

Outline Doctoral research  
Governance of online creation communities for the building of digital commons:  
Provision of platforms of participation online

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## I. The movement behind online creation communities: Free culture movement

The increasing importance of knowledge-based markets; the increasing cognitive capacities in the North for the expansion of education at different levels; and rapid technological change, meaning mainly the digital and communication revolution, have led to the transformation of network society of knowledge based wealth (Rifkin 1995; Castells 2000). But changes in information and knowledge use, exploitation, production and dissemination have created a dialectical and often conflictual logic. Concepts of communal ownership in a free information infrastructure or of 'Digital Commons' clash with the logic of private appropriation and private use of information and knowledge. Claims of free access to information and knowledge compete with claims of private ownership. The Free Culture Movement (FCM) aggregates pro free circulation of information and pro public interest domain and commons ownership positions in this conflict around the new technologies of information and knowledge (NTI). The online creation communities around the building of digital commons are one of the more visible expressions of this wider Free Culture movement.

Furthermore, a part of the growing socioeconomic importance of OCCs, these communities offer an opportunity to see how various problems of democratic governance evolve and are solved. They are interesting for what they can tell us about democratization more generally. More in concrete, OCCs can help us to analyse **how governance shape and favor handling scale and complexity in a context of globalization** in which the global dimension is larger in scope and the political agenda more complex.

Online creation communities are an interesting collective action form from two points of view. OCC are interesting from the point of view of constituting spaces for civic engagement in the dissemination of alternative information and for participation in the public space which could contribute to enriching public discussion in a representative democracy. And, OCCs are also interesting from the point of view of citizen engagement in the provision of public goods and services based on a *commons* approach that is provision of public goods not necessarily linked to the state or other conventional political institutions.

Furthermore, this research is framed by the notion of transition in which distinct organisational and democratic logics are emerging at a time when the institutional principles of both the nation state and the private market are in a state of profound crisis (in the case of the nation state) and undergoing dramatic change (in the case of the private market). Networks form or commons-base processes appear as a distinctive form, different from the state and the market (Powell 1990, Castells 2001, Benkler 2006). In my

view, these emerging common-base forms could provide insight for the building of institutions in a network society.

## II. Online creation communities (OCCs)

Online Creation Communities (OCCs) is a form of collective action performed by individuals that communicate, interact and cooperate; in several forms and degrees of participation which are ecosystemically integrated; mainly via a platform of participation in the Internet; with the common goal of knowledge-making and sharing; which result in a *digital common*, that is, an integrated resource of information and knowledge (partly or totally) of collective property and freely accessible to third parts.

The OCCs emerge on diverse fields of application, including scientific communities (I.e: Scientific Open Access Resources (i.e.: Directory of Open Access Journals), collaborative research), educational related applications, virtual worlds, spiritual communities, political organizing, linguistic communities, and multi-medial content.

## III. OCCs governance

In my view, in order to approach OCCs it is useful to do an analytical distinction between two spaces. On the other hand, there is a large space of decentralized, spontaneous and open networking interaction over the platform of participation. On the one hand, there is a (generally small) administrative or provision space that provides the platform. The provision part cannot be seen as a dysfunction or unimportant; instead it solves some of the questions this type of online collective action necessarily raises. In the medium and longer term, OCCs require several types of resources to function and it becomes necessary to have organized their provision. Previous analysis of OCCs had dedicated little attention to it, but, in my view, in the analysis of OCCs there is the need to look at both spaces and their particular connection, because both are important and have functions in the governing of the OCCs.

More in concrete, the **governance infrastructure** refers to the way in which the provision of the platform and in general the infrastructure over which the collective action take place. Online collective action in the form of OCCs depends on infrastructure features to take place. For example, the platform provision involves the control of the servers and url and other important components which sustain more technically and legally the interaction. Infrastructure governance tends to be not very present and consider a “backstage” question, however this research focus of exploring it looking how the organizational strategies and logics on the way the provision is organized and governed shape the collective action which emerge over it.

## IV. Research design: Analytical process and empirical research

Historically, the local and small communities are presented as having better conditions for democratic organization. Local and small communities could more easily develop control over decision-making

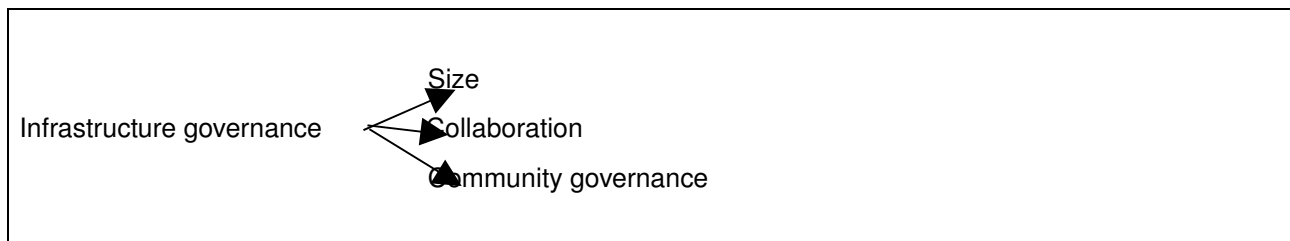
processes; the information could more easily reach all members or participants and increase participation. However, online creation communities are participative processes which are able, in some occasions, to engage very large communities. What are the governance conditions lead to OCCs grow out?

In this doctoral research, the governance form of the OCCs is explored. It applies to governance structure and its organizational and democratic logic, but also the contentions and tensions present in OCCs.

In the analysis of governance, particular attention is given to the infrastructure governance, meaning role of the providers of the platform of participation that hosts the participant's interaction. Finally, analysis on how the different strategies of infrastructure governance relate to the community, which are the governance that lead to scale and cooperation.

Research question: *If and how does the infrastructure governance shape the community in terms of scale, type of cooperation and community self-governance?*

Box: Analytical process



The empirical analysis is based on triangulation of two methods a statistical web analysis of a large-N sample of fifty experiences and four case study comparison.

The development of a large-N analysis is adequate for two important exercises. On the one hand, the OCCs are a recent and under researched phenomenon, the large-N analysis is adequate to describe and map the plurality of forms of OCCS and conceptualize the singularity of OCCs as a form of collective action. More in concrete, an overview exploration of the democratic quality and logic of OCCs is facilitated by the large-N. On the other hand, a large-N web analysis is appropriate in order to test the hypothesis on the explanatory part of the research. That is, how infrastructure governance relates to scale, level and type of collaboration and self-governance of the community. Both exercises are connected (descriptive and explanatory), as the exploration of the democratic quality highlighted the importance of the infrastructure governance of the infrastructure in shaping the community.

The case studies of OCCs are used in order to extract a more in-depth understanding. Each of these four cases are linked to the four main models of infrastructure governance that emerged from the large-N analysis. The cases are (i) Social forums; (ii) Wikimedia, (iii) Flickr and (iv) Wikihow.

For the **large-N analysis** I built pre-defined categories of democratic quality and analyzed the OCCs according to them. The predefined dimensions of democratic quality were useful to the overall approach to OCCs and it helped me to draft provision models for the in-depth analysis of the case studies. However, for the in-depth comparative analysis of the case studies I did abandon the pre-defined dimensions of democratic quality and used a grounded theory methodology to understand and analyze what the democratic

logic and points of quality present were according to the actors.

An online space with democracy quality is the one which defined by six dimensions: 1) organize the information in a usable and accessible way to increase participation inclusion; 2) facilitates the accessibility to the technology that support the process to reduce participation barriers associated to the use of technology; 3) has a transparent organization structure and accountable financial aspects; 4) the knowledge policy favors participants relational freedom and autonomy; and, 5) is open to participation in knowledge-making process over the platform; and, 6) is open to participation in the platform provision.

### **Hypothesis for the large-N analysis**

Hypothesis 1. From the analysis of the presence of dimensions of democratic quality in OCCs, I expect to find that in OCCs there are several styles of searching for democratic quality. Some online creation communities stress some dimensions while other online creation communities put more emphasis on another set of dimensions.

Hypothesis 2. The openness to participation in the administrative space determines the performance of the other dimensions on the democratic quality.

Hypothesis 3. The bigger the size of the OCC, the higher the performance in the dimensions of democratic quality.

## **V. List of previous publications related to the doctoral research**

### **Articles in Refereed Journals**

Fuster Morell, Mayo (2010) "La PARTECIPAZIONE NELLE COMUNITÀ DI CREAZIONE ONLINE. PARTECIPAZIONE COME ECO-SISTEMA? i CASI DI OPENESF.NET E WIKIPEDIA". *Politica del diritto*. Il Molino n°: 2, June 2010 (Italy). Ed. Il Molino. Forthcoming.

Subirats, Joan and Mayo Fuster Morell (2010) "En y desde Internet. Participación política y Espacios virtuales". En Robles, Jose Manuel (Coord). *Prácticas políticas y nuevas tecnologías: Un acercamiento a la idea de democracia digital*. Monográfico para Arbor. Ciencia, Pensamiento y Cultura. CSIC. Forthcoming.

Fuster Morell, Mayo (2009) "Action research: mapping the nexus of research and political action". *Interface Journey*. Issue one (1). ISSN 2009-2431

### **Book Chapters**

Fuster Morell, M *et al.* (2007) *Rethinking political organisation in an age of movements and networks*. XL Editorial: Amsterdam.

Fuster Morell, Mayo (Ed.) (2009) *Organizational principles and political implications of free culture: A reader*. International forum on free culture – Barcelona October 30 2009. Available at: [http://www.networked-politics.info/?page\\_id=212](http://www.networked-politics.info/?page_id=212) [Last access 11/03/2010]

Fuster Morell, Mayo (Ed.) (2008) *Seminar reader Networked Politics and technology*. School of information. University of California, Berkeley, 6 & 7 December 2008. Available at: [http://www.networked-politics.info/?page\\_id=168](http://www.networked-politics.info/?page_id=168) [Last access 11/03/2010]

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