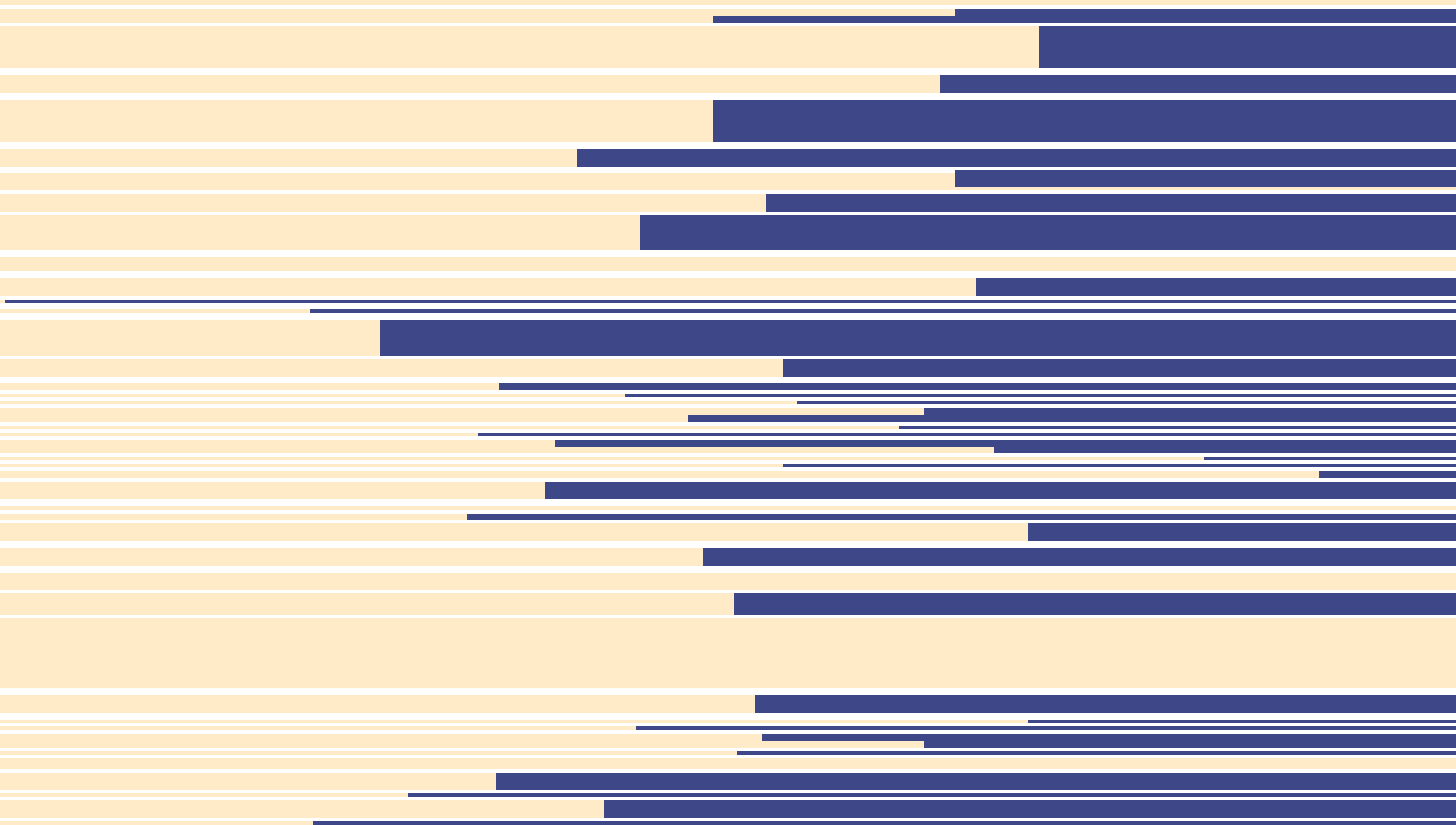




Commons
Network

DIGITAL COMMONS

Transition Collaboratory



Introduction

As a think tank and civil society organisation, Commons network has been working on Digital Commons and sustainable knowledge management for ten years, and has a rich international network of thinkers, academics, policymakers and practitioners on the subject. In our Transition Collaboratories, we explore models for the new economy and provide tools and insights for governments and civil society. [Explore our work on Digital Commons.](#)

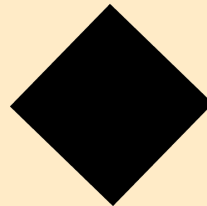
In 2024 Commons Network is working with the Dutch Ministry of the Interior on the Digital Commons Transition Collaboratory. The main question is clear: what are Digital Commons and how can governments interact with them?

In the Digital Commons Transition Collaboratory we develop ideas with partners, build bridges between research, society and policy, and work together towards a sustainable and just digital transition. The Transition Collaboratory is partly an exploration of possible policy directions and partly knowledge and network building where we also want to contribute to the broader societal conversation.



As part of the Digital Commons Transition Collaboratory, we are building an active community of engaged experts, officials and practitioners. They will receive a monthly newsletter, invitations to expert sessions and public events, and a series of accessible Explainers on Digital Commons, of which this document is the first one. Sign up for the mailing list at

digitalcommons@commonsnetwork.org





Motivation

The importance of Digital Commons is becoming increasingly clear as more and more people realise they could open up many opportunities for sovereignty, autonomy and resilience. The topic is strongly related to the conversation about the need for what is called digital public infrastructure. We see all of this reflected in the international context too.

A shared understanding of these concepts and their importance in the wider community and within responsible government ministries is crucial to moving this agenda forward in the right way.

The Digital Commons Transition Collaboratory addresses a number of sub-questions that together ensure a complete and broad understanding of both Digital Commons and a value-driven digital domain in general.

- » What are existing definitions of Digital Commons and what are good examples?
- » How does a Commons approach compare to a market or government approach?
- » What is the economic and social value of Digital Commons, and what are potential risks?
- » How do Digital Commons mix in with related technological concepts, such as open source software or digital public infrastructure?
- » What are possible roles for governments vis-à-vis Digital Commons?

Examples



Open source: Linux

The [Linux](#)-operating systems are the most prominent example of free and open-source collaboration. The source code may be used, modified and distributed commercially or non-commercially by anyone under the terms of 'open' licences such as the GNU General Public License (GPL). The best-known Linux-based operating systems are Ubuntu and Debian for computer and Android for phone.

Knowledge commons: Wikipedia

[Wikipedia](#) is a crucial digital knowledge commons managed by the Wikimedia Foundation and by a small army of volunteers. An ingenious (and imperfect) management model underpins the shared maintenance, transparency and collective nature that has characterised Wikipedia since 2001.



Platform co-op: Consegn Etiche

[Consegn Etiche](#) is an example from the Italian city of Bologna of ethical, collectively driven alternatives to existing delivery platforms. The platform is designed and managed by a cooperative of city planners, local shopkeepers, academics, and representatives of a union of bicycle couriers. The municipality is helping with both funding and flexible regulations.

Decentralised microblog: Mastodon

[Mastodon](#) is a micro-blog application with by now some two million users. Unlike X, it is not a central platform that users are locked into, but an open source software that anyone can install on their own server, a so-called 'Instance'. By using the protocol ActivityPub the Instances communicate with each other and with the decentralised network at large.

Context

The Digital Commons Transition Collaboratory takes place against the backdrop of a digitalised society. Not only that. For an increasing share of technological applications in communication networks, healthcare, commerce and business, science and education, and even the media, citizens and organisations in the Netherlands (and the world) depend on a handful of big tech companies from the United States.

This also applies to the government, even though the business models, black-box technologies and monopolisation of 'Big Tech' are often at odds with public values. The ethics and collaborative model of Digital Commons offer a solution here.

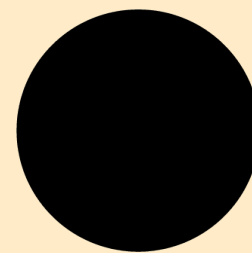
The Netherlands has recently started to engage with the concept of Digital Commons. For one, State Secretary of the Interior Alexandra van Huffelen wrote [a letter](#) to parliament last year in which she endorses value-driven digital ecosystems generally and Digital Commons specifically.

The Dutch government already took some concrete steps. For instance, the Open Source Program Office (OSPO) of the Interior Ministry was launched in 2023 with the aim of removing internal bottlenecks around open source. The government is also a member of Public Spaces, a coalition of Dutch public organisations working together to get a better grip on technology and switch to ethical alternatives to dominant platforms where necessary.

The Netherlands also plans to set up a European Digital Infrastructure Consortium (EDIC) for the Digital Commons together with France and Germany, among others, as a follow-up to the declaration [Towards a Sovereign Digital Infrastructure of Commons](#) that was signed by 19 EU member states in 2022. In cooperation with the European Commission the EDIC should help implement the goals from the progressive [Digital Decade](#) (DD) agenda. The Ministry of Economic Affairs, on their part, published a policy framework called the [Digital Open Strategic Autonomy Agenda](#).

This policy and coalition building also fits in a context of recent European laws and regulations in the digital domain. In the past three years, the EU implemented the Digital Markets Act (DMA) that deals with (anti) monopolisation, the Digital Services Act (DSA) that regulates online platforms and intermediaries, and the Data Governance Act (DGA), which focuses on responsible access to data. And, of course, the General Data Protection Regulation was already there.

It is in this social and political context that the Transition Collaboratory will shed more light on Digital Commons, how they fit into the current flow of ideas, models and policies in the digital domain, and in what way the government can flesh out its role supporting them.



Opportunities and Potential

Digital Commons are not only about digital technology, but also about the economy, how it is organised and who it benefits. Digital Commons represent a democratic practice, with shared ownership, thus initiating a shift away from centralised (private or state) management of technology and towards democratisation of digital infrastructure. In this way Digital Commons help guard and reinforce such public values as democracy, self-determination and sovereignty. This shift offers numerous opportunities for the Netherlands, or any country that takes Digital Commons seriously.

Democratic governance

Democratisation at the community or collective level is central to Digital Commons. Technology used for public purposes, such as in media and journalism, education or healthcare, benefits from being carefully and democratically embedded in its user communities.

Economic transition

Digital Commons have enormous potential as basic infrastructure for inclusive economic development. They are reusable, widely accessible and use ethical business and stewardship models. It can form the basis for new generations of applications, in for example the platform economy, with makers and tech companies firmly embedded in and adding value to society.

Digital Autonomy

Digital Commons can also bring the creation and management of digital technologies closer to the Netherlands. Not only that. They help to flesh out the idea of strategic autonomy in practice, which refers to the ability to safeguard public interests and reduce risky dependencies on third-party (private) actors.

Diverse and resilient

A diverse and decentralised digital landscape is adaptable and resilient to shocks or 'cracks' in the network. The number of single points of failure, the places where the network is vulnerable due to over-dependence on a single technology, company or server, is reduced.

Plan & Activities

We will work with our partners in this Transition Collaboratory and, over the course of the project, invite practitioners, leading thinkers and policy makers from our network to contribute. Commons Network will facilitate expert meetings and public events with the Dutch and international community around Digital Commons, co-produce knowledge and insights, and publish these in a number of accessible Explainer documents and newsletters. The final step is the creation of a clear road map for policymaking around the Digital Commons and developing a set of urgent policy recommendations.

In the Digital Commons Transition Collaboratory we also work closely with partners such as Waag Future Lab, Public Spaces, and the HvA, Faculty of Digital Media and Creative Industry, and the Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development at Utrecht University. The Transition Collaboratory will run until the winter of 2024.

Commons Network
<https://www.commonsnetwork.org>

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