providers. In digital commons such as Wikipedia, the community is involved in infrastructure provision and has more control over the design of the process. Under corporate logic, most sources of control are in the hands of the infrastructure provider, and the community of users is mostly disempowered. For example, with Flickr the community does not have control over the design of the platform, does not participate to the decision-making mechanism of the site, and cannot define the rules that govern community interaction.

There are several commonalities between degrowth and the digital commons movement. Both question the mainstream paradigm of consumption. The digital commons promote the figure of "prosumer" (producer-consumer), an individual who partakes in the online community and "consumes" value, but also produces value. Products and value are not a commodity, but accessible as public services. Indeed, the digital commons realize degrowth's call for de-commodification. Moreover, in digital commons, there is open access to the value created, which is universally accessible (without establishing discrimination mechanism others than internet connectivity and "visibility"). Finally, the production or creation of the common resource is not driven by commercial motivations and labor contracts, but by voluntary engagement. The access to the value produced is separated from its production. Some sectors of the digital commons movement have also called for a **basic income** or they promote social online currencies (see **community currencies**) to reduce dependency on monetary exchange. Digital commoners, like degrowthers are critical of and resist advertising (see for example Wikipedia, where the commitment to zero advertising is one of the online community's strongest principles).

Additionally, in DC the means of production are under the control of the communities aiming to cover its social necessities and its common mission, in contrast to **capitalism** where they are privately-held and serve the aim of profit. In DC, information and knowledge are conceived of as part of our human heritage and access to knowledge is a human right. DC therefore contest neoliberal visions that try to restrict access to knowledge (through its privatization or **commodification**).

Unlike traditional **commons**, the new technologies of information and communication provide accessibility to information and knowledge that is not rivaled nor exhaustible. On the other hand, DC depends on an infrastructure that consumes and contributes to the exhaustion of environmental resources (scarce materials for mobile phones, electricity for the computers, cables in oceans, electromagnetic camps). Although some in the digital commons movement are sensitive to questions of environmental impact, this is not a predominant issue in the movement's agenda and is something it has much to learn from degrowthers. Energetics and energy limitations also do not feature in DC communities, which generally have an optimistic view of the capacities of cooperation and communication-based productivity improvements to maintain economic development. However, beyond such differences concerning environmental questions, or the degrowthers' imaginary of "less" that the DC movement does not share, DC and degrowth meet one another in their call for a paradigmatic shift in value production and consumption and the reclaim and re-politicization of the **commons**.

References

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