

Introduction

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Introduction to the Special Issue “Media Practices Commoning”

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The issue “Media Practices Commoning” contains a selection of contributions that critically discusses current concepts like commons and conviviality by situating them within the contemporary framework of digital media technologies. We thus contribute to the ongoing debate on media practices of commoning as well as a media ontological understanding of commoning processes. These are pressing issues in times of ubiquitous computing and platform capitalism, where an ever-increasing number of devices, technologies and complex infrastructures are interwoven with human and other organic agencies. Daily practices are increasingly framed by digital technologies and thus rendered as productive sources for data production. Thereby, the media ontological question is raised how practices, technologies and data might be conceptualised as commons without being commodified and functionally operationalised (Deuber-Mankowsky). Yet these seemingly antagonistic strategies are intertwined, indicating that more and more new forms of coexistence emerge through an increasing number of socio-technical arrangements. Hence, the idea of conviviality, or living together, is undergoing deep transformations and requires a thorough analysis.

The issue is a continuation of the conference “Media | Practices | Commoning” that took place at the University of Konstanz, Germany (October 9-11, 2017). An international and interdisciplinary group of speakers discussed the concepts of commoning and conviviality from different disciplines and perspectives. From this discussion, three lines of inquiry emerged that we set out to further develop in this issue.

In a first line of inquiry we seek to explore the art of conviviality and recent forms of friendly togetherness while relating them to media-technological infrastructures that frame their emergence. Within recent notions of convivialism, a new style of cohabitation (Adloff and Legewie) is normatively claimed as a way of shaping as well as analysing a positive constitution of social relations that overcomes globalist utilitarian and capitalist thinking (Bollier and Helfrich; Nowicka and Vertovec).

But it remains up for debate what this new way of living together may be and where the line is drawn between different, new, alternative, and ‘the other’. At the “Media | Practices | Commoning” conference Elena Pulcini (see Pulcini) discussed changes to the concept of ‘the other’ in a global and digital age. According to Pulcini, globalisation reduces or compresses distance, thereby rendering both the other-distant-in-space (the poor and disadvantaged people of the world) and the other-distant-in-time (future generations) objectively significant for us. Within this dynamic, a new figure of an empathetic and relational, a ‘common’ subject, may be produced. The global age also influences the double-fold logics of gift-giving, i.e. the gift of hospitality (given to the other-distant-in-space) or the gift of the future (given to the other-distant-in-time). Taking this into account a concept of ‘living with’ instead of ‘other living’ emerges through the contributions of this issue.

The idea of conviviality as a ‘good’ way of living together highlights the significance of skills, creative imagination or knowledge in the practices of togetherness and raises questions about media conditions for building conviviality. In her paper given at the conference, Özlem Savaş reflected on networked imaginations and practices of a so called “good

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life” on social media. Various modes of self-transformation, perfection, and presentation form a common lifestyle repertoire that defines aspects of good living among communities, creating a cultural public sphere, where users can not only *be* together but engage in processes of *becoming* together – also in migration processes and political crisis (Savaş). This is a striking example for why, in our perspective, media are not subordinate ‘tools’ or ‘instruments’ but are deeply rooted in the relational and participatory processes of becoming convivial while unfolding specific socio-economic and political frameworks. Thus, networked infrastructures cannot be considered neutral or a-political: they medially inform and produce forms of relations. The latter are situated among a changing spectrum of digital media encompassing so-called alternative, post-capitalist or platform-based value and data production as well as technology design (Reijers and Ossewaarde 823).

In his contribution to this issue, FRANK ADLOFF aims at integrating different concepts of conviviality to develop an analytical model of convivial and sustainable practices. Departing from Marcel Mauss’ ethnographically inspired discussion about the agonal – a reciprocal as well as parasitic – exchange of gifts, Adloff explores Caillé’s “third way” of depicting an autonomous, self-generating civil society and Castoriadis’ new forms of the ‘societal imaginary’, finally suggesting that a systematic social and political convivialist theory is still pending. In a more practical sense, Adloff states that convivial practices are already exerted and routinised in a variety of cosmopolitical and collectivisation practices, in the sense of Isabelle Stengers, within media and social configurations like family, friendship, volunteering, cooperatives, NGOs, Wikipedia, forms of multi-ethnic cohabitation, etc. (see Linebaugh, Nowicka and Vertovec 346). Adloff concludes that convivial organisations show an experimental moment in understanding convivial and social relations not as a means to an end but as an end in themselves, where they are not primarily and specifically functional but encourage self-organised and creative modes of living. Summarised the four points minimal civil standards of nonviolence and tolerance of difference, open social encounters, equality, and self-organisation, Adloff develops an analytical, normative model of conviviality that is akin to Dewey’s concept of self-fulfillment, where the public and democracy are guided by cooperation between human and non-human actors as the lived practice of conviviality. Therefore, Adloff advances the idea that a new concept of technology has to be developed, emphasising the complex convivial socio-technical entanglements between man, nature and media (Vetter and Best, Vetter).

Departing from Illich’s call for human self-limitation in technological development (Illich 16, 43), ANDREAS BEINSTEINER critically revisits Illich works. He explores the problem of potential non-conviviality as a side-effect of the delegation of know-how, knowledge and instruction to media-technological developments of proprietary or recursively adapting algorithms. By drawing on the work of Bernard Stiegler, who emphasises technology’s irreducible ambivalence, Beinsteiner discusses how a kind of general proletarianisation may ultimately result in a loss of *savoir-vivre* and to what extent people are able to design “the environment of artefacts and infrastructures that enable their working-and living-together”. This is linked to the pharmacological character of the contemporary digital media environment which produces an “economy of contribution” (Stiegler). By problematising platform economies and algorithmic processes, Beinsteiner addresses the question of how current digital media technologies including artificial intelligence could be reframed through political discourses. Yet he raises serious doubts if this could happen by pointing out that not only commercial but also initiatives like OpenAI aim to optimise AI research and ultimately contribute to the economy-driven platformisation of the social. Beinsteiner thus highlights the intransparency of relations between infrastructures, politics, social or cultural knowledge and technical objects enabling or impeding togetherness. In this sense, we are confronted with a media-technological framework that operates and conditions processes of non-/conviviality by making demands on participants and accordingly on future members.

This framework, and the ensuing practices of “commoning” form our second line of inquiry. Based on a processual understanding of the commons, “commoning” practices have in fact become a key concept in discussions regarding alternative economies beyond capitalism, like the “economy of contribution” (Stiegler). At the “Media | Practices | Commoning” conference Valeria Graziano (London) contemplated the idea of things or subjects being “in abeyance” – a state of being suspended or put aside in a temporary limbo, waiting to be claimed by a rightful owner. Her focus on post-work imaginaries, utopias of thorough commoning and anti-work stances brings different aspects of life | living, subjects | slaves, or non-worker | unworker to the fore – all of which need exploring in the ongoing reflection on the complex relations between economic practices, participatory media, community building, and new forms of socio-technical cooperation within this publication. These debates may then generate such questions as were raised by Alexandre Monnin, who presented “Re-Source”, the Lafayette Anticipation (the Galerie Lafayette Foundation for Contemporary Art) digital platform, at our conference. By exploring the possibilities of how to common contemporary art, Monnin pointed out in

which ways Re-Source visualises the transindividuating processes of executing digitalisation, tagging, and narration. Making the relationality and the common of contemporary art comprehensible, he fundamentally changes our view on the production processes of contemporary art.

Practices of commoning as well as the illusionary and utopian potentials regarding their (alternative) economic dimension have been critically observed while questioning the implications of digital technologies (Ossewarde and Reijers; Kostakis; Reijers and Ossewarde). SEBASTIAN RONGE takes up these questions and sketches an essayistic exaggeration to reflect on the economic nature of convivialist practices. To describe present tensions between capitalist forms of life and others that aim to distinguish themselves as alternatives, Ronge draws on the concept of ‘economic form of life’. The author outlines that if there are non-economic practices, these are aligned within economic frameworks through overdetermination, a notion coined by Althusser. In Ronge’s view both capitalist and convivialist forms of life are “ideal-typical expressions of the economic form of life”. So even if capitalist practices are transformed through i.e. commoning and/or convivialist approaches, they remain economic ones. The two main practices for deconstructing and transforming the capitalist form of life that Ronge identifies are in-sourcing and solidary outsourcing. The first includes subsistence practices, while the latter refers to the solidarity economy and thus economic networks relying on practices where products are embedded in political practice forms. Both key practices aim to challenge and transform a “hegemonic” capitalist form of life. By producing a different form of life, these practices involve an engagement with the normative ideal of justice. Hence, following Ronge, conviviality is characterised by a specific normativity that consists of “doing justice to the economic nature of human life”. As he provocatively puts it: “To live convivially means trying to do justice to the *economic nature of human life* [...]”

In their contribution in this issue SELENA SAVIC, VIKTOR BEDÖ, MICHAELA BÜSSE, YANN MARTINS and SHINTARO MIYAZAKI focus on cooperative housing organisations and explore the use of agent-based models as a critical and playful form of engagement. Through the concepts of commoning and computation, they analyse and test “toys for conviviality”. With these, they can deduct innovative findings about decision-making, critical reflection, problem-finding, and productive complication. By introducing two different agent-based models, the interdisciplinary research team discuss their experiences of setting up parameters for modelling, their implications, and the possibilities and limits of employing modelling techniques as a basis for decision-making. Via utopian scenarios of commoning and different experimental settings in workshops with three housing cooperatives, they account for both the perspectives of individuals and those of the community. In describing their project “Thinking Toys for Commoning”, the authors convincingly argue for a critical modelling practice and culture in which models act as toys that allow investigating alternative modes of living together and the constructedness of methods.

This issue discusses socio-economic practices of commoning that afford an institutional, legal, affective, media and infrastructural framework for the togetherness of commons. Exploring the practices of togetherness following the logic of *Teilhabe* (participation) or being-with, collective practices of building and maintaining entanglements with media solutions of commoning (whether digital or not) become more and more decisive actors. Consider for instance common information sharing environments (like OuiShare, Creative Commons, fan communities, remix commons, crowdfunding or other community building practices. It is important to notice, that not all instances of commoning necessarily lead to a homogeneous community. Participants are likely to “be related primarily by their shared interest in defending and producing a set of common resources” (Gilbert 165, quoted in Ash and Howell 11) and - we would add - media practices. Christian Licoppe used gay hook up apps in his conference paper to examine, how these location-based matching apps not only create relations between users but re-mediate and visualise past and future modes of being together on the screen (Licoppe, “Connected Presence”, “Liquidity”). He also argued that *Grindr* in particular aimed at a mode of commoning without necessarily building a community. The specific topo-logic of ‘proximity’ as a distant nearness is a central aspect for any debate about mobile commons. Last but not least, the relation between commons or commoning and power – included here is ‘the power to refuse’ or ‘the power to prefer not to’ – has to be further discussed in a cosmopolitical thinking of resistance as part of commoning.

The discourse on mobile commons, closely connected to platforms, shapes our third line of inquiry. The prefix “mobile” assembles a set of different notions to the concept of commons, which comprises, but is not to be reduced to the role of mobile media in commons and processes of commoning. By raising the issue of ‘mobile undercommons’ (Moten and Harney), which produce a specific form of adherence, connection and a specific kind of knowledge as well as become history once they are circulated outside their original context, Nana Heidenreich turned the conference participants’

attention to the crucial question of participation, togetherness and temporality crucial for commoning. While her input was to approach the after-the-factness of mobile commons through film and video production, Vassilis Tsianos and Dimitris Parsanoglou (Athens) presented their research on migrant mobility and digital strategies of survival, focusing on mobile commons created in migrant networks (cf. Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou and Tsianos). Drawing on their work in Athens, Nicosia and Istanbul they focused the idea of mobile commons as exercising mobility against control and moments of temporal stabilisation through commoning.

In this special issue JEREMY GILBERT asks, what it takes to achieve collective agency in today's age of new media, political shifts to the right and huge platform-cooperations. He asks which conditions render mediated experiences of collectivity genuinely empowering and under what circumstances are they merely illusory compensations for the absence of effective democracy and the wholesale degradation of the commons? By scrutinising ideas of digital capitalism, potent collectivity and collective joy as introduced by Deleuze/Spinoza, Gilbert urges his readers to remain sensitive to and critical of the liberating potential ascribed to digital communication and communities. His paper aims at understanding commons in processes of mobile communication, mobile spaces and mobile work. Beyond that, it emphasises a shift towards an ontologically comprehended "mobility" or displaceability in the general understanding of commons, which increasingly replaces static concepts of community, goods and labour. Yet, these notions are all equally sustained in globally highly present migrant movements of communities "on the move", shaping and being shaped by reciprocally instituted practices and commons that meet with equally evolving practices, commons and communities of border protection and institutional control.

The emancipatory potential of the commons and practices of digital commoning has been a debated issue (Birkbine). It remains open whether and how these practices might unfold a transformative potential given the uncertainty of processes where metastable agencies (Gilbert) vigorously cross the blurred boundaries of (anti)capitalist thought. Even if novel spaces of conviviality and cooperation continue to flourish within the complex entanglements of digital technologies, so too will ambivalences and the flip sides of practices aiming to create other ways of living a good life. Whatever direction media practices of commoning might take in the near future, it is important to remember that these digital practices have intrinsic economic, ecological, political and social implications one cannot ignore (Ash and Howell 9-10). Relations through commoning that are situated on the margins of or which shift through platform and data economies prove full of glitches, offering a horizon of *Teilhabe* where the processuality of the commons is vulnerable and instable infrastructures (Berlant) become sensible. This expanding realm, whether we like it or not, will crucially affect the "material politics of the Anthropocene" (Yusoff 257) and thereby translate the grounds of our becoming-with and (non-)convivial coexistences on this planet.

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