

## 2018 07 01 - Reading group - To hack and to own, 2nd session

*mh notes*

Participants: Mike Hales, Matt Noyes, Michele Kipiel. These are mike's take-home points, 24 hours later.

For this session I read:

- 17 Hoover - What we mean when we say 'cooperative'
- 30 Martin - Money is the root of all platforms
- 36 Morell - Toward a theory of value for platform cooperatives
- 37 Bria - Public policies for digital sovereignty
- 38 Cherry - Legal and governance structures built to share
- 40 Taylor - Non-cooperativism

And for a previous session:

- 13 Bollier - From open access to digital commons
- 15 Orsi - Three essential [legal] building blocks for your platform cooperative
- 28 Bauwens & Kostakis - Why platform coops should be open coops
- 34 Metts - Your friendly neighbourhood tech coop

It seemed to me that none of the chapters for this session (as distinct from the previous session) were very insightful or sharp. Conceptually they're rather haphazard (disappointingly, Morell on the key issue of **value** was totally ad hoc and muddled; for example, rolling together developer-value and user-value), theorising isn't their strong suit even though some of them (like Martin, in banking) clearly draw on a lot of experience. And example-wise, they're a bit too brief to get down into the engine room with cases. So I did what I did in the previous reading from this collection, and asked:

*What is it that these chapters not telling me, that I need to have some way of framing, in order to be clear what social.coop is up to?*

I took the basic assumption that **social.coop Mastodon** is the sole current FLOSS instance 'in the storefront' - the basis of social-coop's **platform service offering** - through which social.coop coop aims to achieve its outcomes. Other instances hosted or used, open or closed (Loomio, MediaWiki, Riot) are operated as **back-office** platform tools supporting the distributed collective practice of the activist/members who comprise social.coop. Possibly other FLOSS apps might be put into the front office at some future time. Possibly other platforms might be adopted in the back office. But an (unforked) instance of Mastodon is currently the core.

I ended up with **four topics** below:

- Who are the beneficiaries (users) of social.coop understood to be?
- A platform-service that somebody will pay for? Place-based?
- Social.coop = a coop?
- Facilitation, wiki, commons - to be foregrounded?

There also was a whole other discussion, on defeating platform capitalism: a separate note to come on this.

## 1 Who are the beneficiaries (users) of social.coop understood to be?

*Workers in social.coop*

What's the expectation in social.coop Mastodon that **decently paid work**, in predictable amounts will be generated **within** social.coop?

*Hosting and maintaining a platform-instance? Forking Mastodon code? Re-jigging the UI? Anything else? **Tech jobs**.*

*Other workers*

What's the role of social.coop Mastodon in creating or enabling **jobs/ decent work for others**?

- Are these **tech jobs** in service production, in which platform-instances of FLOSS apps are the service offering 'in the front office'?
- Or are they jobs in **other sectors** of economic activity - material services (eg cleaning), supply chains (eg food), production clusters (eg incubator/accelerator hubs) etc
- enabled by (specific instances of?) Mastodon 'in the back office' (in management and governance, community development, local supply-chain communication, liaison with municipalities, etc)?

They key issue here would be: why would anyone use Mastodon rather than Twitter? Or Slack? Is the app up to it? Does it have a too-complex and sometimes hard-to-read interface? Is the UI really suited to anarcho self-sufficiency tech nerds?

*Other livelihood-related projects*

Regarding the 'other sectors' above, what's the role of social.coop Mastodon in **other 'economic' projects** - social enterprise, generative economic activity, solidarity economy. Including coops - but not exclusively coops? Leading on from this . . .

*Activist communities*

The issue of place-based solidarity-economy or social justice-based programmes was raised in several of the chapters. What's the role of social.coop Mastodon in **enabling organising**?

Matt had wondered before, whether the core role of social.coop would turn out to be:

- in service-producing employment (ie as a **workers' coop**), or
- in organising, oriented to generative, solidarity-economy employment (ie as a **civil-society development organisation**, sustained in conventional ways from supporting subscriptions and - maybe - grants).

-Good question. Seems obvious to me, it has to be the latter **facilitative** option; which is an important one. I see no way a workers' coop, based on providing a Mastodon platform service, is going to employ workers, plural, into double figures. The creator of Mastodon source (now supporting umpteen instances) is a one-person show.

This makes me wonder whether the core function of social.coop is in fact to develop a **commons**, as distinct from operating as a service-producing **coop**. In which case, what's it a commons **of**? More on this below.

*Local? Trans-local?*

Should social.coop Mastodon develop **partnerships with cities & municipalities** - and civil-society groups in cities & municipalities - facilitating solidarity-economy development in cities or geographical regions?

*Specific instances of Mastodon - with a local-identity skin - whose users are persons & groups, active in developing geographical practices and institutions.*

Are there **trans-local activist communities** that social.coop should identify as core users to be served - by social.coop Mastodon or perhaps by further, specific instances hatched via social.coop?

*Note: If social.coop were facilitating local projects - as implied above - would this make social.coop itself a trans-local organising community, whose core (livelihood-related) outcomes will arise in **other, local settings**, perhaps through other, coop-owned instances of Mastodon? Might this be a source of income to social.coop, if worker-members are 'seconded' to, or do job shares in, more local enterprises - perhaps in a startup or short-term booster role?*

## **2 A platform-service that somebody will pay for? Place-based?**

How can Mastodon be the basis of a (platform) service that somebody with a substantial bank account will pay for, as a public good?

**Local economic initiatives** seemed to be the obvious thing here.

Am I missing ANOther option?

- Set up a local coop (an actual coop, with employed **workers**)
- with a particular community-mix of known/intended **users**
- Staff it with two workers experienced in **federated working**:
- a **tech person** to establish and maintain a Mastodon hosting service and do development (code forking, UI, drawing & contributing to the commons of FLOSS/fediverse resources; whatever) also skills-sharing (running fediverse classes?); and
- a **facilitator/community-developer person**, to fit Mastodon into the processes of development occurring on the ground, developing community identity (and identity of Mastodon-use as part of that), developing UX, access modes for the platform in the community, related roles, literacies, cascading training/learning, organising educated-user pressure on the platform service and UX. Etcetera.

Both roles can pass to the local community, through apprenticeship. The local coop could become a mini-social.coop, propagating others through solidarity-economy networks. And contributing the social.coop wiki/commons, on how-to-do-it (tech and facilitation, both).

This path requires a municipality with a manifest commitment to being a **Partner State** participant<sup>1</sup> in autonomous community economic development

- maybe adopting 'the Preston model', a model from the Democracy Collaborative, GEO, RIPESS, the Guatemalan FLOK programme, etc),
- seeing the value of a localised social media channel to support and sustain emerging local identities, but also
- with a window (through the fediverse) into globally-wide open networks of collaboration and expertise.

This public-sector institution would be where the main funding would come from - coupled with civil-society channels (grants, crowdfunding) - to commission and maintain a **local social-media platform**.

It strikes me that it may only be through giving this kind of local, under-our-own-control, local identity-bearing, place-centred character to the deployment of FLOSS-based social media platforms, that the **alternative literacy** of using them can be developed (in preference and in resistance to the sleek, mass-membership, sheep-to-the-slaughter, extractive corporate platforms that a majority of people will be familiar with).

The apps will need further development to make them really useable by folks who are not prepared to spend the time and effort on them that

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1 A P2PF/Commons Strategies Group notion, see David Bollier, John Restakis.

geeks are. Enjoying the practicality and visible benefit and pride of community usage, as distinct from the frivolity and self-indulgent tribalism of corporate platforms' usage, is a cultural mode that will take some cultivating. **Different memes** - of mutual, socialised contribution - will need to be hatched in the practice, and folks who are used to the individualism and me-too of corporate media won't necessarily find this obvious and immediately pleasing. And working out the relationship - between the globalised communities of FLOSS and solidarity economy and P2P commoning, and the local here-in-this region communities of daily life and work - is a balancing act that will challenge our best facilitators. There is expertise on this, out-there. The global-local fediverse roots of the infrastructure enables those resources to be drawn down into any city or town; likewise, contributed-to. Design global, build local. Could social.coop become a hub for this stuff?

### 3 Social.coop = a coop?

As my sense of the direct employment possibilities in (global) social.coop shrank, I started to wonder: is social.coop in fact a coop? How much can it be expected to actually trade, as revenue-earning, service-providing practice?

If it were, it would have to be a **multi-stakeholder** coop. The number of workers would be too small to make it a **workers' coop**. Of course there are many small workers' coops - printers, for example, or software houses, or retail enterprises. But as a service organisation, the huge majority of actors involved in the effective deployment of a platform - that is, developing and institutionalising the **social use-value** of the platform - are **users**.

We wouldn't want to see a passive-**consumer coop**, just interested in cheap reliable, good-UX service. In fact, the actual service is **co-produced** between platform developers/providers and platform users; the service isn't fully delivered until its **social outcomes** in the community (enterprise sector, household/neighbourhood sector, municipal sector, civil-society organiser-sector) are realised. The coop form for this is the multi-stakeholder coop. Social.coop needs to adopt this form (Somerset rules or similar). And any spawned local coops would be in the same boat.

**Employment in coops** is not where the main effects come. Employment and other economic effects (including environmental effects) come in tuning a social media service, grounded in free-code apps, to generative work, to worker- and community-self management and to mutual care in other (less techno-centric) work communities. At least half the directly associated employment is in facilitation as distinct from tech

development and apparatus. It's **culture/capability** that's being produced as the key economic output, not **hosted instances of code**.

But maybe social.coop itself isn't going to be a coop, generating revenue? (Though the principles of a multi-stakeholder coop are bound to be a good guide to governance and steering.) Maybe social.coop is creating a commons?

#### 4 Facilitation, wiki, commons - to be foregrounded?

Perhaps the wiki should be seen as a more significant part of the 'front office' of social.coop than it is? Currently it's the poor, unexciting, bread-&-butter, backroom relation of the more in-your-face Mastodon instance. But this is the open-access, transparent place where documentary resources need to be curated and cultivated, for **platform-cooperativeness practice** (including governance) and for literacy in **using** Mastodon as a tool and in using it in **facilitating community development** - both inside social.coop, by members, and in social.coop Mastodon's user communities. The wiki is a significant part of **the commons** that social.coop is developing.

##### *The resources of the social.coop commons*

The resources of the commons are the accumulating knowhow in making free libre software serve the production of wealth under relations of production that are not Capital's. Which is to say: the developing resources are forms of **labour-power**: in making tech infrastructure work, and in weaving infrastructure together with culture in everyday living and working, to enable . . . whatever: sufficiency, wellbeing, commonweal, wise de-growth environmentally-tuned economic practice. In addition to propagating labour-power in time-honoured ways - through apprenticeship 'on the job' - the need is to **document** skills and stories, institutional forms and analytical constructs, enterprise strategies and political alliances and learning processes and tool-configurations, so that the challenge is easier for the next wave, or for the folks who live over the next hill. Rather than Mastodon, the social.coop wiki is where this function rests.

##### *The work of commoning - and why: remember Mr Moneybags*

Bauwens and Kostakis suggest that "In general cooperatives are not creating, protecting or producing commons." A commons is a relationship between a constellation of resources, a (set of) community(ies) whose members identify as commoners, and a system of obligations, privileges and sanctions by which they are bound. The **work of commoning** is at the heart; it comprises

- collectively **curating** the resources (sometimes, with contributors to the commons making the resources new, out of new visions) and

- **stewarding** them (determining what kinds of economic and cultural use of the resources are acceptable, under what regulation, by which players).

The stewarding of a commons includes the question of what kind of coop (or other social enterprise) can trade on the back of the commoned resources (free libre software? strategic learning?. The strategic mistake of 'open source' software has been made once; and today's Microsoft (which now owns the primary open source software repository, having paid \$7.5bn for it last month) is one of the visible outcomes of that. The management of a software commons **as a regulated commons**, and its weaving together with social enterprise and cooperative enterprise (as trading and wage-paying ventures using commons resources), is a domain of institutional politics that has a long way to go yet before it's properly worked out.

We can be sure that Mr Moneybags in Silicon Valley (China, Russia . . . wherever Capital sets up its offices) will be working every bit as hard as we are, to make these new forces of production into resources for capital accumulation and extractive production (as they have done with open source software), rather than for common weal, freedom and husbandry of the planetary commons. We need to learn for all we're worth. Within the social.coop platform architecture, the wiki is where the work of facilitating this struggle to learn rests. Bauwens and Kostakis note how - despite the internationalism of solidarity-economy proponents like RIPESS - coops tend to self-enclose around their local or national membership. "As a result, the global arena is left open to be dominated by large corporations." The 'open coop' in a global federation of trade and knowhow is a new kind of institution. Nobody quite knows how to do it yet.

Social.coop Mastodon is a place where developing insights into this challenge can be offered and recognised. Social.coop Loomio is a place where learning about this skilful stuff can be collectively brought under the spotlight, refined and documented. And social.coop wiki is where the best current multi-mode documentation needs to live. As a **facilitation venture** (with a culture-producing and practice-producing mission) - as distinct from a mere infrastructure venture of boxes and code hacking and hosting - social.coop needs to develop a much more dynamic and mutual relationship between these three platforms. If Riot would work reliably, that might sometimes be useful too; this thinkpiece grew out of a Riot/Jitsi session (hard work, with bandwidth issues). A Mastodon instance is the tip of the iceberg of what social.coop may be for.