

Maintaining an affective commons through events: a practice-based study of three collaborative communities

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Abstract

In this article, we look at how new forms of organizing in collaborative communities (Adler & Heckscher, 2006; Benkler, 2006; Fuster Morell & Espelt, 2018; Garrett et al., 2017; Scholz & Schneider, 2017) rest on collectively maintained 'affective commons' (Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2019). More concretely, we compare event-organizing practices in three case studies, showing how they compound into affective atmospheres that envelope the perceived potential of bodies to feel and act. In recognizing this product of continuous affective labor as a pooled resource (Ostrom, 1990) that is stewarded by a community with its corresponding ethos (Arvidsson, 2018), we highlight that collaborative organizational designs (Adler & Heckscher, 2018) can create diverse economic practices for the common good. We ask how digitally mediated work relations in coworking spaces, crowdsourcing platforms, and peer-to-peer production can strike a balance between reciprocal and transactional forms of value creation, which challenges the rampaging precariousness in the emerging gig economy (Hyman, 2018).

To explore the critical role of events in this process, we follow a sociomaterial approach to practice theorizing (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Gherardi, 2019) that is sensitive to the role of affect for organizing (Gherardi, 2017). In this view, affect is seen as a social phenomenon - a traveling intensity that resonates between human and non-human bodies. It permeates and attunes (Reckwitz, 2016) practices, materializing as bodily sensations and modulating bodies' capacities to act, affect and be affected. As affects shift the tone of a space, their capacity to cause different states of action readiness and structures of feeling materializes as an affective atmosphere (Anderson, 2009; Gregg, 2018). In their study of coworking (Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2019) suggest that atmospheres can be seen as a pooled resource, "inflecting bodies with novel capacities, new modes of interaction, new insights, tendencies or habits, new creative opportunities, a different experience of work" (Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2019, p. 8). We ask how event-organizing practices contribute to maintaining and replenishing this affective commons and how they mediate the conflictual mobilization of diverse value-creation logics in this process. Methodologically, we pursue a multi-case qualitative approach which comprises a total of approximately six years of ethnographic fieldwork. Through a cross-contextual analysis (Mason, 2002), we compare three case studies that differ in the size, type and degree of frequency in the organization of communitarian events.

The first case, *Drupal*, is an open source platform for the development of web applications and

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currently powers approximately 2% of websites worldwide. What started as a small project in 2001, has gathered a community of more than 1.3 million collaborators worldwide. The main motto of the project - “come for the software, stay for the community” - is actualized in a wide range of events, ranging from local presentations and drinks to national *DrupalCamps* and global *DrupalCons* conferences. Secondly, *Enspirial*, a grassroots entrepreneurial community and social impact incubator based in New Zealand, is a network with a fluctuating membership between 150-300 people. It has been characterized as an ‘open cooperative’ (Pazaitis et al., 2017) enabling an ecosystem of initiatives and ventures, in which people practice resource-sharing, collaborative decisions and collective ownership. As a new organizational form, *Enspirial* is a collection of different communities, online channels and a coworking space, punctuated by meet-ups and biannual retreats. *Amara*, our third case study is, on the one hand, an open source project for the creation of subtitles, such as those of TED talks (Jansen et al., 2014) and on the other hand, a paid on-demand crowdsourcing service, offering subtitling and translation. We observed a noticeable absence of events, which led to various problems as the community increased its size and became more physically distributed over time.

We would like to participate in PROS to better flesh out the contribution of our analysis. Grounded in previous research on “affective commons” (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019; Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2019) we identified three main practices (1) ‘hooking a vibe,’ (2) ‘tuning into a vibe,’ and (3) ‘keeping the flow.’ Our analysis reveals how different forms of event-making play into each other to maintain affective commons as the lifeblood of communities (Singh, 2013). Large events function as spaces for generating and keeping momentum. Shared purposes, values and narratives are created to atmospherically ‘hook the vibe’ of the community. Smaller events translate this atmosphere into a rhythm or vibe through local rituals, enrolling the bodies of their participants. We highlight that keeping this flow as an ‘affecto-rhythmic order’ (Katila et al., 2019) or ‘affective oscillation’ (Resch & Steyaert, 2020) entails the establishment of a perpetually fragile gentle reciprocity, which challenges practitioners to become commoners through embodied practices of care (Singh, 2017) and sensemaking (de Rond et al., 2019).

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