Outline Doctoral research – July 2009

Governance of online creation communities

Provision of platforms for participation

for the building of digital commons

Mayo Fuster Morell
European University Institute
Social and Political Science Department
http://www.onlinecreation.info
E-mail: mayo.fuster@eui.eu
Supervisor: Prof. Donatella della Porta

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) agglutinates 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.

Online creation communities

One of the pioneer pieces of research employing the term "virtual community" can be found in a book of the same title written by Howard Rheingold and published in 1993. Rheingold used the term 'online community' to connote the intense feelings of camaraderie, empathy and support that he observed among people in online spaces. Nowadays, *Virtual or online community* is used broadly for a variety of social groups interacting mainly via the Internet. But several types of online communities can be distinguished.

This research will be developed through a specific type of online community, the *online creation communities*. Online creation communities are characterized by having as a common goal the building of integrated and systematized information pools. OCCs have very diverse types of

goals (eg: Memory and documentation of social processes; developing software programs; encyclopaedias; dictionaries; and audio-visual archives; among others).

Online Creation Communities (OCCs) are defined as a collective action performed by individuals that cooperate, communicate and interact, mainly via a platform of participation in the Internet, with the goal of knowledge-making and which the resulting informational pool remains freely accessible and of collective property.

It might be worth mentioning that in information and communication technology research areas, including this research, the term knowledge is used in a broad sense as information and data elaboration, not refering to scientific knowledge. Knowledge-making in the framework of this research is defined as *the process of creation and systematization of socially dispersed information and knowledge resources and cognitive capabilities resulting in evolving bodies of shared knowledge*.

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.
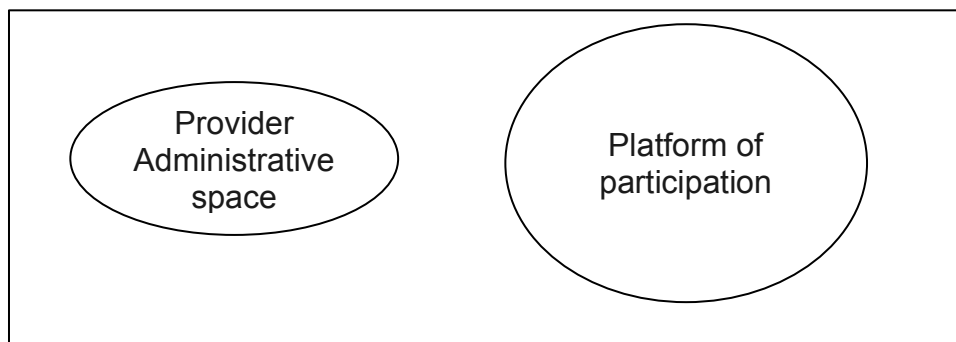
Furthermore, this research is framed by the notion of transition in which distinct organsational and democratic logics are emerging at a time when the institutional principles of both the nation state and the private market are in a state of profound crisis (in the case of the nation state) and undergoing 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.

Some authors agree that if we regard communities as collective action, which in some occasions constitute large performances and produce elaborate outcomes, a number of questions emerge (Tsoukas, 1996; Eisenhardt and Santos, 2000; Patriotta, 2003): How can complex knowledge-making and sharing take place in such an extremely decentralized form of organization in which apparently formal governance structures are weak or invisible, and in which permanent membership in the classical sense does not exist? How can dispersed activities nevertheless lead to the creation of a complex product such as software code or an encyclopaedia online? What are the basic mechanisms underlying the coordination of knowledge-making and sharing in OCCs, and where are they embedded? (Lanzara and Morner 2003, 2006).

In my view, in order to approach OCCs it is useful to do an analytical distinction of 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 (which, in some occasions follows formal organization principles such as strong ties and membership).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.

Figure I : Online creation communities components

But how do the provider space and the community of participants at the platform relate to each other? Which is the role of each in governing the OCCs? How does the combination of organizational and democratic logic in each space (hybridism form) affect?

Analytical process and empirical material: Governance, hybridism and scale

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 and the combination to different forms, but also the contentions and tensions present in OCCs.

In the analysis of governance, particular attention is given to the role of the providers of the platform of participation that hosts the participant's interaction and the distribution of functions

between the providers of the platform and the community of participants. Finally, analysis on how the different styles and organizational form of the providers relate to the community and grow out of the community is also developed.

Research question: *If and how is the role of the platform provider and the relationship and hybridism established between the providers and the community of participants related to the community's growth?*

Box: Analytical process

Role providers and Relationship with the Community	<<< >>> Community growth

The empirical analysis is based on a statistical web analysis of a large-N sample of 50 experiences and a comparison of three case studies: (i) Social forums; (ii) Wikimedia, and (iii) Flickr.

Large- N analysis

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.

Table: Dimensions considered at the large-N analysis

Democracy Quality	Provision models
Usability	(open *versus* close)
Technical Accessibility	
Accessibility	< > Size of the community
Openness to participation	
Transparency	Time of appearance
Knowledge Management	

The pre-defined dimensions of democratic quality are: 1) has well-organised and multi-lingual information required to participate (usability dimension); 2) facilitates accessibility to the technology that support the process; 3) has a transparent organization structure and accountable

financial aspects; 4) the knowledge management is clear on the authorship and on the conditions of use; and, 5) is open to participation in the platform and in the administrative space

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.

Case studies

From the case studies emerged that the organizational and democratic logic of participation in OCCs platforms follow a eco-systemic conception. Participation is understood as an eco-system in six senses. 1) What is important is that the system is open to participation, but it is not expected that everybody participate and contribute equally; 2) Participation has multiple forms and degrees which are integrated: a critical mass of active developers is essential to initiate the project and maintain the content; weak cooperation enriches the system and facilitates reaching larger fields of information resources; and lurker or non-participants provide value as audience or though unintended participation that improve the system; 3) Participation is decentralized and asynchronous; 4) Participation is in public; 5) Participation is autonomous in the sense that each person decides which level of commitment they want to adopt and on what aspects they want to contribute. 6) Participation is volunteering. Participation is not only deliberation but implementation.

Concerning the relationship between platform providers and participants, models can be distinguished depending on the level of openness *versus* closeness of the providers space to participant co-involvement, formal and non – formal organization, and profit versus non profit approach, resulting in three distinctive models: closed and profit provision model; open and non proffit formal provision; and open and non profit informal provisions.

Contribution to the literature

First studies on the Internet and politics mainly concentrated on well-established and traditional actors such as parliaments and political parties (Trechsel *et al*, 2003: 23; Norris, 2002; Römmele, 2003). As Bennett (2003) claims, "much of the attention to the Internet has been

directed at the places where the least significant change is likely to occur: the realm of conventional politics" (della Porta and Mosca, 2006). In this line of argument, the debate was followed by an interest in empirical research on interest groups, NGOs and social movements looking at the impact of the Internet and the type of Internet use carried out by those groups (van den Donk *et al*, 2004; Vedel, 2003). From my point of view, the debate on the Internet and politics could benefit from expanding further to consider actors with mainly an online base. Interestingly, the emergence of collective action in online environments apparently follows an organizational logic that is different to political parties or social movements. Following this potential development of the field, I focus my analysis on the phenomenon of the online creation communities.

In the last few years, the phenomenon of online creation communities has opened a debate on the common-base knowledge-making in the field of organizational studies. My research could be an empirical contribution to this ongoing debate on common-base knowledge-making and distributed organizing by putting attention to an area poorly considered, the role of the platform providers and its relationship with community growth. However, while the empirical research in this field has mainly concentrated on the Open source – Free software (FLOSS) case, I instead aim to examine a larger typology of online creation communities based on distributed organization.

Furthermore the empirical research centered specifically on the online creation communities is mainly based on analyzing one type of online creation community; instead, my plan is to contribute to the analysis of online creation communities by a comparison of several types of online creation communities. I especially aim to compare the online creation communities within the framework of the global movement with other online creation communities, Wikipedia case.

Social movement theory initially tended to approach social movements in a protest perspective and defined their impacts in terms of national-state political institutions. Yet a narrow conception of social movement expressions and outcomes has prevented researchers from realizing social movements' promise (Giugni 1998; Andrews 2001). In this regard, this research on online creation communities stresses some challenges already present in social movement theory: highlighting the performative dimension of social movements (not linked to protest) and expanding social movements as challenges of socio-cultural organizational logics and modes of knowledge production. Furthermore, methodologically the research is applied to social movements' organizational level, instead of the more frequent movement-field level. And finally, the research takes attention to the hybrid character of the organization and the combination of several type of organization and democratic logics.

Fuster Morell, Mayo (2009) *Outline doctoral research: Governance of online creation communities. Provision of platforms for participation for the building of digital commons.* Available at: http://www.onlinecreation.info

Bibliography

Benkler, Yochai. (2006). *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. Yale University Press.

Bennett, W. L. (2003) New Media Power: the Internet and Global Activism. Couldry, Nick, James Curran (eds.) *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a Networked World*, Rowman and Littlefield Lanham, MD, pp. 17-37.

Bimber, B. (2003). *Information and American Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Bollier, D. (2004) "Is the Commons a Movement?" The Wizards of OS3: The Future of the Digital Commons Berlin, Germany. June 12, 2004

Castells, Manuel (2000) *The rise of the network society.* Oxford; Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishing.

Castells, M. (2001) The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society. Oxford University Press.

della Porta, D., Mosca, L. (2006) Report on WP2 – Searching the net. Project Democracy In Europe and the mobilization of society. http://demos.eui.eu

Eisenhardt and Santos (2000) Tacit knowledge and organisational performance: construction industry perspective. Journal of Knowledge Management. 2007. 11. Issue: 1. Page: 115 - 126

Lanzara, G F., Morner, M. (2003) "The Knowledge Ecology of Open-Source. Software Projects". 19 EGOS Colloquium. Copenhagen, July 3-5, 2003 (European Group of Organizational Studies).

Lanzara, G. F., Morner, M. (2006) *Making and Sharing Knowledge at Electronic Crossroads: Coordinating via Mailing Lists in Open Source Software Projects*. Forthcoming.

Norris, P. (2002) Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Patriotta, G. (2003) Organizational knowledge in the making. Oxford University Press.

Powell, W.W. (1990) "Neither market nor hierarchy: Network forms of organization". In B.M. Staw & L.L.Cummings (Eds.), Research in Organizational Behavior, 12, 295-336

Rheingold, H. (1993). *The Virtual Community. Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing.

Rifkin, J. (1995) *The end of work: the decline of the global labor force and the dawn of the post-market era*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Rommele, A., (2003) *Political Parties, Party Communication and New Information and Communication Technologies*, in "Party Politics", Vol 9, No 1, pp. 7-20.

Trechsel, A., Kies, R., Mendez, F., and P. Schmitter (2003)"Evaluation of the Use of New Technologies in order to facilitate Democracy in Europe". Scientific Technology Assessment Office, European Parlament. (Available at: http://edc.unige.ch/publications/edcreports/STOA/main_report.pdf).

Tsoulkas, H. (1996), "The Firm as a Distributed Knowledge System: A Constructionist Approach", Strategic Management Journal, Vol 17. pp. 11-25, December 1996

van den Donk, W., Loader, B., Nixon P., Rucht, D. (2004) *Cyberprotest. New Media, citizens and social movements.* London and New York: Routledge.

Vedel, T. (2003) Political communication in the age of the Internet. *Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies,* nº 10: 41-59.

Weber, 2004*. The success of open source*. Harward Press.