

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Digital Commons and the Digital Public Sphere: How to Advance Digital Democracy Today

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This paper asks: what are the democratic potentials of the digital commons and the digital public sphere? First, the article identifies ten problems of digital capitalism. Second, it engages with the notion of the digital public sphere. Third, it outlines the concept of the digital commons. Fourth, some conclusions are drawn and ten suggestions for advancing digital democracy are presented.

This article contributes to theorising and the analysis of digital capitalism, Internet platforms, the digital public sphere, the digital commons, digital democracy, public service Internet platforms, civil society/community Internet platforms, platform cooperatives, open access, corporate/capitalist open access, and diamond open access. This work also outlines ten problems of digital capitalism as well as ten principles of digital progressivism, a politics that advances the public sphere and the commons and thereby (digital) democracy in society.

There are natural, economic, political, and cultural dimensions of the commons and the digital commons. Capitalism, public service, and civil society media/community media/cooperatives are three forms of organisation and governing the Internet and digital media/technologies. Capitalism colonises and commodifies the (digital) commons and the (digital) public sphere. Alternative models are located outside of capitalism in the realms of the public sphere and civil society as well as their interactions.

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**Keywords:** digital commons; digital public sphere; digital capitalism; public service media; public service Internet platforms; platform co-operatives; platform cooperativism

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## Introduction

In the past 15 years, the notions of big data and social media have become prevalent in everyday life. Associated with it, we have experienced the rise of platforms such as Google, YouTube, Facebook, Amazon, Twitter, Apple, Baidu, Instagram, WhatsApp, WeChat, Alibaba, Spotify, and Netflix. These platforms gather lots of personal user data and provide services

such as search engines, video platforms, social networks, online shop microblogs, photo-sharing platforms, messenger apps, or music and film streaming.

This paper asks: What are the democratic potentials of the digital commons and the digital public sphere? First, the article identifies ten problems of digital capitalism. Second, it engages with the notion of the digital public sphere. Third, it outlines the concept of the digital commons. Fourth, some conclusions are drawn and ten suggestions for advancing digital democracy are presented.

### Digital capitalism

Capitalism is a type of society that is based on the logic of the accumulation of power (Fuchs, 2020a). Money capital is a particular and important form of power that is accumulated in capitalist society. But the logic of accumulation also shapes politics and culture. Politics in capitalist society is the sphere of the accumulation of decision-power. Culture in capitalist society is the sphere of the accumulation of reputation. Inequality and injustices are the consequences of the logic of accumulation: the capitalist economy is shaped by the exploitation of labour and the asymmetric distribution of wealth; the capitalist political system is shaped by domination and asymmetrical influence; the capitalist cultural system is shaped by ideology, malrecognition, and disrespect.

Digital capitalism is not a new phase of capitalist development, but rather a dimension of the organisation of capitalism that is shaped by digital mediation. In digital capitalism, social processes such as the accumulation of power, capital accumulation, class struggles, political struggles, hegemony, ideology, commodification, or globalisation, are mediated by digital technologies, digital information, and digital communication. Transnational digital and communication corporations play an important role in digital capitalism.

Twenty-one of the world's largest 100 transnational corporations operate in the communication, media and digital industry (**Table 1**). Subsectors of the capitalist communication, media and digital industry include, for example, advertising, broadcast networks, cloud storage, communication/digital networks, digital games, digital hardware, digital services and platforms, leisure and live entertainment culture, online shopping, online streaming, or software. The total profits of the dominant 21 communication/digital/media corporations amounted in financial year 2019 to US\$ 2.5 trillion, which made up 3% of the global 2019 gross domestic product.<sup>1</sup> That just 21 companies control 3% of the world's financial wealth produced during one year shows the large power of capitalist companies, including digital and communication corporations.

**Table 1:** The dominant transnational communication and digital corporations.

Rank	Company	Country of headquarters	Commodities	Annual revenues (US\$ bn)	Annual profits (US\$ bn)
9	Apple	USA	digital hardware, software, digital services, online streaming, cloud storage	267.7	57.2
11	AT&T	USA	communication/digital networks, broadcasting networks	179.2	14.4
13	Alphabet	USA	digital advertising, digital services and software (e.g. Google, YouTube, Android OS, Chrome)	166.3	34.5

(contd.)

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Company</b>	<b>Country of headquarters</b>	<b>Commodities</b>	<b>Annual revenues (US\$ bn)</b>	<b>Annual profits (US\$ bn)</b>
13	Microsoft	USA	software (e.g. Windows, Office, Skype), hardware (Xbox)	138.6	46.3
16	Samsung Electronics	South Korea	digital hardware	197.6	18.4
20	Verizon Communications	USA	communication/digital networks	131.4	18.4
22	Amazon	USA	online shopping platform, online streaming of digital content, cloud storage	296.3	10.6
27	Comcast	USA	communication/digital networks, broadcast networks	108.7	11.7
28	China Mobile	China	communication/digital networks	108.1	15.5
31	Alibaba	China	online shopping platforms, online payment, online entertainment streaming	70.6	24.7
36	Walt Disney	USA	entertainment content, broadcast networks, digital entertainment and streaming platforms, leisure parks, merchandising	74.8	10.4
38	Intel	USA	digital hardware	75.7	22.7
39	Facebook	USA	digital advertising, digital services (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp)	73.4	21
43	Nippon Telegraph & Tel	Japan	communication/digital networks	109.6	7.9
50	Tencent	China	digital advertising, digital services (QQ, WeChat), digital games, music and video streaming,	54.6	13.5
51	IBM	USA	digital hardware, software, cloud computing	76.5	9.0
58	Sony	Japan	hardware, video games, entertainment content	79.2	6
66	SoftBank	Japan	communication/digital networks, digital hardware	87.4	2.9
69	Deutsche Telekom	Germany	communication/digital networks	90.1	4.3
82	Cisco Systems	USA	digital hardware, software	51.6	11.1
94	Oracle	USA	digital hardware, software	39.8	10.8
			<i>Total:</i>	2,477.2	367.0

Source: *Forbes 2000 List* (year 2020). Available at: [www.forbes.com/global2000](http://www.forbes.com/global2000) (last accessed 7 October 2020).

Digital capitalism has been shaped by ten major societal problems (see Fuchs, 2021: especially chapter 14):

1. Communication and digital capital exploits communication and digital labour and has resulted in the tendency of capitalist monopolies in the communication and digital industry.
2. Dominant Internet culture is shaped by a competitive, individualistic digital culture that is me-centred and focused on the accumulation and asymmetric distribution of online attention, influence, reputation, visibility, and voice.
3. Communication/digital corporations and state apparatuses have created a surveillance-industrial complex.
4. Capitalist social media are anti-social media that have helped in advancing anti-democratic potentials, digital authoritarianism, digital racism, digital nationalism, and digital fascism.
5. In algorithmic politics, algorithms create online content and attention, and it becomes difficult for humans to discern which online activities are human and which ones are machinic.
6. In the online world, there are fragmented digital public spheres where we find filter bubbles.
7. The digital culture industry has created digital ideology, ideologies about the digital and ideology disseminated via digital networks. Digital advertising and tabloid content dominate the online world. Many digital platforms are digital tabloids.
8. Influencer capitalism dominates social media and has created asymmetric attention, reputation, and visibility on the Internet as well as an ideological culture dominated by shopping and advertising. Advertising is increasingly hidden and presented as regular content ('branded content'). 'Influencer capitalism is not a type of capitalism but an ideology that claims that by being active on social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube there are great opportunities for becoming wealthy and famous. Influencer capitalism is the dream, fantasy, and desire of users to become celebrities that accumulate a wealth of social relations, money, influence, likes, positive comments, etc. Influencer capitalism is the online manifestation of the American Dream's ideological claim that in capitalism everyone has an equal opportunity to make a career, from a dishwasher to a billionaire, by having a good idea and believing in themselves' (Fuchs, 2021: 175).
9. The high amount of online information flows processed at high speed has resulted in digital acceleration. There is a lack of time and space for sustained political debate.
10. On social media, one frequently encounters fake/false news and post-factual politics that deny facts and are led by emotionalisation, tabloidisation, and ideology.

The combined consequences of these ten developments are that democracy is under threat and we have experienced the rise of authoritarian capitalism where far-right demagogues dominate politics (Fuchs, 2018a, 2020b). Digitalisation is not the cause of these developments, but has rather mediated the antagonism between neoliberal capitalism and rising social inequalities. The commodification, privatisation, commercialisation, and individualisation of (almost) everything has turned against liberalism's civic values and political freedoms, which has given rise to new nationalist, racist, xenophobic, authoritarian, and fascist forces in society.

The question arises: What the alternatives are to digital capitalism and digital authoritarianism? Are the digital public sphere and the digital commons such alternatives?

### The digital public sphere

Political communication is an important and indispensable aspect of the political system in all models of democracy. In general terms, it can be said that the public is a central mechanism of the political system. By 'public' we generally understand goods and spaces that are 'open to all' (Habermas, 1989: 1). One speaks, for example, of public education, public buildings, public parks, public squares, public assemblies, public demonstrations, public opinion, public media, etc. Public goods and facilities are not reserved for a clique or a club of the privileged, but are intended for the general public, i.e. all members of society.

The public sphere is a sphere of public political communication that mediates between the other subsystems of society, namely the economy, politics, culture, and private life. The ideal type of the public sphere is a realm of society that organises 'critical publicity' (Habermas, 1989: 237) and 'critical public debate' (Habermas, 1989: 52). The public sphere mediates political communication. It is a mediating space of political communication in which citizens meet, who inform themselves about life in society, and communicate politically. The public sphere is a space where political opinions are formed. Public communication is an important aspect of the existence of humans as social beings and of society. In modern society, the media system is the most important organised form of public communication. In the media system, media actors produce public information. There is a number of criticisms of Habermas' concept of the public sphere, mainly from the field of postmodern studies. The present author has in other places criticised the dismissal of Habermas and the public sphere concept and argues that Habermas' concept is useful in and can be updated to the digital age (see Fuchs, 2014b).

The digital public sphere is not a separate sphere of society, but a dimension and aspect of the public sphere in societies where digital information and digital communication are prevalent. The digital public sphere means the publishing of information, critical publicity, and critical public debate mediated by digital information and communication technologies. Not all information and communication via the Internet, mobile phones, and tablets is part of the digital public sphere. When processes of commodification and capitalisation (the logic of economic accumulation), domination (the logic of political accumulation), and ideology (the logic of political accumulation) shape digital practices, the latter do not form a public sphere. The digital public sphere has then, as Habermas (1989) argues, been colonised and feudalised. We can then speak of an alienated digital sphere and alienated communication but not of a digital public sphere. The ten processes outlined in the previous section are manifestations of digital alienation, digital colonisation, and digital feudalisation.

The mentioned ten tendencies lead overall to a digital sphere that is characterised and divided by economic, political, and cultural power asymmetries. The logics of accumulation, advertising, monopolisation, commercialisation, commodification, acceleration, individualism, fragmentation, automation of human activity, surveillance, and ideologisation turn the digital public sphere into a colonised and feudalised sphere, a pseudo-digital public sphere that is public in appearance only. In digital capitalism, commercial culture dominates the Internet and social media. Platforms are largely owned by profit-oriented corporations. Public service media operate on the basis of a different logic. However, the idea of a public Internet has not yet been able to establish itself and sounds strange to most ears, as there are hardly any alternatives to the commercial Internet today.

Public service media are media of, in and operating through the public sphere. The communication scholar Slavko Splichal (2007: 255) gives a precise definition of public service media:

In normative terms, public service media must be a service *of* the public, *by* the public, and *for* the public. It is a service *of* the public because it is financed by it and should be

owned by it. It ought to be a service *by* the public – not only financed and controlled, but also produced by it. It must be a service *for* the public – but also for the government and other powers acting in the public sphere. In sum, public service media ought to become ‘a cornerstone of democracy’.

The means of production of public service media are publicly owned. The production and circulation of content is based on a non-profit-making logic and the public service media remit. Access is universal, as all citizens are given easy access to the content and technologies of public service media. In political terms, public service media offer diverse and inclusive content that promotes political understanding and discourse. In cultural terms, they offer educational content that contributes to the cultural development of individuals and society. Public service media have a special, legally defined remit, namely that they have to produce and provide content and services that help to advance democracy, education, and culture. In debates, public service media such as the BBC are often incorrectly presented as state media or state-controlled media. True public service media are legally enabled by the state (licence fee funding, public service remit), but not controlled by the state. Public service media are independent media organisations that are enabled by state laws.

Due to the special qualities of public service media, they can also make a particularly valuable democratic and educational contribution to a democratic online public sphere and digital democracy if they are given the necessary material and legal means to do so.

Life in modern society has increasingly been accelerated, which includes the acceleration of the economy, political decision-making, lifestyles, and experiences (Fuchs, 2014a; Rosa, 2013). The logic of accumulation is the driving force of acceleration (see Fuchs, 2014a). As a consequence, the speed of social relations has been increased, especially since the rise of neoliberal capitalism. In the realm of the media, the acceleration of information flows has been an aspect of the tabloidisation of media and communication that in turn is an aspect of the commercialisation, monopolisation, and commodification of the media.

The predominant media are high-speed spectacles that are superficial and characterised by a lack of time provided for debate. They erode the public sphere and the culture of political discussion. They leave no time or space to citizens for grasping the complexity of society and for developing arguments. What we need today is the decommodification and deceleration of the media. We need slow media (see Fuchs, 2021; Köhler, David and Blumtritt, 2010; Rauch, 2018).

### **What is slow media?**

Slow media takes the speed out of information, news, and political communication by reducing the amount of information and communication flows. Users engage more deeply with each other and with content. Slow media does not distract users with advertisements, it is not based on user surveillance, and it is not undertaken to yield profit. It is not simply a different form of media consumption, but an alternative way of organising and doing media – a space for reflection and rational political debate. (Fuchs, 2021: 363)

Slow media and slow political communication are not new. Club 2 in Austria and After Dark in the UK are prototypical examples. The journalists Kuno Knöbl and Franz Kreuzer designed the Club 2 concept for the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF). It was a discussion programme that was usually broadcast on Tuesday and Thursday. The first programme was broadcast on 5 October 1976, the last on 28 February 1995. 1,400 programmes were broadcast on ORF (Der Standard, 2001). Club 2 had a new edition that was broadcast from 2007 to 2012. However, a different concept was used that did not adhere to the original principles.

In the UK, the media production company Open Media created a similar format based on Club 2 under the name After Dark. After Dark was broadcast once a week on Channel 4 between 1987 and 1991 and occasionally thereafter. In 2003, After Dark was shown for a short time on BBC.

The producer of After Dark, Sebastian Cody, describes the Club 2/After Dark concept as follows:

Namely, the number of participants in these intimate debates (always conducted in agreeable surroundings and without an audience) was never less than four, never more than eight (like, as it happens, group therapy); the discussion should be hosted by a non-expert, whose job rotates, thus eliminating the cult of personality otherwise attaching to presenters; the participants should be a diverse assortment, all directly involved in the subject under discussion that week; and, most importantly, the programme was to be transmitted live and be open-ended. The conversation finishes when the guests decide, not when TV people make them stop. (Cody, 2008)

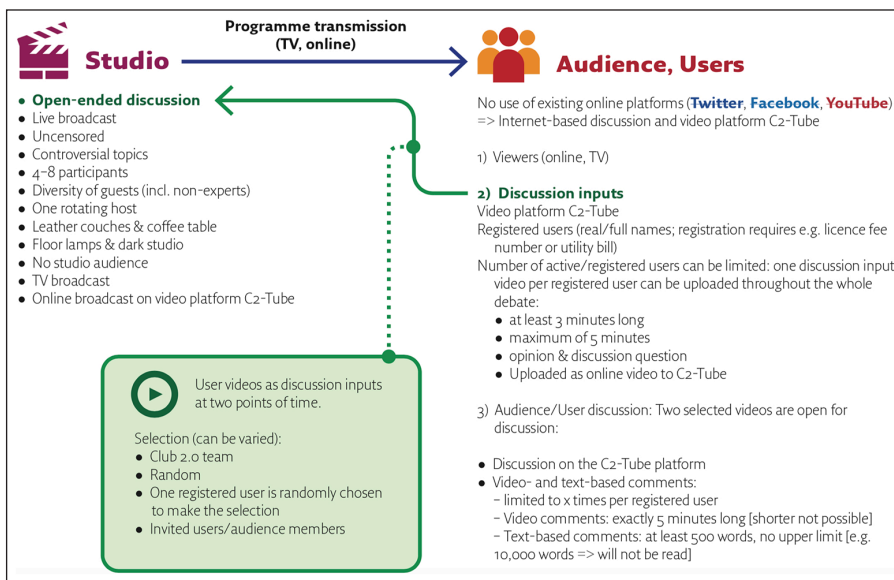
The concept of Club 2 sounds rather unusual to many people today, as we are so used to formats with short duration, high speed and the lack of time in the media and our daily lives. Open, uncensored, controversial, live discussions that appeal to the viewer and the audience are different from accelerated media in terms of space and time: Club 2 was a public space where guests met and discussed with each other in an atmosphere that offered unlimited time, which was experienced publicly and during which a socially important topic was discussed. Club 2 was a democratic public space in public broadcasting.

Space and time are two important dimensions of the public political economy. However, a social space that offers enough time for discussion is not yet a guarantee for a committed, critical, and dialectical discussion that transcends one-dimensionality, penetrates into the depths of a topic and highlights the similarities and differences of different positions. Public space and time must be organised and managed in an intelligent way, so that the right people participate, the atmosphere is appropriate, the right discussion questions are asked, and it is ensured that all guests have their say, listen to each other, and that the discussion can proceed undisturbed, etc. Unlimited space, a dialectically controversial and intellectually challenging space, and intelligent organisation are three important aspects of publicity. These are preconditions of slow media, non-commercial media, decolonised media, and media of public interest.

We need slow media. Online and offline. Let us decelerate the media and create slow media 2.0. Is a new version of Club 2 (Club 2.0) as part of the digital public sphere possible today?

Club 2.0 is an example of a public service Internet platform that helps advancing democratic communication and the digital public sphere. In Club 2.0, the traditional principles of Club 2 are practised and updated (see **Figure 1**). There is a controversial live studio debate without time limit. It is broadcast on television and also on a public service video platform, a public service version of YouTube. Social media enable user-generated content and online debate. An updated version of Club 2 should make use of the affordances of digital media: in Club 2.0, users can upload discussion inputs and discussed in text- and video-based formats on the public service YouTube channel that accompanies the Club 2.0 television broadcasts. At certain points of time of the TV debate, single user-generated video discussion inputs are selected and broadcast as part of the television discussion so that they inform the studio debate.

Club 2.0 is an expression of digital democracy and the digital public sphere. It manifests a combination of elements of deliberative and participatory democracy. Deliberative democracy



**Figure 1:** Club 2.0. *Source:* First published as CC in Fuchs (2018b: 74).

creates ‘institutional designs of modern democracy’ that are based on the ‘principle of reciprocity’ (Held, 2006: 233). It enables ‘social encounters which take account of the point of view of others – the moral point of view’ (Held, 2006: 233), places ‘greater emphasis upon those settings and the procedures of preference formation and learning within politics and civil society’ (Held, 2006: 233) and the ‘giving of defensible reasons, explanations and accounts for public decisions’ (Held, 2006: 237). It stresses the communicative dimension of democracy and that ‘[c]ritical reflection must link up with public debate and deliberative politics’ (Held, 2006: 241). Club 2.0 is a communicative mechanism that allows more reflection, explanation, and debate in politics and can thereby strengthen deliberative aspects of democracy. Participatory democracy stresses ‘[d]irect participation of citizens in the regulation of the key institutions of society, including the workplace and local community’ (Held, 2006: 215). Club 2.0 increases participation of citizens in culture and political debate. It is a participatory aspect of culture and politics. Club 2.0 offers space and time for controversial political communication and enables citizens to participate in the discussion collectively and individually through videos and commentaries. Club 2.0 brings together the communicative aspect of deliberative democracy and the participatory idea of grassroots democracy. The digital public sphere and public service Internet platforms are social phenomena that are opposed to and challenge digital capitalism and the capitalist Internet.

### The digital commons

Elinor Ostrom, winner of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences 2009, defines the commons with a theory of economic goods that is based on the two features of exclusion and subtractability. For Ostrom, common-pool resources have high subtractability and low exclusivity (Hess and Ostrom, 2007: 9). An example is a library with open accessibility: it has a low entry barrier (low exclusivity) and high subtractability (it becomes unusable if too many humans use it at once). In contrast, she argues that a sunset is a public good because it is non-rivalrous in consumption (low subtractability) and it is difficult to exclude someone from sunshine and watching the sunset (low exclusivity).



The problem with Ostrom's concept is that it neglects political economy, i.e. the concept of common ownership. Ostrom thereby de-politicises the concept of the commons. Yochai Benkler argues that influenced by Ostrom's works, 'a more narrowly defined literature developed' (Benkler, 2006: 480). Benkler argues for 'an entirely different theory of the commons' (Benkler, 2013: 1510). He defines the commons in the following way:

Commons are an alternative form of institutional space, where human agents can act free of the particular constraints required for markets, and where they have some degree of confidence that the resources they need for their plans will be available to them. Both freedom of action and security of resource availability are achieved in very different patterns than they are in property-based markets. (Benkler, 2006: 144).

For Benkler, the commons are non-market and non-profit-based resources that are available to everyone (for another definition, see Bauwens, Kostakis and Pazaitis, 2019: 3). Slavoj Žižek (2010, 212–13) identifies three forms of the commons:

- the cultural commons: language, means of communication, education, infrastructures;
- the commons of external nature: the natural environment;
- the commons of internal nature: the human being.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2017: 166) identify two basic forms of the commons, namely the social and the natural commons. They subdivide these two types into five kinds of the commons:

- the natural commons: ecosystems, the earth;
- the social commons 1: codes, ideas, images, cultural products;
- the social commons 2: physical products commonly produced by cooperative work;
- the social commons 3: rural and metropolitan spaces where human communicate, cooperate and interact culturally;
- the social commons 4: institutions that provide health care, education, housing, and welfare for all.

Karl Marx stressed that there are resources in society that are produced in a collective and cooperative manner. He argues that universal work creates common goods that are 'brought about partly by the cooperation of men now living, but partly also by building on earlier work' and involve the 'direct cooperation of individuals' (Marx, 1894: 199). Commons are resources that are collectively owned and that are reproduced in a cooperative manner. The natural commons are resources produced by nature that are required for all humans to survive. It includes the earth and the universe as the natural habitat of humans. Nature constantly produces and reproduces itself. It is a self-organising system. Nature as such is by its own nature a common good because when it produces itself it is available to everyone.

But historically, capital expropriated and enclosed parts of nature so that they became private property. In the middle ages, humans used the land, the forests, the fields, the meadows, etc. as common goods. The formation of capitalism involved what Marx (1867: part 8) terms original primitive accumulation, the violent transformation of humans into wage-labourers. One measure was the legal enclosure of the natural commons so that land became private property. Peasants were driven from the land and henceforth had to earn a living as wage-workers.

Socially produced goods are commons when they are collectively owned and cooperatively produced. There is an important moral–political principle underlying Marx and Engels’s thought and politics: those who produce the goods should collectively own them. For Marx and Engels, the central characteristic of a communist society is that there is common ownership of the means of production by the workers:

In this sense, the theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property. [...] When, therefore, capital is converted into common property, into the property of all members of society, personal property is not thereby transformed into social property. It is only the social character of the property that is changed. It loses its class character. (Marx and Engels, 1848: 498, 499)

According to Marx and Engels, the commons are not goods that have certain features as assumed in the theory of economic goods. Rather, any good can be transformed into collective ownership. They argue that the means of production should be common goods. A key feature of neoliberal capitalism has been the transformation of common goods into private property and commodities as part of the process that David Harvey (2005: 165–72) calls the commodification of everything. Commodification is an economic process that destroys the material foundations of the commons. It turns something that is available and accessible to all and benefiting all into a private property controlled and traded on markets. Utman (2020) points out that in the realm of communication, neoliberal capitalism has resulted in the expropriation of voice as a common resource and practice and has thereby undermined democracy. Based on a model of society, **Table 2** identifies four types and dimension of the commons.

Euler (2018) stresses that there is a structural and a practice dimension of the common. ‘Commoning can be considered the social practices that make commons what they are. [...] commons is the social form of (tangible and/or intangible) matter that is determined by commoning’ (Euler, 2018: 12). In capitalism, the commons can only exist as seeds of a commons society (Euler, 2018: 12). Antonis Broumas (2020, 11–14) points out the commons’ dialectic of resource and community. Given that the commons are not just resources, but

**Table 2:** Four types and dimensions of the commons.

<b>Sphere of society</b>	<b>Type of the commons</b>	<b>Meaning of the commons</b>
nature	natural commons: environmental sustainability	common access to natural resources for everyone, common use of natural resources in environmentally sustainable manners
economy	economic commons: socialism	common ownership of the means of production
politics	political commons: participatory democracy	humans who are affected by certain phenomena can take collective decisions about these affairs, basic political rights are guaranteed for all and commonly respect
culture	cultural commons: culture of friendship	all humans are respected and they are able to understand each other and live together through common practices in everyday life so that friendships and a unity of diversity of lifestyles, identities, and communities are possible

common resources embedded into practices of commoning and commons communities (Papadimitropoulos, 2020: chapter 1), there is a 'distinctive communicative element' of commoning (Utman, 2020: 158).

The digital commons are digital resources that are commonly controlled by humans. **Table 3** presents four types and dimension of the digital commons.

At the level of digital infrastructures, community networks run as cooperatives are examples of a digital commons projects. At the level of software and digital content, free software and non-commercial Creative Commons licences are examples of digital commons projects. Free/libre and open source software (FLOSS) has postcapitalist potentials, but has also in various forms been subsumed under capital (see Berlinguer, 2020; Birkinbine, 2020). At the level of digital platforms, platform cooperatives are examples of digital commons projects. Platform cooperatives are not-for-profit Internet platforms that are collectively owned and governed by the digital workers who produce the resources that underpin these platforms (see Sandoval, 2020; Scholz, 2016, 2017; Scholz and Schneider, 2016). Examples of platform coops are the music platform Resonate (an alternative to Spotify, <https://resonate.is>), Fairbnb (an alternative to Airbnb, <https://fairbnb.coop>), Taxiapp (an alternative to Uber), the photography and video platform Stocksy (an alternative to Shutterstock and iStockPhoto, [www.stocksy.com](http://www.stocksy.com)), or the collaboration platform Loomio ([www.loomio.org](http://www.loomio.org)).

Cooperatives in the realm of the digital economy advance the economic commons and the political commons because they are non-profit organisations that are collectively governed and controlled. They are not the only digital commons project. For example, public service Internet projects advance the economic commons as they are owned by the public and the political and cultural commons as they are based on public service remits. Digital commons projects do not automatically advance all levels of the commons. For example, community networks do not necessarily reduce e-waste and energy consumption (environmental sustainability). Some aspects of the commons are per definition covered by digital commons projects, whereas others are only achieved by active commitment beyond the foundation of particular projects.

Open access publishing has emerged as a response to the monopoly practices of capitalist publishers. Open access journals and publishing houses very frequently use Creative

**Table 3:** Four types and dimension of the digital commons.

<b>Sphere of society</b>	<b>Type of the digital commons</b>	<b>Meaning of the digital commons</b>
nature	natural digital commons: digital environmental sustainability	common control of the mines where natural resources are extracted that form the physical foundations of digital technologies, sustainable environmental impacts of digital technologies that guarantee the common survival of nature, humans and society (e.g. green computing)
economy	economic digital commons: digital socialism	common ownership of the digital means of production
politics	political digital common: participatory digital democracy	collective governance of decisions about the use of digital resource
culture	cultural digital commons: digital friendships	unity in diversity and common recognition and respect of everyone in digitally mediated communities so that friendships are enabled

Commons licences, which make the content of published works a digital common in the sense that it is a common good that can be accessed by anyone and isn't the exclusive private property of someone but a form of knowledge that is provided to humanity as a gratis resource. On 28 February 2021, 15,989 open access journals were listed in the *Directory of Open Access Journals* (<https://doaj.org>).

But open access is not automatically a true digital common that is a manifestation of all four forms of the digital commons identified in **Table 3**. Capitalist open access publishers have subsumed open access under capital (see Knoche, 2020). These are for-profit open access publishers that accumulate capital. The capital accumulation strategy they employ most frequently is that they charge high fees to authors that do not just cover production costs but also yield profits that are privately owned. In capitalist open access, digital content is de-commodified, i.e. the articles and books are published as Creative Commons, but the principles of capital accumulation, commodification, valorisation, and profitability are not given up, but transformed. The opportunity to get published is commodified while the published content is a commons. The digital commons thereby are subsumed under and colonised by digital capital. Capitalist open access is a digital capitalism of the commons. 'In the Corporate Open Access Model, companies, organizations or networks publish material online in a digital version, do so free of charge for the readers, but derive monetary profits with strategies such as charging authors or selling advertising space' (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2013: 438).

Commons licences should focus on advancing not-for-profit projects that are seeds of post-capitalism. Commons licences such as Creative Commons are not automatically critical of capitalism; some of them are compatible with, subsumed under, and supportive of capitalism. In contrast, diamond open access projects are true digital commons projects that have a non-capitalist character. Diamond open access is,

a form of non-profit academic publishing that makes academic knowledge a common good, reclaims the common character of the academic system and entails the possibility of fostering job security by creating public service publishing jobs. [...] *In the Diamond Open Access Model, not-for-profit, non-commercial organizations, associations or networks publish material that is made available online in digital format, is free of charge for readers and authors and does not allow commercial and for-profit re-use.* (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2013: 428, 438; emphasis original)

Radical Open Access is a network of diamond open access projects that,

promote a progressive vision for open publishing in the humanities and social sciences. [...] We also share a willingness to subject some of our most established scholarly communication practices to creative critique, together with the institutions that sustain them (the university, the library, the publishing house and so on). The collective thus offers a radical 'alternative' to the conservative versions of open access that are currently being put forward by commercially-oriented presses, funders and policy makers. [...] By showcasing the wide variety of non-commercial, not-for-profit and/or commons-based models for the creation and dissemination of academic knowledge that are currently available, we endeavour to help generate and sustain diversity within the publishing ecology. (Radical Open Access, n.d.)

The question that remains to be answered is if and how the public service Internet projects and the digital commons can contribute to advancing digital democracy. The conclusion addresses this issue.

### Conclusion: Advancing digital democracy

The digital public sphere is a dimension of the public sphere, where published knowledge takes on digital formats and informs critical public debate. For Habermas, the public sphere has a democratic, non-capitalist and unideological character. Therefore, not all digital knowledge and not all digital communication is part of the public sphere. Public service media are media that are publicly owned by independent not-for-profit organisations that are not controlled but enabled by the state and operate a basic public service remit to provide content and services that advance democratic communication, education, and culture. Public service Internet platforms are Internet platforms owned, operated and maintained by public service media. Just like public service media, public service Internet platforms are media of, in, and operated through the public sphere. Digital civil society projects such as diamond open access platforms and platform cooperatives are not-for-profit digital projects that are commonly owned and governed by the workers who produce the resources underpinning these projects. Public service Internet platforms and digital civil society/community media platforms are both part of the public sphere and the digital public sphere. Their main difference is that the organisation operating, controlling, and owning the platform is in the first case a public service media organisation and a civil society group or community in the second case. Public service Internet platforms operate closer to the state than platform cooperatives and other digital civil society projects. Public service Internet platforms are, however, not controlled, but rather enabled by the state.

**Table 4** outlines some foundations of three political economies of digital platforms. Public service Internet platforms and civil society Internet platforms are the two types of digital platforms that operate on non-capitalist principles and thereby negate the political economy of digital capitalism. They operate in the digital public sphere. In contrast, capitalist digital platforms colonise, feudalise, alienate, and destroy the digital public sphere. Public service Internet platforms and civil society Internet platforms are excellent foundations for advancing the digital commons, i.e. digital environmental sustainability (natural digital commons), digital socialism (economic digital commons), participatory digital democracy (political digital commons), and digital friendships (the cultural digital commons). Creating such non-capitalist digital platforms is not a sufficient condition for the advancement of the digital

**Table 4:** Three political economies of digital platforms.

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Capitalist Internet platforms</b>	<b>Public service Internet platforms</b>	<b>Civil society Internet platforms, digital community media</b>
economy	digital capital, private ownership of digital platforms that accumulate capital	public service organisation	community ownership, civil society organisation ownership, cooperatives
politics	governance by private owners, shareholders and managers	governance by a democratically legitimated board	governance by the community of members/workers/users
culture	publicly available digital content that is prone to ideology and capitalist values	digital content and digital services that realise the public service remits of democratic communication, education, culture, and participation	digital content and services that support user-generation, citizen journalism, and digital participation

*Source:* Further development based on: Fuchs (2021, table 8.2).

commons, but a good foundation that has a better likelihood and chance to advance digital democracy, digital equality, and digital justice than digital capitalism and capitalist digital platforms. It takes a conscious human effort, social struggle, and material foundations to advance all dimensions of the digital commons. For example, a digital platform can be democratically governed and owned (political and economic) but advance e-waste and climate change. The organisations and communities operating these platforms should therefore support the creation of non-capitalist green computing.

Political colonisation is the main danger that public service Internet projects face. Public service media lose their independence and critical character when governments are able to directly influence the appointment of boards, the hiring and firing of workers, and the produced content. Such media are state-controlled media, not public service media. Just like traditional public service media, public service Internet projects face the danger of political colonisation. Marginalisation and neoliberalisation are the two main dangers that civil society Internet platforms such as platform cooperatives face. The history of alternative and community media is a history of resource precarity and self-exploitative, precarious, voluntary labour. Resource precarity and precarious labour are the two twin political-economic dangers that alternative, community projects face. In addition, digital culture is highly shaped by a culture of individualism and neoliberal entrepreneurialism. The two main dangers that platform cooperatives face is that (1) they remain fair and democratic but small, precarious and unimportant, which can be their ruin, and (2) they turn into capitalist projects.

Nick Srnicek (2017: 127) argues that 'all the traditional problems of co-ops (e.g. the necessity of self-exploitation under capitalist social relations) are made even worse by the monopolistic nature of platforms, the dominance of network effects, and the vast resources behind these companies' (Srnicek, 2017: 127). Marisol Sandoval (2020) analyses how platform cooperatives have employed the neoliberal language of entrepreneurship ('creators', 'entrepreneur', 'innovation', 'investments', 'shareholders', 'profits', 'shares', etc.) and how such a focus has advanced individualism and undermined cooperatives' potential for radical politics. 'But collective ownership and democratic governance do not automatically protect co-ops from the dynamics of entrepreneurialism' (Sandoval, 2020: 811).

The main danger that public service Internet platforms and platform cooperatives face is that they are paralysed or destroyed by contradictions that stem from economic, political, or ideological colonisation, so that they cannot challenge and oppose the power of capitalist Internet platforms. Advancing an alternative Internet can therefore only be successful if it is part of a broader political movement and campaign for strengthening the public sphere and the commons in society. Advancing the digital public sphere, the digital commons, and digital democracy requires progressive politics that address issues such as the following ones:

1. **Techno-realism:** Progressive digital politics should avoid both techno-optimism and techno-pessimism and advance realistic projects and platforms that are possible, feasible, challenge and oppose, and point beyond digital capitalism.
2. Advancing digital democracy, the digital public sphere, and the digital commons should be part and parcel of movements, parties, and movement parties that campaign for the **strengthening of democracy, the public sphere, and the commons in general**. Advancing the common control of the means of communication requires the advancement of the common good and the commons in society in general.
3. Advancing digital democracy, the digital public sphere, and the digital commons is not a technical question but a question of bringing about **good working conditions** for digital and communication workers (and workers in general) and a **good life for all in digital society**.

4. Progressive digital politics needs to stand up for the **breakup of capitalist monopolies** in the communication, media, and digital sector in particular and in the economy in general.
5. Progressive digital politics should demand and advance ending corporate tax havens, corporate tax avoidance, and low corporation taxes. It should campaign for and implement **higher corporate tax rates** in general and, in particular, a digital services tax that affects large transnational capitalist media and digital companies.
6. Digital democracy, the digital public sphere, and the digital commons need **space, time, material support, and public/civil society partnerships**. Material support helps creating such space and time. Corporation taxes and a media fee paid not just by citizens, but also by companies, can create a material support for alternative projects. The licence fee should be kept where it exists and introduced where it does not yet exist and be used for funding public service media and public service Internet projects. The licence fee should be extended from households to corporations and be developed from a flat fee into a progressive fee. Participatory budgeting can be combined with corporation taxes in order to create a public sphere cheque that citizens receive in order to support alternative, democratic public sphere and civil society projects. Instead of public/private partnerships, public/civil society partnerships are needed where public organisations cooperate with civil society organisations. Where possible and feasible, there should be partnerships of public service Internet projects and civil society Internet projects. Using such forms of material support, public service Internet projects and civil society Internet projects, and networks of public service and civil society organisations should create Internet platforms of, for, and through the public sphere that advance the digital commons and follow the remit of advancing democracy, education, culture, and participation in society with the help of digital technologies. Such public, civil, and public/civil Internet platforms challenge capitalist Internet platforms and thereby digital capitalism.
7. **Digital, critical, and democratic skills:** Digital democracy requires critical, engaged citizens who practise democratic debate and democracy. Citizens require time, spaces, educational opportunities, and participation opportunities in order to develop and practice democratic, digital, political, social, cultural, and other skills. On the one hand, participation and engagement with others is education on participation. On the other hand, measures such as the reduction in working hours with full wage compensation, the introduction of a redistributive basic income guarantee funded by capital taxation, political and digital education in schools and an offensive in adult learning based on the principles of critical pedagogy, etc. are material measures that provide foundations and support for skills development. Progressive digital politics should advance critical education opportunities.
8. **Deceleration, slow media:** The public sphere needs time for critical thinking, reading, critical writing, critical presentation, critical debating, critical coproduction. Digital media can support such processes that bind online practices and face-to-face practices. Digital platforms should be designed in such a way that they enable humans to afford sufficient time for the critical skills just mentioned.
9. **Privacy friendliness and data minimisation:** Non-capitalist digital media should respect the privacy of citizens, workers, and consumer. They should use the principle of privacy by design, minimise data storage to data that is needed for operating platforms, and be advertising free.
10. Public service Internet platforms and civil society Internet platforms as well as their users should **respect and advance democracy**, plurality of opinions that respects

human rights and the equality of all humans, anti-classism, anti-racism, gender equality, anti-fascism, and inclusion. Advancing participation should not be a fig leaf for enabling fascist, racist, and other hate speech. News and educational programmes require high quality standards and should always be truthful. There is no place for false news and post-truth politics in progressive media. Those who hold discriminatory views should be allowed to speak as long as they do not violate laws (e.g. when voicing death threats or violent threats), but their views should always be adequately challenged.

Today, digital society is a digital capitalism that undermines democracy, the public sphere, and the common good. Progressive digital politics that advance the digital public sphere and the digital commons along with the public sphere, public services, and the common in general are the active and practical hope for safeguarding and advancing democracy in the age of, and in opposition to, digital authoritarianism.

### Note

- <sup>1</sup> Global GDP 2019: US\$ 33.426 trillion. Source: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD> (last accessed 7 October 2020).

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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