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Postdigital Commons

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In academic literature, the commons have been brought into prominence with the publication of Garrett Hardin's (1968) article 'The Tragedy of the Commons', which argues that common resources used by an infinite number of people will necessarily become depleted. In a postdigital age (see Jandrić 2023), the commons have undergone significant transformations. Such transformations include, amongst others, the need to preserve natural commons (the environmental challenge), the growing importance of digital commons (the informational challenge), and the change in focus from commons as a resource (watersheds, pastures) to commons as a process (Bollier 2024). This article focuses to what can be found under the name of digital commons (see Dulong de Rosnay and Stalder 2020; Verdier and Murciano 2016; Kioupkiolis 2022). From this starting point, this paper takes a first stab at the development of a theory of postdigital commons, explore its main challenges, and directions for further research.

Michael Bauwens, the founder of the P2P Foundation,¹ argues that commons are new seed forms or 'new patterns that carry a new social logic, that may create subsystems, that may develop into systems, and eventually become new social norms' (Bauwens in Bauwens and Jandrić 2021: 577). What we make of these seed forms today, will shape the world of tomorrow. In the world of technology, the window of opportunity for this shaping is quite narrow.

In academic literature, digital commons are often defined in juxtaposition to natural commons such as pastures and wells. Most of these definitions understand (material and immaterial) commons as resources (e.g., Dulong de Rosnay and Stalder 2020; Verdier and Murciano 2016; Kioupkiolis 2022). However, building on Brando et al. (2019), Sanders (2024: 151), and of course postdigital theory (see Jandrić and Knox 2022; Jandrić 2023), the commons are much more than resources. The real battlefields are 'norms, standards, and values' around those resources – and in a postdigital context, they are co-created through entanglements between human and non-human actors (see Fawns 2022).

Based on this theory, I now arrive at a provisional description: postdigital commons are non-binary entities and processes, that reach beyond mainstream dichotomy-based, determinism-based, or instrumentalism-based definitions of digital commons. Let's examine one example and see where this description will take us. An Open-Source book about chess is a clear case of informational commons. An Open-

¹ See <https://p2pfoundation.net/>. Accessed 8 May 2024.

Source record of a person's genome is both informational (because it is written in digital language of zeroes and ones) and biological (because it describes genetic code of a living organism); it is bio-informational. An Open-Source record of a population's genome is informational (because it is written in digital language of zeroes and ones), biological (because it describes genetic code of living organisms), and social (because the geographical spread of genome speaks about nutrition, migrations, and other social categories); it is bio-info-social. Of course, the society needs to arrive at a common agreement about handling the record, which brings us into the realm of politics. This is where our Open-Source record becomes more than an entity or a resource – it triggers, and it becomes, a set of processes (e.g., decision-making about ways of handling the record).

Examples like this can be built almost endlessly. However, the recognition of entanglements between biology information, and society, and the curious existence in a state between entity and process, allows us to use one word, and one concept, that binds them all: the postdigital. This recognition reaches far beyond linguistic replacement of clumsy portmanteaus such as bio-info-social by the word postdigital, as postdigital theory has developed a complex theoretical apparatus for dealing with this kind of complexity. Postdigital theory resolves some problems such as those related to the presentation of the commons as “immaterial” contra “material” within different scientific discourses’ identified by Roos et al. (2016: 48). At the same time, however, postdigital theory introduces a lot of theoretical complexity, and, as can be seen from examples in fields such as education (see Peters and Besley 2023; Jandrić et al. 2024), this complexity is often difficult to translate into policy and practice.

Today's postdigital commons now need to include human and non-human actors, data and algorithms, biology, information, and society. We need to reach beyond the fallacy of digital immateriality and accept complex entanglements between material and immaterial worlds. We need to avoid technological determinisms and instrumentalisms. Postdigital commons are not just resources; they are also processes, and much more. Theory and practice of the commons now need to be shaped by fields such as philosophy of technology, Science and Technology Studies, sociomaterialism, and many others.

Our postdigital age is a rupture and continuation in the history of knowledge (see Jandrić 2023), so these theories and approaches pile up on top – rather than replace – earlier theories and approaches. This implies the need for developing postdigital approaches to research, (geo)politics, policy, and practice of the commons; approaches that would result in the making of new seed forms of the commons (Bauwens in Bauwens and Jandrić 2021: 577), suitable for our postdigital society.

As I write these words, some aspects of theory, practice, policy, and politics (such as the copyright debate) are rather fixed. For instance, we all know that Open Access is better for knowledge development than copyrights, but the struggle for opening takes place within a fixed capitalist environment. Other aspects of theory, practice, policy, and politics (such as new AI designs) are definitely much more malleable. New generation AIs, such as Generative AIs and Large Language Models, are currently under technological and legislative development. However, we are not starting exactly from scratch, as this development largely depends on previous technological and legislative solutions.

Postdigital commons are not a magical stick that will resolve all problems. However, they are an important step towards a reimagining of more traditional forms of commons in and for our postdigital age. Making this step will ensure that the commons

maintain their important historical place in theory and improve its positioning in politics, policy, and practice.

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