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‘Commons in a 'glocal' world: global connections and local responses’

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Panel #19: Networking, Comparing, and Integrating Urban Commons Initiatives in Research and Action

Convenor: Ileana Apostol

Presenters: Panayotis Antoniadis, Ileana Apostol, Philipp Klaus, Jens Martignoni

Special guest: Hans Widmer (aka P.M.)

Summary

The key question addressed in this panel regards the characteristics of technology that can support and interconnect various urban commoning activities. We address four different areas of collective action in the city: community networks, social infrastructure, cooperative housing, and community currencies. Every paper introduces one of the above areas of commoning and explores different possibilities for linkages between them as currently explored in two new EU Horizon2020 projects, MAZI, http://mazizone.eu, and netCommons, http://netcommons.eu. A long-term vision of these research consortia is to collaborate toward promoting a spirit of sustainable living, while advancing the rich European democratic heritage through research and action. They wish to do this within specific cultures that shape their current and future collective living in the midst of diversity.

More specifically, the first paper by Antoniadis, Dulong de Rosnay, and Tréguer, reflects on the understanding of (wireless) community networks “as a commons” for equitable and affordable access to the Internet, but also for the deployment of local services, possibly supporting other commoning activities. Using the example of Guifi.net in Barcelona, it highlights the potential of communication networks to be owned and managed by citizens themselves, and identifies important legal, social, and technical challenges that need to be addressed in this context.

In the next paper, Apostol, Gaved and Unteidig discuss the role of ICTs, and DIY networking solutions in particular, for the small scale social infrastructures of urban spaces for collective life, touching upon the role of technology in creating alternative materializations of social space, and in facilitating social learning processes.

As an example of grass-roots social infrastructures at the neighborhood level, the third paper by Philipp Klaus presents the “young” cooperative housing and living projects in Zurich, through the example of Kraftwerk1, the first of a multitude of projects of this sort.

The last paper presented by Jens Martignoni introduces the concept of complementary currencies and discusses its potential for supporting small-scale commoning activities such as cooperative housing and living projects similar to Kraftwerk1 in Zurich, or as community networks like Guifi.net that are discussed in the previous presentations.

In this manner, rather than a series of individual presentations, this panel offers multiple dialogues that aim to network and integrate the specific facets of urban communing by reflecting on potential interconnections.

We are proud to have with us, as a special guest, Hans Widmer (aka P.M.) whose book bolo'bolo was one of the main inspirations for the Kraftwerk1 project, and who is active in the development of a new initiative in Zurich by the name of NeNa1, which encompasses many of the ideas discussed in this panel.

APPENDIX - Paper abstracts

1. What does "as a commons" really mean? A critical reflection on the case of community networks
Panayotis Antoniadis, Melanie Dulong de Rosnay, Félix Tréguer

The concept of the commons has become a popular means to argue in favor of a more democratic and sustainable management of shared resources, which may have the characteristics of a common-pool resource or a public good. From basic resources such as water and energy the discussion moved to complex constructions such as the "city as a commons", "knowledge as a commons" or even "money as a commons". The paper discusses whether information and communication technologies, and more specifically community networking infrastructures, can be treated "as a commons" when they are shared, owned and managed by citizens, and how they can become a sustainable alternative to market-based networking infrastructures (Baig et al, 2015; De Filippi & Tréguer, 2015).

Despite the open and distributed nature of the Internet as a technological artefact, the access to it for the general public has been traditionally a commercial service provided by a limited number of Internet Service Providers (ISPs), as a "private" good not meant to be shared, and with a limited mode of connectivity, suitable more for “client” than “server” applications.

Since the late 90s, the advance of wireless technology made it easier to build local networks of various scale that can offer symmetric and free access to the Internet. This led to the birth of numerous Wireless Community Networks around the world, which provided an ideal playground for technology enthusiasts to experiment with new technologies and build their own communication networks from scratch. This infrastructure provided also Internet access to all the members of the network, and sometimes beyond, but also the option to host local applications and services. It also led local communities to experiment different governance organizational models and funding structures towards sustainability. In parallel, the increasing threats on privacy and freedom of expression, among others, due to the increased power of global Internet platforms has brought more attention on the potential for local networks that can operate outside the commercial Internet.

Today, some of these community networks have even evolved to professional broadband Internet providers, following a bottom-up model of distributed ownership and governance. The Guifi.net network in Barcelona counts over 30K nodes, offers good quality of Internet access for low price in the city, and has brought broadband connectivity in rural areas where commercial providers did not have an interest to invest.

In this context, the paper is critically reflecting on the application of the concept of the commons to collectively owned network infrastructures, by analyzing the existing narratives and their evolution over time, from different disciplinary perspectives. The methodology combines socio-legal and computer science analysis of the technical infrastructure and the governance arrangements of networking infrastructures such as Guifi.net. A modified version of the Institutional Analysis and Development framework (Ostrom, 1990) adapted to knowledge (Frischmann, Madison, Strandburg, 2014) and infrastructure commons (Frischmann, 2012) is used to assess the nature of the resource and the community and to discuss under which circumstances local networking infrastructure can be treated “as a commons”.

2. Together, enacting the urban commons
Ileana Apostol, Mark Gaved, Andreas Unteidig

How do people connect with each other, how do they network and socialize in our times? Where are they located while socializing? Are all citizens represented in the public arena? Is this arena for urban collective life still the market square, the 'agora', the park, the cafe or simply the sidewalk? Actually what are our contemporary spaces for social life? How are they produced and who is responsible for providing them? How are they managed and operated?

Answering such questions becomes more and more difficult within the current urban conditions. On the one hand, that is due to the advances of information and communication technologies (ICTs) enabling social

contact and activities within overlapping physical and virtual spaces for socialization. On the other hand, it is so because of the increasing privatization and commodification of public spaces, together with the shrinking capabilities of the state and of local governments to provide their citizens with public goods. In such circumstances, a large number of citizen initiatives offer the alternative at various scales and in various organizational forms, providing manifold perspectives on possible routes toward, and meanings of the urban commons. The questions above remain, nevertheless, to be understood for each particular case.

In this paper we attempt to build an understanding of what social infrastructures – spaces, networks, tools and protocols for social life – may imply presently, and also how ICTs could facilitate and stimulate people's contact, information and resource sharing, and, more generally, collective practices. We hereby focus on those practices, abilities, incentives, tools and tactics for citizens to interact with others, particularly strangers, in their immediate physical proximity – a city, a neighborhood, a house, as we simultaneously see these interactions as being limited and endangered by dispersive forces within processes of globalization, as well as bearing the potential of being sustainably amplified by exactly the technologies, changing practices and awareness that threaten them at first sight.

Appropriated space is necessary, however, for integrating the continuous expression of shared values in the everyday life activities. Thus, another aim of the paper is to unveil the dialectical relation between social space and the forms taken in the physical space, including ICTs role in creating alternative materializations of social space.

To generate stimulating social environments in the city, we explore the role of triangulators capable to boost the connection of strangers in urban settings, whether they come in the form of the always successful 'tea and cake' technology or rather as hybrid spaces generated by recent instantiations like the hybrid letterbox or the MAZI Mondays node/gatherings. We argue that, when this social space is produced, owned and used in some collective form, it shares characteristics of the urban commons regardless its geographic, temporal and dynamic characteristics. Important is that the use value of this space is more relevant than its exchange value, and that the spirit 'in common' generated through the collective activities in such space has the potential to multiply through replication within the spatial practice of the city. It is in this process of replication where we aim to provide tools, guidelines, and to transfer knowledge, in the form of the MAZI toolkit, which is meant to facilitate social learning processes.

3. Exploring the potentials of self-managed communication tools for development of cooperative living, housing and related urban commons projects

Philipp Klaus

As a transdisciplinary research process and integral part of the MAZI-project (gr. "together"), http://mazizone.eu, INURA Zurich, in collaboration with nethood explores the potentials of self-managed communication tools as facilitators for social contact, deliberations, and knowledge transfer in housing cooperatives in Zurich, Switzerland.

Cooperative housing started as a movement at the beginning of the 20th century as a self-help initiative aiming at providing housing for workers that is affordable, hygienic, and secure in terms of eviction. Throughout the 20th century more than ninety housing cooperatives realized hundreds of buildings and today provide living space for 100'000 people, a quarter of the city's population.

Since the 1980s new cooperatives have been founded. They claim more democratic rights within the coop, less hierarchic organisation and more inclusive decision making. Every member holds a share of the cooperative and additionally pays an amount related to the respective apartment, depending on its size? Basically, the buildings are managed by their inhabitants. The members rent and own the flat at the same time.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the self-managed model was expanded to bigger complexes and to "more-than-just-housing". The members of the Kraftwerk1 cooperative started working on the realization of an utopia and set up a programme: ecological living, restaurant, offices, ateliers, a self-run store, contracts with cooperative food producers, a kindergarten, apartments for handicapped people, solidarity funds,

community rooms, hairstylist, flats for families, singles, communities of 5 to 10, common guest rooms. In 2001 the building was finished. 240 people moved in, 90 people started working in small businesses.

Exploring the potentials of the MAZI tools in existing urban commons projects offers the opportunity of unlocking knowledge and facilitate networking activities regarding the growth of the urban commons realm.

The existence of dozens of working groups and decision making processes in Kraftwerk1 is a perfect starting point for exploring DIY communication tools as a means to facilitate social interactions and the collection of knowledge and ideas, both online and offline. Our starting point will be the accumulation of knowledge around the organization of the cooperative and its transfer to different political, social and economic environments, namely the recently launched NeNa1 initiative in Zurich (nena1.ch) and various communities and municipalities in Greece in collaboration with the INURA Athens team. For this, we will install together with members of the cooperative a small number of MAZI nodes that will collect different types of input from residents and their guests in addition to providing free and easy access to the local Intranet. A HybridLetter box, designed and implemented by the Design Research Lab in Berlin, will allow non-savvy residents to participate in the discussion by simply writing their ideas on a card. The implementation will be accompanied by permanent observation and followed by a survey (interviews) about the successes and failures of the application.

The goal of this paper is to sketch the required transdisciplinary research framework, which will facilitate the collaboration of different actors around our ambitious goal.

4. Community Currencies as a Commoning tool: The case of Cooperative Housing and Community Networks

Jens Martignoni, Panayotis Antoniadis

Grassroots initiatives are often thought as depending mostly on voluntary effort, built on ethical community values rather than financial objectives. Similarly, the management of the commons is seen incompatible with centralized forms of accounting and enforcement. However, research and practice, with most notable the work by Elinor Ostrom, shows that self-organization cannot become sustainable without some form of organization.

Community currencies provide exactly a standardised way of organization by framing transactions and accounting for different types of resource exchange in a certain geographical area. They are further able to provide incentives for solidarity and local economic growth. Most importantly, they can be designed according to the local values and objectives. Time Banks for example, define time as the main measure of value of one's effort in community activities, while mutual credit systems, like numerous LETS systems, reject the notion of interest rate on credit.

However, no matter how attractive they look, at least for the proponents of self-determination and independence, few community currencies have managed to achieve significant scale. But mostly their design did not take in account “the power of the commons”. The most successful schemes until now have followed a pragmatic approach in terms of sustainability, such as the Sardex in Italy, the RES in Belgium, or the Bristol pound in the UK.

The paper wishes to build on the lessons learned from failures and success stories in order to design special-purpose community currencies for supporting specific commoning activities in the city. Such activities include the case of cooperative housing and living projects, see http://o500.org/, and community networks that provide broadband Internet services, like Guifi.net in Barcelona, see http://guifi.net. In each case, the goal of a well-designed currency would be to solve a specific problem. A challenge that cooperative housing initiatives as well as community networks face today, is the lack of voluntary self-help activities, one of the main attributes of their identity that is fading away. Guifi.net is one of the few community networks that managed to solve this problem, by establishing a foundation that operates a resource allocation and rewarding scheme. This scheme rewards those that contribute resources to the system and requests payments in EUR for those that wish only to consume.

A community currency could replace the requirement for payments in EUR with the option to contribute not only in networking resources but also through other services outside the network, making it more open, more independent, and a driver for the local economy.

The paper analyses some important design criteria for such a currency, it presents scenarios of a possible implementation in community networks as well as in housing cooperatives, and explores possibilities of interesting combinations between such commoning activities in the city. Some theoretical matters based on the similarities of CN's and CC's as networks transporting information respectively value are discussed as well.