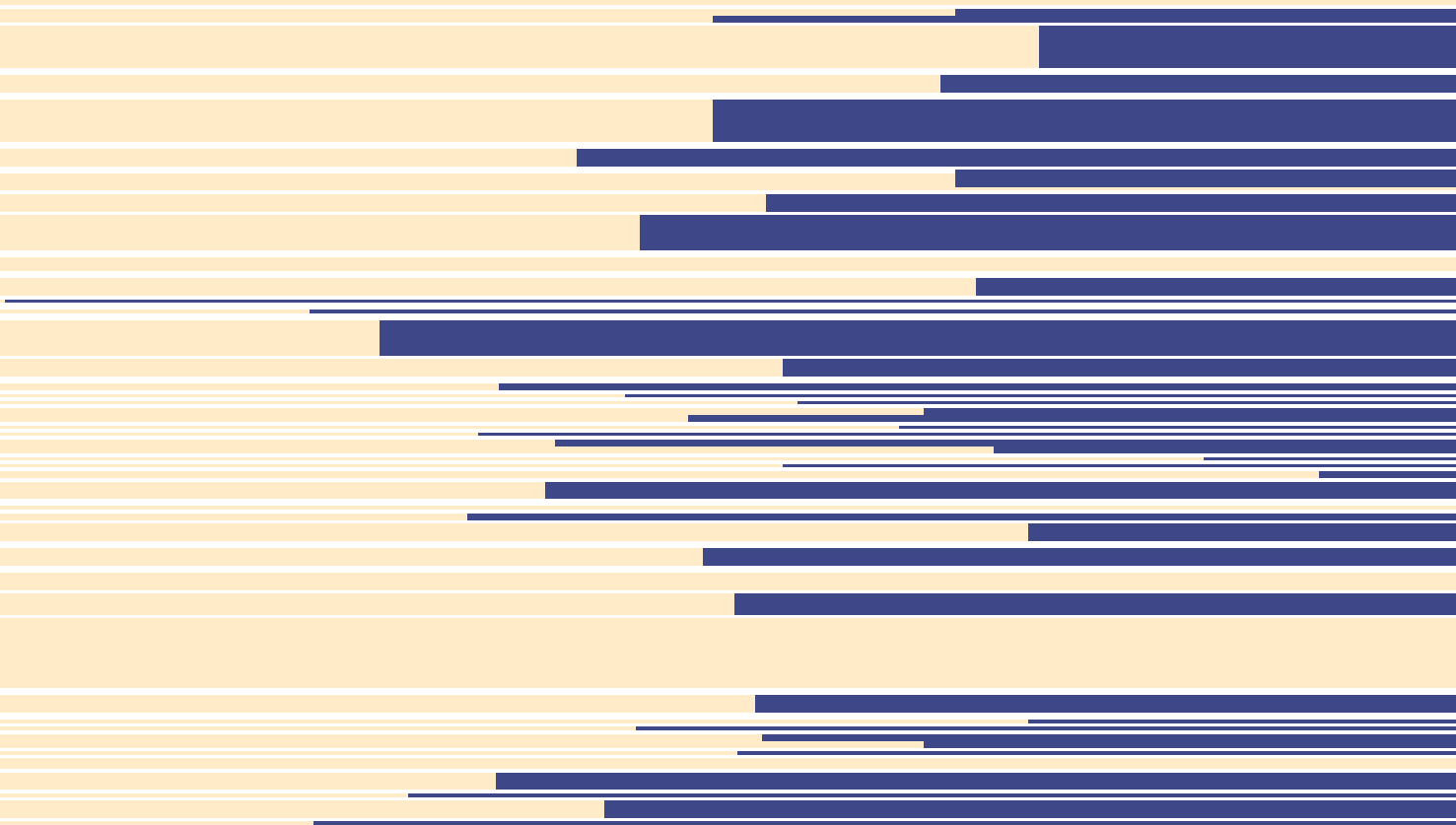




**Commons**  
Network

# **DIGITAL COMMONS**

## **Collaborative Culture**



## Explainer #4

This document is the fourth one in a series of accessible Explainers about the Digital Commons. The Explainers series is part of our Digital Commons Transition Collaboratory, where we are building an active community of engaged experts, public officials and practitioners and explore a shared understanding of the Digital Commons and the role of government. Want to join the community? Sign up for the mailing list at [digitalcommons@commonsnetwork.org](mailto:digitalcommons@commonsnetwork.org) and you will receive our monthly Digital Commons newsletter with updates about what happens in the Transition Collaboratory, events and announcements, and upcoming Explainers and other knowledge resources.



## Collaborative Culture

Historically, the success of human societies (and those of our predecessors) has always depended heavily on collective sociability and cooperation, more than on the pursuit of material self-interest. Digital Commons give space to the social aspects of human motivation, encouraging forms of cooperation and interaction based on community, creativity, autonomy and altruism.

This broadens our view of humans beyond the human image that currently dominates society and the economy: the homo economicus, self-interested beings seeking material rewards. We now know that this is a one-sided - and harmful - view of human beings. People are driven by a wide variety of motives; material self-interest is only one piece of the puzzle.

Digital Commons emerge through a diverse and often socially oriented value system. Participants do not participate because they have to. Nor solely because they can make money from it. Reciprocity and common purpose are important drivers, as are the need to learn and build a reputation. Personal autonomy and fun also play important roles. Even when no reward - tangible or intangible - is in sight, people can contribute to Digital Commons, for instance when there is idealism or solidarity with vulnerable groups or minorities.

Exactly how people are motivated to contribute to Digital Commons depends on a number of variables, such as age and the specific role in the project. Also, motivations are not static and subject to change. For example, the need for solidarity and camaraderie becomes more important the longer people are involved in Digital Commons projects.

Non-hierarchical, non-market-driven collaboration on the Internet is a cultural phenomenon on a previously unprecedented scale, in which Digital Commons play a major role. This collaborative culture favours the sharing of collective digital resources rather than strict property rights (Explainer #2), democratic and decentralised models rather than hierarchies, (Explainer #3) and floats on the intrinsic human motivation to create, share and collaborate.



# Pydry: why I contribute to open source software

A page on the Internet forum Reddit asks the question: why do you contribute to open source projects? User pydry answers through a list of motivations:

- It's fun.
- It seemed to help with getting new jobs - the companies that hired me tended to remark as if it was a bonus, anyway.
- I get an ego boost seeing people use my stuff online and recommend it.
- I kind of like the idea of one day making some sort of lasting positive impact that outlives me. That's more likely to happen with OSS than with a job.
- It gave me useful specialist experience which I parlayed into a few days of consulting work here and there which was loads more fun than my regular job (I'd like to do more of that).
- I have half hearted ideas about maybe making a business out of it.

# Individual needs and collective goals

Digital Commons add a number of roles to the existing palette of roles available to humans in society. For the market, people are mainly consumers or value-added producers; for government, people are mainly clients or voters.

For Digital Commons, people are first and foremost collaborators, stewards or stakeholders. Each collective plays with this terminology in practice. Individuals who contribute to the free and open source world map Open Street Map, for example, are called *mappers* or *mapping Gurus*. The Apache Software project calls participants *committers* and *contributors*, and Wikipedia has Wikipedians and *stewards*. These projects try to give words to the shift from homo economicus to homo cooperans, collaborator or responsible steward.

Successful Digital Commons are able to balance and bring together individual needs and collective interests. For this, self-selection of participants is an important mechanism. It enables individuals to self-identify for tasks that attract them and for which they are well-suited. This gives Digital Commons a major advantage over regular companies and the labour market, namely a collective, bottom-up alignment of individual motivations and skills with collective goals.

The balance between individual and collective is a key difference from the dominant design of the digital realm today, which is still founded on the idea that pursuing individual and material self-interest ultimately also serves the collective or society. We now know that this pursuit is often actually at the expense of the collective interest and can result in great inequalities, undermining public values and a democratic culture.

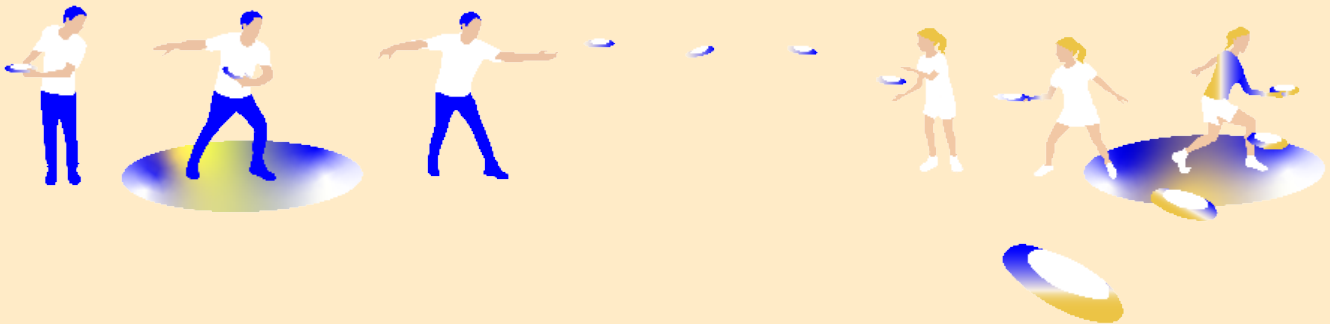


## Linux OS: a partnership unparalleled

Linux is a *free and open source* (FOSS) operating system for *personal computer* (PC). Linus Torvald, a student at the University of Helsinki, designed the Linux 'kernel' in 1991 and published the code under the GNU *copyleft* licence. This allowed Linux to grow into a distributed and virtually non-hierarchical development project that eventually encompassed more than two million lines of computer code and brought together thousands of geographically dispersed volunteers and paid company employees.

The developers who chose to contribute to the further development of Linux could rest assured that no one would sell off the products of their efforts for personal gain. Their motivations were diverse and had an important collective, societal dimension, which stemmed from enthusiasm for the project and a willingness to participate in a community. The development of Linux proved that Digital Commons can bring together groups of people far larger than any commercial party can afford.

The Linux OS currently powers more than two percent of all personal computers worldwide and, via the Android OS which runs on the Linux kernel, about 85 percent of all smartphones. Linux also powers over 95 percent of the top one million most visited web servers.





# Innovating together

**A collaborative culture based on sharing knowledge and technology is, according to the dominant economic view, disastrous for innovation because the *homo economicus* would no longer be motivated to innovate. In reality, the production and distribution of knowledge is actually highly social in nature. A successful scientific method, for example, requires an ethos of open, wide-ranging critical exchange and debate.**

This also applies to Digital Commons. They show that successful knowledge creation and innovation can take place when people are approached as inherent but diverse collaborators, even when these collaborators are geographically widely dispersed.

This premise has implications for the way we view the economy, competition and business models. Digital Commons are usually non-proprietary and shield their knowledge and technology less, if at all, from so-called ‘free-riders’ (i.e. potential collaborators). This leaves innovation anything but stagnant.

Interoperability is a key concept here. It means that platforms and applications can communicate and collaborate with each other, via an open API or a standard protocol, even though their creators or owners may, according to common perceptions, be competitors.

E-mail is an example of an interoperable system. Messages can be exchanged between users of different operating systems and e-mail software, offered by different e-mail providers. It shows that when technical interoperability is accompanied by targeted public investment, regulation and a deep-rooted culture of collaboration, an ecosystem can emerge to which any player (commercial or non-commercial) can add its innovations and value. Such an ecosystem will not only lean on public values, it will also make competition fairer and open up new opportunities and ‘markets’ for other innovative players and yet more innovative Digital Commons.



# Matrix: inter- operate rather than compete

The messaging application Element is a free and open-source messaging application that runs on the open Matrix protocol and a decentralised server network. Content and user data on Element are not stored on one central server, but on several, decentralised servers that communicate with each other using the Matrix protocol. Element users thus have full control over their data and metadata.

A paid version of Element takes advantage of another important feature of the Matrix network, namely interoperability. Matrix can act as a ‘bridge’ to other major messaging apps, so the user does not have to switch between different apps for different conversations, but can reach them all from Element. This ‘horizontal interoperability’ between competitive platforms benefits personal autonomy as users can now switch to the app that best suits their values and preferences without network and data loss. Element has already set up bridges to rival apps like Telegram, Whatsapp and Signal.

The Element project is non-profit, open source and highly transparent, making it popular with governments in France and Germany and with journalists who want more control over their communications.

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

**In cooperation with the Dutch  
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