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The Adoption of Digital Commons in Platform Cooperative Governance Mechanisms[1]

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Abstract: This study examines how cooperative platforms governance arrangements adhere to the principles and practices of the commons theory and open cooperative movement. The result reveal that while cooperative platforms tend to hold values consistent with the commons theory, their governance arrangements may vary and depend on the context in which they operate. The research found a duality in terms of governance structures, with some emphasizing democratic decision-making and share-based ownership, while others employed sociocratic approaches and alternative ownership structures. The level of flexibility and autonomy in terms of contribution and participation also varied. These differences were partially due to the type of cooperative and its purpose, whether it was to provide fair pay or to offer commons-based alternatives. Views on openness also differed, with some embracing open systems while others were more hesitant. The latter often attributed this to their proprietary operating environment. The conclusion that can be drawn is that cooperative platforms exhibit diverse narratives on how to organize, reflecting the complexity of their operations, which aligns with the complexity and contradictions often observed in the commons theory.

Keywords: Cooperative Platforms, Digital Commons, Governance

A adoção dos *Digital Commons* nos mecanismos de governança de plataformas cooperativas

Resumo: Este estudo examina como os arranjos de governança de plataformas cooperativas aderem aos princípios e práticas da teoria dos *commons* e do movimento de cooperativas abertas. Os resultados revelam que, embora as plataformas cooperativas tendam a sustentar valores coerentes com a teoria dos *commons*, os seus arranjos de governança variam e dependem do contexto em que operam. A pesquisa identificou uma dualidade em termos de estruturas de governança, com algumas enfatizando a tomada de decisão democrática e a propriedade baseada em cotas, enquanto outras empregaram abordagens sociocráticas e estruturas alternativas de propriedade. O grau de flexibilidade e autonomia em termos de contribuição e participação também variou. Essas diferenças se explicam, em parte, pelo tipo de cooperativa e seu propósito,

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como proporcionar remuneração justa ou oferecer alternativas baseadas nos *commons*. As visões sobre abertura também divergiram, com algumas plataformas cooperativas adotando sistemas abertos, enquanto outras se mostraram mais hesitantes. Essas últimas frequentemente atribuíram a postura adotada ao seu ambiente operacional proprietário. A conclusão é que as plataformas cooperativas exibiram narrativas diversas sobre como se organizar, refletindo a complexidade de suas operações, o que se alinha à complexidade e às contradições frequentemente observadas na teoria dos *commons*.

Palavras-chave: Plataformas cooperativas, *Digital Commons*, Governança

1. Platform economy and its discontents

The original enthusiasm with the internet and its democratising impact on the economy has waned, and one of the reasons is the rise of the so-called *platform economy*, well represented by major corporations such as Amazon, Facebook, Google and Uber. These companies have created online structures that provide a novel arena for the exchange of goods, services and information (Kenney & Zysman, 2016). They based their business model on the so-called web 2.0 and the possibilities it enabled for user-generated content (Kaplan, 2015). While these technological developments foster opportunities for peer-to-peer interaction and value co-creation, the actual economic result has been the restructuring of traditional industries and integration into the global economy (Van Dijck *et al.*, 2018). Some scholars speak even of a specific phase of capitalism, *platform capitalism* (Srnicek, 2016).

The primary focus of this discussion has revolved around labour within the information, knowledge and communication sectors, with particular emphasis on forms of unpaid digital labour (Birkinbine, 2014). Scholars claim that the platform society has evolved into an emergent knowledge society characterised by the technological expansion of immaterial and intellectual content of labour, commonly referred to as cognitive capitalism (Koloğlugil, 2015; Vercellone, 2005; Zukerfeld, 2015). While the notion of a completely disruptive post-industrial form of capitalism transforming society into a "social factory" might be somewhat exaggerated, it is undeniable that the information society holds considerable significance for the broader economy, particularly in terms of labour markets and consumer behaviour. Thus, the ascendancy of digital platforms has introduced novel approaches to business organisation and conduct, leading to profound transformations in the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services.

The platform economy's negative implications are frequently associated with emerging forms of exploitation. Furthermore, critical scholars see undemocratic characteristics stemming from market concentration, which results from the dominant presence of monopolistic platforms (Dolata, 2017; Frenken, 2017). These arrangements are characterised by datafication and commodification, with intermediary entities like Uber, Airbnb and Amazon Mechanical Turk operating profit-driven sharing platforms that perpetuate unequal digital labor relations (Casilli, 2016; Fuchs, 2012; Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013; Saner *et al.*, 2019; Terranova, 2000). Also recalled as the gig economy, characterized by short-term and freelance work arrangements facilitated by digital platforms, which has reshaped traditional employment structures and labor dynamics.

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Within this context, users (referred to as prosumers) actively generate content and engage in a participatory culture, creating, sharing and interacting with content, products and services, but often receive no proper acknowledgement for their contributions. In addition, they lack participation in the production and governance models (Fisher, 2015).

All this means that the platform economy does not represent an automatic progress in the direction of a more democratic economy, that strengthens worker struggle and social justice. If we are interested in using the digital resources and potentialities for building a post-capitalist political economy, we need to think about alternatives to platforms as they currently work. The goal of this chapter is to discuss an alternative.

For some scholars and activists, many problems of the platform economy can be solved, or at least significantly ameliorated, by instilling in its properties of a well-known mode of organising and managing production: cooperativism. But the platform cooperative movement itself has its challenges, and some scholars have proposed that, in order to succeed, cooperative platforms need to more decidedly embrace the (digital) commons. The question is how they are doing this in practice. For answering this question, we need to address first the whole discussion around platform cooperativism and its adoption of commons.

2. Platform cooperativism as an alternative way of organising

The platform cooperative movement gained momentum with the intervention of Trebor Scholz (2014, 2016, 2018), who pleaded for a more equitable framework for digital workers within a sharing economy by integrating organisational structures rooted in traditional cooperative principles with business models facilitated by new information and communication technology dynamics. The cooperative structure is based on values of equality and solidarity over self-interest and efficiency (Philipp *et al.*, 2021), and cooperative platforms should strive to facilitate resource sharing and contribute to the collective welfare (Pazaitis *et al.*, 2017).

This objective is posited to be attainable through the adoption of decentralised models of collective ownership and democratic governance, characterised by participatory decision-making processes (Bria, 2017; Scholz, 2016; Scholz & Schneider, 2017b). The concept of shared ownership within this framework is advocated as a means to achieve equitable value distribution among the community, rather than concentrating profits in the hands of a small group of investors (Frenken, 2017; Mannan & Pek, 2021; Scholz, 2017). Building on this foundation, it is contended that the cooperative movement holds the potential to challenge the prevailing platform economy and mitigate the alienating effects of on-demand work (Como *et al.*, 2016; Scholz & Schneider, 2017a).

Despite being praised as catalysts for transformative change within the platform economy, cooperative platforms have not been immune to criticism, with claims that they often represent an ideal rather than a tangible reality, primarily stemming from their short-lived nature as outcomes of activist endeavors (Mayo, 2017; Zygmuntowski, 2018). Such concerns are often rooted in the skepticism voiced by anti-capitalist theorists, who question the capacity of platform cooperatives to genuinely resist and challenge capitalist dominance, thereby advocating for more radical and alternative approaches (Birkinbine, 2018).

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This critique can be traced back to the non-adherence of these platforms to conventional growth strategies centred around network effects, which poses challenges in attracting a wider user base. Furthermore, a dearth of capital and funding further impedes their scalability (Acquier *et al.*, 2017; Bradley & Pargman, 2017; Guttmann, 2021; Mayo, 2019; Philipp *et al.*, 2021).

Another notable concern raised pertains to the challenges faced by cooperatives in resisting the coercion exerted by powerful entities and the appropriation of resources by elites, thereby exposing them to the risk of gradually aligning with capitalist practices and consequently deviating from their community-oriented mission (Brabet *et al.*, 2020; Guttmann, 2021). Adversely, many platform cooperatives adopt market-oriented behaviours, values, and managerial approaches akin to those observed in mainstream corporations (Conaty & Bollier, 2014).

Bauwens and Kostakis (2014) agree that this is a contradiction in the platform cooperative movement. They add that these pitfalls emerge alongside another contradiction, namely within the so-called commons-oriented peer production itself. In sum: (1) There is a surge in cooperatives, but they are often under pressure to work according to the capitalist dynamics of competition. This way, they end up strengthening capitalist values; e (2) Commons-oriented peer production is also on the rise with open software, hardware and digital culture, but their producers often see no alternative than organising themselves as start-ups, or these commons are appropriated by large corporations, which leads again to the reinforcement of capitalism.

These two different developments should represent a challenge to a capitalist economy, but the constraints of current competition make them actually work *for* capitalism, and not against it. Bauwens and Kostakis believe that merging both movements, cooperativism and commons, would create the conditions for a real challenge to the platform economy and, therefore, to capitalism. They call this merger *open cooperativism*. Several scholars argue in a similar line (Conaty & Bollier, 2014; Guttmann, 2021; Papadimitropoulos, 2020; Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2010). In other words, to really challenge capitalism, platform cooperativism needs to explicitly embrace the commons.

The idea of a commons-based peer production is a development from earlier approaches on the commons. In modern political economy, Elinor Ostrom (1990) has become the most important voice on the topic, significantly contributing to the comprehension of how communities can collaborate to safeguard and sustain commons-based resources.

This idea has been expanded to the digital commons with the emergence of the internet. Here, Yochai Benkler (2006) performed a central role. He gained prominence arguing that the internet encouraged common-based peer production of information through a widely distributed network. He is convinced that intellectual commons practices, independent of market demands and hierarchical structures, could succeed in challenging other modes of production.

Since then, the idea has been further developed in several aspects by scholars and activists, highlighting digital technologies potential for communities to construct and sustain digital commons, serving shared objectives and the common good. For many scholars, structures for production, use and management of digital commons can usher in a new paradigm of value creation, thereby facilitating the endeavour to transition towards

a post-capitalist society (Conaty & Bollier, 2014; Dafermos, 2020; Papadimitropoulos, 2020; Rosnay & Stalder, 2020; Scholz & Schneider, 2017b). Three dimensions can summarise the key areas where a commons-oriented peer production diverges from the economic dynamics of capitalist societies, namely *governance*, *ownership* and *access rules*. In the following, we address in details the characteristics of these dimensions.

3. Governance, ownership & access rules

The first dimension is governance. A commons-oriented peer production should strive for self-governance, encompassing collective rules to govern and manage productive processes (Broumas, 2020; Chatterton & Pusey, 2020). The establishment of rules for decision-making within a given context must include user influence on decision-making, contribution and compensation.

Within the realm of political decision-making, there is an emphasis on the inclusion of each participant in shaping the community mission and navigating the legal ramifications. Digital platforms can play a pivotal role in orchestrating this process, facilitating the attainment of a consensus (Rosnay & Stalder, 2020). Bauwens and Kostakis (2014) assert that entities grounded in the commons paradigm should implement economic democracy through the adoption of alternative multi-stakeholder governance frameworks. Within these frameworks, all pertinent stakeholders, encompassing members, collaborative communities, intermediaries, clients, and those engaged in reproductive and affective labour should partake in the process of decision-making, besides holding ownership roles as discussed below (Bauwens *et al.*, 2017). By embracing this pluralistic approach, commons-based organisations can enhance the inclusivity and participatory nature of their governance practices.

The second aspect we consider in the context of self-governance is the contribution mechanism. A distinctive aspect of this aspect relates to the nature of the digital commons, which commonly manifest as boundary organisations, operating beyond conventional legal, financial, technological, and governance frameworks, with certain functions professionalised, while others depend on volunteer contributions. In reality, such variations include the utilisation of traditional employment contracts, volunteer work arrangements, or a hybrid combination amalgamating elements from diverse approaches (Rosnay & Stalder, 2020). Notably, commons-based projects foster collective relationships that place less emphasis on monetary incentives and prioritise values of community, trust and reputation (Broumas, 2020). Within this context, equitable contribution and recognition, coupled with dynamic and flexible participation via the allocation of distributed tasks, are encouraged (Bauwens *et al.*, 2017; Kostakis & Bauwens, 2019).

The following dimensions are ownership and access rules. The ownership structure in cooperatives refers to the manner in which the means of production and common resources generated by these cooperatives are owned and governed. This includes property status and distribution of ownership. Access rules dictate resource utilisation and appropriation, in other words, policies that determine who can access the resources and the conditions under which they may be used and shared (Broumas, 2020).

To safeguard the commons from enclosure, various strategies have been proposed, such as employing open and shared systems facilitated by licensing arrangements for intellectual

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commons. These approaches endorse non-proprietary legal frameworks, promoting unrestricted access to digital commons such as software code, in line with the principle of open access (Birkinbine, 2014). Alternative intellectual property licenses are utilised to construct digital commons, reflecting the values and goals of the adopting community.

Table 1. The elements of common-based governance arrangements

Dimension	Definition	Common-based characteristics
Governance	The collective rules governing the management of productive processes and rules for political decision-making	Democratic participation Non-monetary incentives Self-management (Distributed tasks)
Ownership Structure	Rules for property status and distribution of ownership.	Collective ownership and distribution of productive processes
Access rules	Rules dictating resource utilisation and appropriation	Open and shared systems

Source: prepared by the authors

4. Different political perspectives on commons

However, the (digital) commons has become a contested field. Attempts to critically politicise the concept, for example by Broumas (2017) and Papadimitropoulos (2022), are useful to point out the divergences in the commons debate and the broader context in which the proposal of open cooperativism emerges.

In a sophisticated categorisation, Broumas (2017) proposes that supporters of the commons should be divided in two major political strands, the social democratic and the critical one. The social democratic, on the one hand, can be divided into liberal and reformist perspectives. The critical, in turn, encompasses poststructuralists and anti-capitalist perspectives of the commons.

Papadimitropoulos (2022) simplifies the schema, proposing a mere tripartite division between liberals, reformists and anti-capitalists. For the goal of our argument in this chapter, it is enough to go with the simplified version. In this version, Ostrom's and Benkler's approach is considered a liberal version of the commons. They analyse the commons in a more isolated way, with little reflection on the actual relations with markets and state. If the commons should become more than an alternative form of organising production, that is, if the whole political economy should be based more on commons than market and state-induced production, this should be a more or less autonomous development.

The liberal perspective is contrasted to the reformist one. In this case, there is a normative position of privileging the commons – and a post-capitalist society. The state should play an "aid" role. Policies should be developed in order for the commons to become ever more present and substitute markets in the management, production and distribution of resources, especially the digital ones.

Finally, the anti-capitalist strand adopts a more radical stance by considering that there is no reconciliation between commons, markets and state. They look at the broader antagonistic dynamics inherent in the dialectical relationship between the commons and

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capital (Birkinbine, 2018; Broumas, 2017). This is often traced back to the potential of commons to foster alternative forms of social wealth and social production, where the commons can serve as an alternative system of values in opposition to prevailing capitalist arrangements (Chatterton & Pusey, 2020). In this strand, the progress of the commons is rather a struggle against the state as it is and the markets it is designed to support. Commoners cannot expect state aid to act in favour of a commons-based, post-capitalist society.

Therefore, as a concept and as a narrative, the (digital) commons has had a fraught, contested history, and it is not clear how relevant they can really be for a post-capitalist society. As we will discuss in the following, proponents of open cooperativism believe that their broader strategy, connecting the commons to platform cooperativism, is a possible way forward, solving contradictions between the different strands regarding the commons and indicating the path towards a post-capitalist economy.

5. Combining platform cooperativism and the commons

Bauwens and Kostakis (2014) understand open cooperativism as the "glocalisation" of the commons. This means, they take the original proposition by Ostrom according to which commons are possible and manageable (local) and connect to Benkler's commons-based peer production, which developed from the digital culture (global).

In their original proposal, Bauwens and Kostakis's pratical measure towards open cooperativism would be the introduction of a new kind of legal licence for (digital) commons production, the so-called Peer Production Licence (PPL). First proposed by Kleiner (2010), this licence is designed to govern and protect digital commons and peer-produced resources. It is an alternative to traditional copyright and proprietary licensing models, but also to classic open source licences, such as the GNU General Public Licence (GPL), which authorises the use of commons by any project regardless the size, property, governance and business models of the beneficiary.

The problem of the GPL and similar licenses, according to Bauwens and Kostakis, is that they allow commercial corporations to benefit from the commons without requiring them to give anything back to the commoning community, reducing the long term incentives to work with the commons. The PPL, on the other hand, seeks to strike a balance between openness and sustainability, ensuring that the commons remain accessible to all while also preserving the community's ability to benefit from its shared efforts. The exact terms and conditions of a Peer Production Licence can vary based on the specific project or community's preferences and values. However, in general, this licence typically should allow others to use, modify, and distribute the peer-produced resources under certain conditions. These conditions might include attribution to the original creators, sharing derivative works under the same licence, and preventing commercial exploitation without proper consent.

Emphasised in this context is the reciprocity attribute, wherein the commons may be utilised for commercial purposes by for-profit entities in exchange for rent or a reciprocal contribution. This entails that while commercial utilisation is permitted, it is contingent upon the mandatory provision of contributions or benefits to the commons in return (P2P Foundation, 2020).

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However, the whole idea of open cooperativism goes beyond merely a licence. This approach is evident in the endeavors of activists who seek to establish governance and reproduction models based on commons principles for intangible resources, such as software and applications (Ajates Gonzalez, 2017). The authors argue that the goal of open cooperatives is to establish a commons model that enables social reproduction, which is defined as economic activities that provide sustainable livelihoods (Bauwens & Kostakis, 2014). Kostakis and Bauwens (2019) argue that, for peer production to succeed, it must encompass the entire cycle of the commons, including value realisation and distribution, in order to counteract the co-optation tendencies observed in traditional cooperatives (Gerhardt, 2020).

They endeavor to eliminate the state of subjugation to external forces within the common resources by employing a strategic approach redirecting capital from capitalist systems to the common resources, with the aim of establishing increased autonomy and self-governance (Kioupkiolis, 2021; Papadimitropoulos, 2022). The processes in which the common resources interact with the market to enable control over value have been exemplified through reversed value capture, accomplished by creating economic barriers around common resources (Bauwens & Niaros, 2017). These strategies, referred to as "reverse co-optation" or "transvestment", involve the transfer of value from one mode of production to another (Bauwens *et al.*, 2017; Bauwens & Pazaitis, 2020).

This mechanism should lead to a gradual process of structural transformation from neoliberalism to a society centred around the commons (Papadimitropoulos, 2022). According to this view, peer production serves as an essential mechanism that could coexist with capitalism, rather than being inherently opposed to it, until peer-to-peer practices can surpass capitalist forms of organisation (Terranova, 2010). The underlying premise is that no society has ever existed in a state of pure mode of production (Lund, 2017).

Supporters of open cooperativism believe that this holistic approach is a way to solve the problems of the digital commons. Papadimitroupoulos (2022, p. 23) even talks about a "post-hegemonic holistic strategy", which he describes as such:

> To put it succinctly, the transition from neoliberalism to post-capitalism entails the transformation of the capitalist enterprise into an open cooperative running on the principles of sharing, sustainability, democratic self-management (one member-one vote) and the equitable distribution of value among multiple stakeholders (Papadimitropoulos, 2022, p. 23).

In his approach, the post-hegemonic perspective, in which open cooperativism would be central, manages to embrace aspects from all three strands of the commons, the liberal, social-democratic and anti-capitalist.

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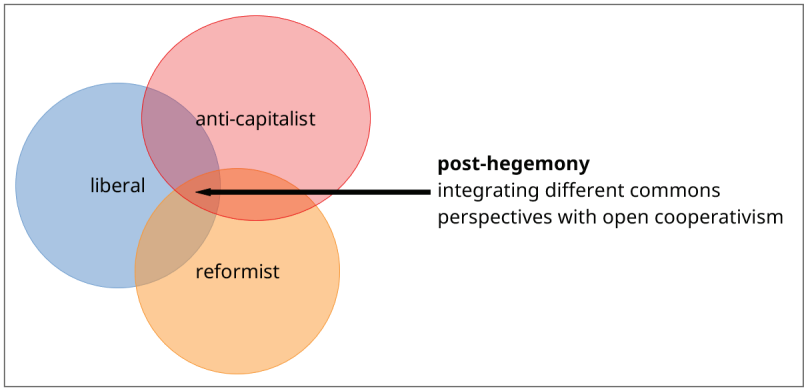

Figure 1. Post-hegemony with open cooperativism

Source: prepared by the authors

Indeed, the proposal of a post-hegemony in which platform cooperativism would be radicalised towards open cooperativism seems to offer a possible way out of the criticism to platform cooperatives. However, one should not forget the contradictions that lead, firstly, to different perspectives such as liberal, reformist and anti-capitalist. In addition, this is a solution that is still to a large extent solely based on theoretical assumptions about the potentials and the pitfalls of platform cooperativism in advancing the commons. What is lacking, in our opinion, is a more empirically based understanding on how these cooperative platforms work in terms of their relations to the commons.

As seen before, the adoption of the commons should entail specific arrangements of governance, ownership structure and access rules. This entails the establishment of a peer governance framework rooted in the tenets of common-based peer production, encompassing elements of democratic governance, participatory decision-making, distributed ownership, and open policies. Nevertheless, it remains uncertain whether cooperative platforms are effectively embracing these commons-oriented practices. A more solid empirical understanding of the governance mechanisms, ownership structures, and access rules of existing cooperative platforms could illuminate the precise challenges impeding the advancement of the commons and assess to what extent the theory of open cooperativism is expected to succeed.

Hence the research questions of our chapter: How do platform cooperatives actually relate to the commons, in terms of governance, ownership structure and access rules? Under which circumstances do they tend to advance more the principles of commoning in these three dimensions?

6. Moving to an empirical assessment

Drawing from the theory, the study at hand will adopt a set of indicators to understand the presence of commons-based principles and practices in cooperative platforms. These markers will provide a structured framework for the comprehensive assessment and analysis of their governance practices.

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Table 2. Common-based peer governance

Categories	Empirical markers
Governance	
Decision-making	Participation in democratic processes
Self-management	Contribution mechanisms Compensation schemes
Ownership rules	Property status Distribution of ownership
Access rules	Licencing mechanisms

Source: prepared by the authors

In order to analyse these markers, we have chosen ten cooperative platforms in different industry areas from the United States and European countries. This choice is based on the prevalence of digital cooperatives originating from these regions. With this case study research design, following a normative post-capitalist lens (Thacher, 2006), it is possible to compare their governance mechanisms, the principles behind them and to what extent digital commons are used to fulfil them. For data collection, we relied mostly on semi-structured interviews with professionals from these platforms – some of them based in other countries than the ones of their companies –, but also on documents such as Terms of Service and cooperative self-description as presented on their websites. As desired by most interviewees, we anonymised them, providing as much information as possible about their roles to allow the reader to assess our evidence but, at the same time, making sure participants cannot be immediately identified.

Table 3. Representatives Platform Cooperatives

Country	Industry	Interviewees	Role	Code
Canada	Stock Photography	2	Operational coordinator VP of Legal	P01
Canada	Food Delivery Service	1	Co-founder	P02
UK	Coordination systems	1	Co-founder	P03
UK	Video Conferencing Platform	1	Operational member	P04
France	Bike Delivery Service	1	Operational member	P05
Germany	Product and service provider	1	VP of Legal	P06
USA	Hospitality	1	Freelancer	P07
USA	Crowdfunding Platform	1	Operational member	P08
UK	Community-Building	1	Co-founder	P09
Switzerland	Data mobility Provider	1	Tech partner	P10

Source: prepared by the authors

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7. Governance

7.1. Decision-making

Our findings demonstrate an unanimous preference for decentralised and non-hierarchical structures in political decision-making among all participants. As for decision-making approaches, two distinct patterns emerged: democratic (based on the principle of one-member-one-vote) and sociocratic (relying on consensus rather than consent). The latter means reaching a decision that everyone in the group can accept, even if not fully agreed upon, the decision is proceeded without encountering active opposition.

The cooperatives advocating for the democratic model underscored the significance of ensuring equal participation and influence for all members in the decision-making processes. However, certain challenges were noted in implementing this democratic ideal, particularly in larger cooperatives and those affiliated with broader federations. "We are attached to the democratic principle, but we are aware that it is impossible for 'riders' to always take part in every step of the management and the decision-making of the federation" (P05). The scale and complexity of some cooperatives, as well as their integration into larger federative structures, occasionally posed obstacles to achieving uniform and fully participatory decisions, as explained by this member of a bike delivery cooperative.

Cooperatives adopting a sociocratic model desire to incorporate not only cooperative members, but also extend the definition of stakeholders, recognising the complexity of identifying users or beneficiaries of the cooperative's endeavours. As expressed by one participant in a community-building cooperative (P09), decision-making power should be apportioned in direct proportion to the magnitude of impact of a given decision on the affected parties, encompassing not only cooperative members but also local communities, customers, and suppliers.

For another platform that provides digital solutions, this translates to the fact that decisions are not necessarily determined by the majority. "Instead of asking for a majority, we ask for resistance against a solution, and if no one expresses resistance, we proceed with the decision" (P06), an interviewee clarified. This illustrates that the democratic principle of "one member, one vote," as conceptualised within the theoretical framework, is not the only way to organise around commons as it could have exclusive properties.

7.2. Self-management

The second aspect we consider in the context of governance is self-management which involves the contribution and compensation mechanism. It exhibits considerable variation among different cooperatives. These disparities often correlate with the objectives of the cooperatives. For instance, worker cooperatives that prioritise the equitable generation of income for their members often tend to embrace conventional employment practices and monetary remuneration schemes, albeit guided by more equitable principles. As demonstrated by a hospitality cooperative (P07), these are often made up of operational members and employees (e.g. cleaners). In this case, contribution are set up in a similar way to a conventional corporate organisation through employment.

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In contrast, purely digital cooperatives were more inclined to engage volunteer workers, often comprised of activists contributing to the cause alongside their regular pursuits. In instances where cooperatives encounter constraints in acknowledging labour and rely heavily on voluntary contributions, certain stakeholders referred to alternative forms of value, frequently associated with the greater purpose of digital commoning. It is noteworthy that those cooperatives that articulated their commitment to commoning values beyond monetary considerations still raised concerns about existing remuneration practices. These cooperatives expressed a desire to have the option to offer financial compensation to contributors down the line.

On this note, a participant affiliated with a video conferencing platform (P04) conveyed their interest in a contribution-based economy that values diverse forms of contribution on an equal footing, extending beyond solely monetary considerations. Nonetheless, the participant acknowledged the inherent challenge of adequately monitoring and recognising these contributions. Moreover, they highlighted the potential of gift contributions as a viable alternative, wherein a gift economy prevails over a financially-driven one, ultimately benefiting both the cooperative and the commons. Nonetheless, the participant acknowledged the pragmatic reality that individuals must address the necessities of acquiring sustenance, hence the need to devise means to generate financial resources for compensating wages.

This further highlights the complexity of organising commons initiatives entirely detached from capitalist frameworks, relying solely on individual motivation and non-monetary incentives, while still ensuring the generation of sustainable livelihoods as espoused within the idea of open cooperatives.

Several cooperatives highlighted "tokenisation" and "reputational scores" as alternatives to money. "An economy does not involve just one type of value and if we want to build a society and an economy which incorporates multiple values, we have to have more than one measurement and currency (...) a definite part of a commons future is one that measures and rewards different types of value", an interviewee from a coordination systems cooperative (P03) explained.

7.3. Ownership structure

We also found two distinct narratives by members of cooperatives concerning ownership arrangements. The more prevalent narrative involved a traditional division of ownership into shares, which were purchased by each member, thereby granting them equal rights and participation in the cooperative. This set-up was described by one participant from a stock photo cooperative (P01) as "not really all that different from being part of an agency except that they are co-owners and have the ability to weigh in".

Conversely, the other narrative entailed either a hesitancy to acknowledge ownership or a belief in its non-necessity. This perspective was influenced by the recognition that non-members could also derive benefits from the cooperative's endeavours as recognised by a participant from a video conferencing platform (P04): "Contributions are not being black and white (...) Since it is a 'commons', many different kinds of contributions can be made by many different kinds of people". Another notion is that fixed ownership might conflict with the inherent principles of the commons. An interviewee from a crowdfunding platform (P08)

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explained the complexity of defining ownership regarding public goods as "complicated - because its whole nature implies that there is something exclusive to own". If the premiss is that platforms are public goods, "the only thing there is to 'own' is the governance and the trademarks and in that sense we have a nonstock model", the interviewee affirmed.

Within this group, the intricacies of establishing ownership as a distributed organisation were raised as a concern. On one hand, ownership confers protection to the cooperative against potential appropriation. "A common does not mean free for all and, if it does, it will get exploited and abused", an interviewee from a coordination systems cooperative (P03) stated. On the other hand, it introduces barriers through the construction of a corporate narrative, which may pose challenges in terms of inclusivity and egalitarianism. The same participant therefore pushed for solutions such as informal memberships to work as barriers protecting the commons. "The membership agreement forms a wrapper around the whole organisation. If you signed it, then you can trade inside this space (...) but people from outside cannot come (...) and the value within the network cannot escape", the participant elaborated.

A noteworthy trend was observed wherein all the cooperatives operating within the gig economy tended to establish a fixed ownership structure based on member shares. In contrast, all the cooperatives with alternative ownership configurations were situated in a digital context.

7.4. Access rules

All participants reported an equal opportunity for access and interaction with shared resources within the organisation. However, a significant divide emerged among participants concerning the extent to which their systems were open to external use.

A majority of the cooperatives deemed it unnecessary or unfeasible to completely align with open practices due to their operation within competitive markets, which could potentially undermine their competitive advantage and hinder their overall success. For example, a member of a cooperative platform operating in the food-delivery domain (P02) argued that the cooperative is collectively owned by its members. As a consequence of this ownership arrangement, certain assets within the cooperative are inherently regarded as proprietary. The main reason for this is that the members provide aggregated data and if this data were accessible to everyone, it could weaken the competitive nature of the restaurant business.

In contrast, cooperatives focused on enabling digital infrastructure as a counter-hegemonic alternative were more inclined to support open practices such as sharing digital infrastructure, software and code regardless of the consequences. "As a member of the community and the public, I want to have better free software and I want it to be open to everyone", one participant from a crowdfunding platform (P08) stated on the topic. Still, even within the aforementioned group, there existed variations in the degree of radicality, as exemplified by the diverse licensing strategies employed.

In the context of a bike delivery service cooperative (P05), a decision was made to adopt an open licensing approach, albeit with restrictions on commercial utilisation. The cooperative's bylaws explicitly permit the usage of their code by other cooperatives or non-profit entities. However, in adherence to their core cooperative principles, the cooperative refrains from extending this to for-profit organisations. Consequently, they firmly reject

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the prospect of experimenting with the licence to accommodate commercial use, despite observing instances of such licensing practices among other cooperatives. Conversely, the coordination systems cooperative (P03) contended that an adoption of a peer production licence could establish a protective boundary around the commons. According to this view, the licence would permit for-profit organisations to utilise the code, provided that they offer compensation to the cooperative, thereby engendering common value. This is exactly what Bauwens, Kostakis and others envisioned with open cooperativism, i.e., revert the flow of resources from the commercial realm to the commons.

This highlights the complex interplay of political ideologies and strategic considerations shaping cooperative practices regarding the governance of digital commons as open resources and underscores the diverse range of approaches and licensing mechanisms employed by these organisations.

8. Discussion

While all cooperatives emphasised their mission to establish sustainable alternatives to capitalist platforms, with high emphasis on equitable ownership and resource allocation as well as decentralised decision-making, our empirical investigation unveiled variations in the governing approaches taken by different cooperatives. Notably, a pattern of duality in their practices was observed, with distinct modalities coexisting. One group of cooperatives emphasised their aspiration to extend their cooperative endeavours beyond their own institutions and strive for economic change. These cooperatives that identified their primary objective as facilitating digital infrastructures towards a counter-hegemonic alternative exhibited a greater propensity to explore alternative organisational practices and embrace open arrangements.

This was evident in various dimensions, such as their adoption of non-conventional decision-making processes and their reluctance to establish ownership structures based on shares. Instead, these cooperatives demonstrated a commitment to fostering synergy through their unconventional approaches to governance, aligning with their broader aim of challenging hegemonic norms in the digital landscape.

The second group pursues governance arrangements for alternative organisational structures, revenue models, and improved working conditions for their members or users, contingent on competition and proprietary forces. Although operating within comparatively more egalitarian conditions by demonstrating a pronounced commitment to achieving self-sustainability and actively seeking strategies to mitigate their dependence on commodity markets, their value realisation remains heavily reliant on capital. This phenomenon indicates that while these cooperatives demonstrate an aspiration to establish themselves as a viable alternative, leveraging democratic decision-making processes and purportedly equitable ownership distribution, they inevitably manifest structural resemblances to conventional capitalist enterprises.

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8.1. Two different types of cooperatives

In addition, a common pattern that emerged in our research is that drawing on commoning was also contingent upon whether the cooperative was established within the gig economy or solely in a digital environment. The cooperatives belonging to the former group, known as "worker cooperatives," thus adhere to the cooperative and union traditions by placing importance on ensuring equitable income and monetary remuneration for their members. Conversely, cooperatives primarily engaged in providing alternative digital infrastructures or services demonstrated a greater inclination towards utilising part-time employment or volunteer work arrangements, emphasising the pursuit of digital commoning itself rather than the creation of monetary value.

One could argue that platform cooperatives facing greater limitations in their governance arrangements are susceptible to intensified competitive and proprietary pressures. This variance in material conditions and contextual attributes in the gig economy potentially elucidates why working cooperatives exhibit divergent inclinations, with a stronger orientation towards competitive pursuits, and thus manifesting comparatively reduced involvement with the commons framework. Nonetheless, a significant majority of cooperatives operating within a voluntary peer-to-peer framework expressed their aspirations to generate monetary value for their contributors, which was acknowledged as a formidable challenge. Thus, even among cooperatives primarily focused on establishing an alternative economic system, the practicality of generating income remained a tangible reality.

The open cooperative movement takes a holistic approach, seeking to establish sustainable livelihoods for digital workers by embracing alternative value systems and fostering a transformation away from traditional capitalist paradigms. In this sense, our research findings revealed a noteworthy conclusion: Cooperatives that exhibited more radical departures from capitalist norms tended to experience challenges in ensuring long-term and viable livelihoods for their members. This suggests that governing digital commons does not necessarily guarantee a sustainable alternative as envisioned in the theory.

8.2. Alternative values

It is imperative to highlight that within this theoretical framework, the concept of value assumes a complex nature. A significant portion of the theory advocates for the recognition of alternative values that transcend mere monetary exchange. Simultaneously, the theory underscores strategies aimed at diverting value from capitalist circuits towards commons circuits, fostering post-capitalist transformations that could engender sustainable livelihoods for contributors. This vision was not prominent in the result. Consequently, one may surmise that the holistic approach taken by the theory somewhat oversimplifies the inherent challenges and politically charged dimensions associated with operationalising digital commons, wherein conflicting interests and ideologies often coexist.

To conclude, these results indicate that the political commitment and ultimate goal of a platform cooperative, whether it is to create a whole counter-economy or serve as an alternative configuration, plays a pivotal role in governing their practises. The multiplicity of strategies adopted by these cooperatives is indicative of the complexities inherent in

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building alternative business models under the contradictory conditions of digitalisation in contemporary capitalism. The duality observed in our empirical data strengthens these inclinations, wherein cooperatives face the challenge of making governance choices that, while monetarily advantageous for the organisation, may simultaneously diminish their autonomy as a social movement vis-à-vis capital.

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