



Commons
Network

DIGITAL COMMONS

Caring Practices



Explainer #6

This document is the sixth 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 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.



Care

In contrast to a capitalist model of accumulation, manipulation, and exploitation, Digital Commons fosters an ethic of care, self-determination, and sufficiency. Caring is a core element of the commons. We can consider a digital good as part of the Digital Commons when it is embedded in a framework of care that takes various forms.

An ideal-typical view of the Digital Commons is of a community that cares not only for the technology being developed but also for the people involved, while remaining aware of the collective responsibility to bring care into the broader economy and society.

Caring for Tech

Caring for technology consists of several components, including technical maintenance and development, ensuring transparency, implementing privacy standards, and keeping the source code and APIs open and transparent.

Caring for technology also involves protecting the digital assets from private or corporate appropriation. Examples of such protection include collective ownership structures, the use of copyleft licenses (see for both explainer #2), and regulations geared towards fair competition and mandatory interoperability.

Private appropriation of Digital Commons happens in various ways, such as developing exclusive digital products and services based on open-source code; opening and dominating ancillary markets to an open source project, such as through many standard Google apps for the Linux-based Android operating system; and the private interference (and dominance) of large commercial entities in open-source software development itself.

There is also large-scale exploitation, where forms of open data, knowledge, and cultural production—such as design, music, text, and photography—are used for commercial purposes without sharing back with the community. There is a lack of protection for these open digital works and a failure to implement concrete forms of reciprocity, like we see present in organizational models like data commons or in the use of not only open, but specifically commons-protective licenses.

Sovereign Tech Fund: German Care for Vital Public Infrastructures

The Sovereign Tech Fund is an initiative of the German federal government that “supports the development, improvement, and maintenance of open digital infrastructure.”

It serves as an example of how care and protection for vital Digital Commons and public digital infrastructure can be implemented in practice. Specifically, it provides financial support for the maintenance and development of the open-source code of ‘fundamental technologies’ that enable the creation of other software and can play a significant role in Germany’s digital infrastructure.

The goal is to strengthen the open-source ecosystem, with a focus on security, resilience, technological diversity, and concern for “the people behind the code.”

The Netherlands is also addressing the issue and, as part of the Dutch government’s participation in the Digital Commons European Digital Infrastructure Coalition (EDIC), there are proposals for a Dutch Sovereign Technology Fund.



(Open Data Commons) Licenses for Protection of the Commons

A specific but emerging niche within the open license domain is the so-called Open Data Commons Licenses (ODCL). ODCL licenses address the risk of misuse and appropriation of Digital Commons by private entities.

The peer production license (PPL) is another example of a commons-protective license. Under the PPL, only other commoners, cooperatives, and nonprofit organizations can share and reuse the digital material produced—not commercial entities seeking to profit from the commons without explicit reciprocity.

The peer production license is an explicitly anti-capitalist variant of the non-commercial Creative Commons license. It allows commercial exploitation only by collectives where ownership of the digital goods is held by those who contribute value, and where any profits are shared equally among them. In this way, PPL and ODCL licenses encourage a shift in the ownership structure of organizations.



Care Work Within the Community

Digital Commons do not exist without a well-functioning community and caring, collaborative practices. The needs of those involved are just as important as the successful development of technology. Indeed, in the context of Digital Commons, technology is often viewed as a tool for fostering a stronger, collaborative culture (see explainer #4).

Commoners implement the feminist principle that ‘reproductive’ labor, or care work, is equivalent to ‘productive’ labor and should be valued as such. This means that within a collective or community, there can be very different forms of value—ranging from purely technical maintenance to providing emotional support to a colleague or member of a collective.

We distinguish between two types of care work: care work for the health of the collective in the form of dedication, material input, and loyalty to the mission, and care work for the individuals participating in the Digital Commons in the form of, for example, social connection, mutual trust, and emotional support.

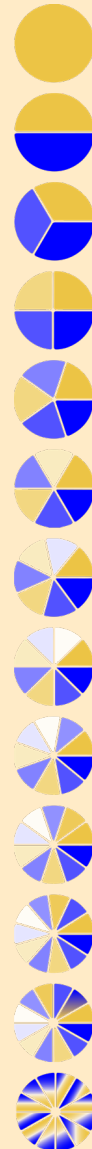
These forms of care work are indispensable for the performance of regular, ‘productive’ work and thus play an essential role in the successful development of a sustainable digital economy. Clear organizational structures, licenses, rules and bylaws, along with collective ownership (explainer #2) and a digital democratic and collaborative culture (explainer #3 and #4), can ensure that care work within and for the community is not left to the goodwill of a willing investor or CEO, but rather is a shared agreement and responsibility.

DisCO and Guerilla Media Coop: Care About Code

The Distributed Cooperative Organization, or DisCO, is an organizational structure designed to democratize the digital economy. DisCOs are socially and environmentally oriented, federated, commons-generating, and central to them is care work. Their motto is: care over code.

Guerilla Media Coop is a creative agency and a leading practical example of a DisCO. Guerilla Media Coop embodies the feminist principle that not only productive labor is valuable, but so is reproductive labor or care work. The Coop identifies three forms of value: commons-generating (pro bono), care work, and 'livelihood' work. The income from paid assignments, 'livelihood', is pooled and paid out to members based on the value generated in all three value forms. This value tracking influences decision-making, payments, and work priorities for all DisCO members.

DisCOs, including Guerilla Media Coop, have a federated structure, meaning that within the Coop, there are several semi-independent 'nodes', such as Guerilla Translation and Guerilla Graphic Collective. Each node focuses on trust, intimacy, and mutual support in small groups of up to 15 to 20 people. DisCOs can be replicated through a federation protocol, enabling them to achieve critical mass, similar to how Internet protocols support networks.



Caring for Society and Nature

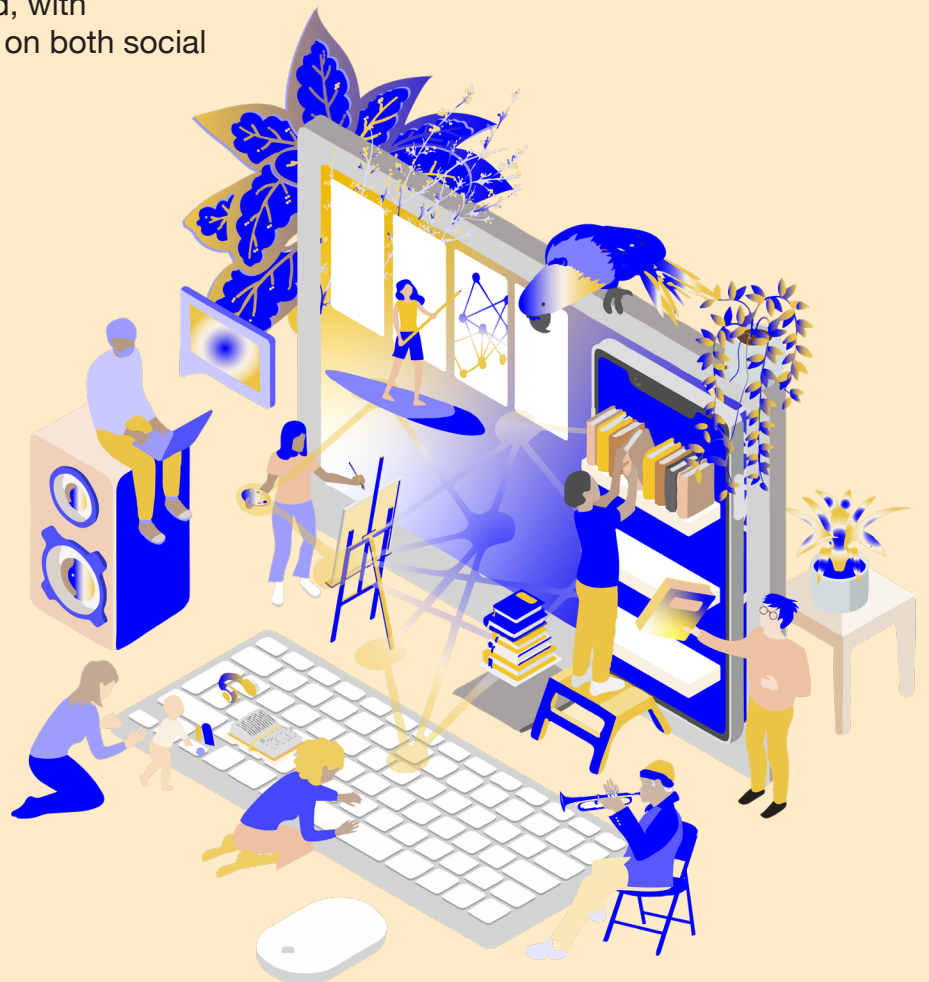
The practice of care extends further with Digital Commons, from caring within a community to caring within an economy, a society, and for the planet. Digital Commons contribute to a different type of economy, one based on cooperation, care, and sufficiency.

Digital Commons thus align with the framework of a pluralistic economy, where there is space for regenerative alternatives to dominant extractive models, commodification, and surveillance online. In practice, this means adopting various democratic ownership models (see explainer #2) focused on local economies that regenerate and share wealth rather than extract and monopolize it.

These models can include cooperative structures like platform co-ops, but also forms of steward ownership, combinations of commercial and non-commercial entities, or entirely non-profit organizations, with open and commons protective licenses as a key complementary tool. In these models, people are explicitly recognized as responsible stewards, not as managers and shareholders who extract value from the organization or from nature.

Community and social relationships are central to Digital Commons. They guide decisions about technological necessity, design, and use—not the other way around, as is common in today’s digital economy, in which technology (driven by the wealthy class) often disrupts communities and harms nature.

This ties into the idea of sufficiency. It raises the question: is new technology truly necessary for human and planetary well-being? The recent rollout of ‘artificial intelligence’ into our digital infrastructure—resulting in algorithmic discrimination and severe climate damage from data centers, among other issues—illustrates how this question is often ignored, with technology imposing a heavy toll on both social and planetary systems.



Posmo: Swiss POSitive MObility

The Posmo cooperative is developing a democratic and fair model for the data economy. Founded in May 2020, Posmo (short for POSitive MObility) is one of the first data commons dedicated to the ethical collection and analysis of mobility data.

Posmo has two central goals. The first is to develop and implement the technical infrastructure, organizational structures, and governance mechanisms of a data cooperative, with a focus on caring for and protecting 'data producers'. The second goal is to create high-quality datasets on individual mobility in Switzerland and make them available to governments, researchers, and policymakers for a fee.

Since August 2022, a pilot project on data donation has been running in collaboration with the city of Zurich. Residents are invited to use a mobile app to provide their personal mobility profile to the city in anonymized and aggregated form.

Posmo's model redistributes the value derived from data collection back to the data producers themselves through the cooperative's collective ownership model. Posmo aims to institutionalize caring practices, not only for the technology and the data, but also for the cooperative and its members.



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

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