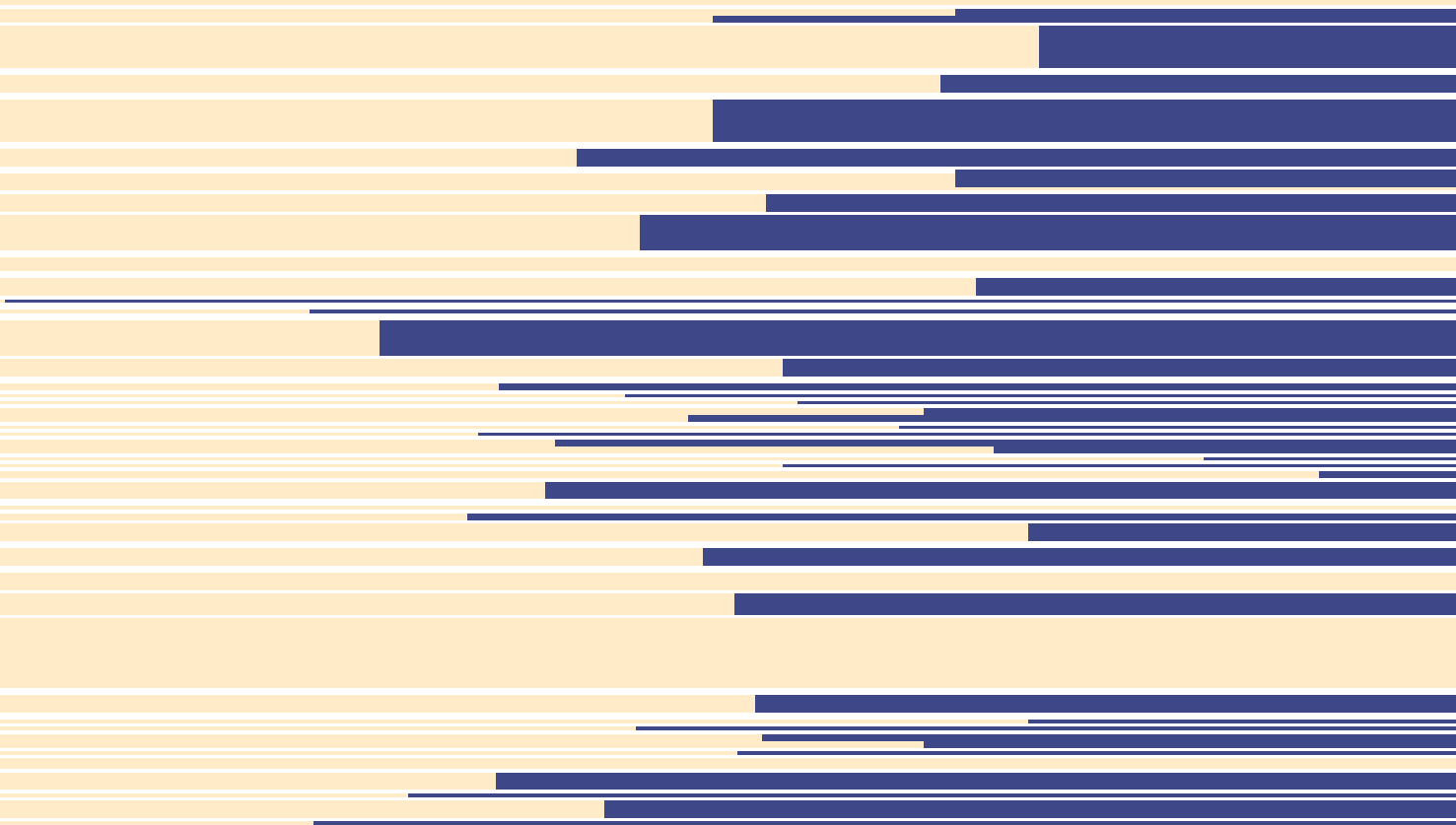


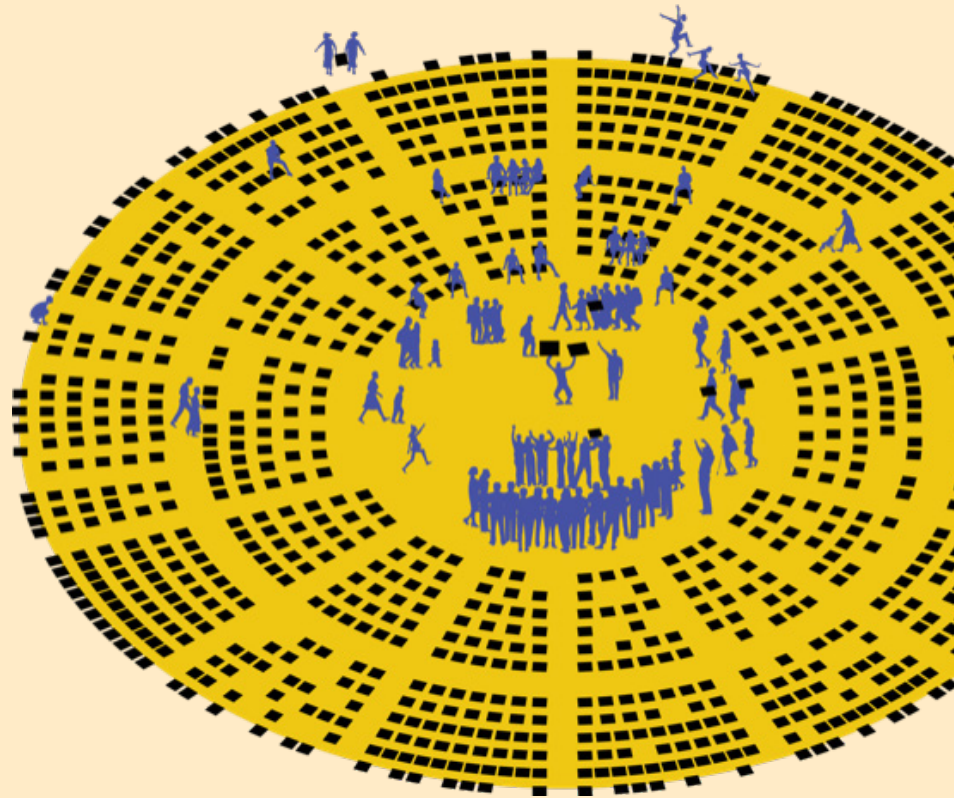


**Commons**  
Network

# **DIGITAL COMMONS**

## **Democratic Practices**





## Explainer #3

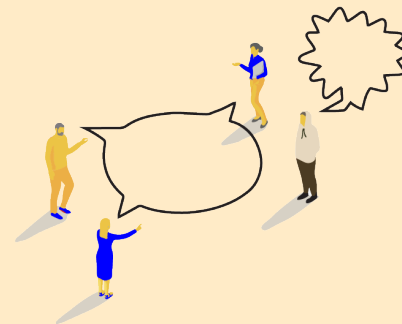
This document is the third one in a series of accessible Explainers about the Digital Commons. The Explainers series is part of our Digital Commons Transition Collaboratory, where we are building an active community of engaged experts, public officials and practitioners and explore a shared understanding 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.

# Democratic Practices

**Digital Commons are distinguished not only by Collective Ownership (see Explainer 1), but also by collective, democratic practice. Digital Commons prioritise democratic principles and practices such as collective decision-making, high-quality participation and transparent governance, without necessarily using terms like democracy or democratic explicitly. ‘Decentralised’ and ‘federated’ are alternative terms that fit well with – and stem from – the digital domain and the Internet.**

Democracy today is mostly understood as representative democracy at the national level. In Digital Commons, other types of communities often take centre stage. Democratic governance is not about representation, but about forms of direct and participatory decision-making. Democracy is interpreted practically: all stakeholders should be able to co-shape the digital resource or technology. How that works in practice varies by type and case.

This democratic practice of Digital Commons is reflected at different levels. In many open-source projects, for example, the technology itself is the object of democratisation; the code of the software is transparent and the development process ideally highly participatory (e.g. Linux Foundation, Apache Foundation). The organization model is not necessarily democratised. With data or platform co-ops, it is mainly the organisation model and the governance of the central legal entity, usually a cooperative, that is democratised. The technologies and digital platform that co-ops use are not always open source. A third – and by no means final – level of democratic practice occurs at the content level when knowledge is produced or content and moderation rules are established in a transparent and participatory way (e.g. Wikipedia, Mastodon).





# Mastodon and Fediverse: federated alternative to Silicon Valley

**Mastodon is a free, open-source microblog application similar to X. Mastodon is part of the so-called 'Fediverse', a global network of 'federated' internet services and applications.**

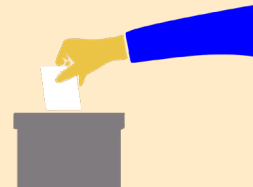
Federated means that Mastodon consists of thousands of servers or 'Instances', a kind of clubs of Mastodon members that together form a network and communicate with each other via a standard protocol, ActivityPub. Federation is nothing new: e-mail and mobile telephony are also examples of federated communication networks.

Mastodon is highly decentralised at the technology level. No single party controls software development and data is stored on decentralised servers that members manage themselves. At the content level, Mastodon also pursues a decentralised and participatory policy: Instance administrators and users together draw up rules on communication, behaviour and moderation.

The Fediverse network has become a federated equivalent of the centralised domain of Silicon Valley internet platforms. Anyone can start an Instance for Mastodon, but also for all other Fediverse applications. These include Pixelfed, the federated sister of Instagram, Writefreely, a macroblog application á la Wordpress, and Friendica, which is best compared to Facebook.

# Governance: from procedures to licences

Digital resources, unlike physical resources, cannot ‘run out’, even with large numbers of users. Yet there are other risks: contamination and loss of quality of software and code, poor discoverability or private appropriation. Therefore, proper governance is needed: the interplay of user rules, licences and procedures for collective decision-making.



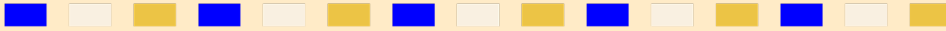
The bigger and more successful the Digital Commons, the more essential clear procedures are. Those procedures determine the quality and effectiveness of collaboration. They answer questions such as: Who decides what? What cooperation principles do we use and what rules do we set? What subgroups or governing bodies are needed? How do we ensure broad consensus and when are decisions legitimate?

Open licences play an extremely important role in the governance of Digital Commons. They regulate that digital resources such as knowledge, code and data can be widely used, shared and modified. In doing so, they help ‘democratise’ Digital Commons.

Open licences are counterparts to strict copyright and intellectual property rights where ‘all rights are reserved’ to a single party. There are roughly two groups of open licences. The so-called copyleft licences require modifications and copies of a given digital technology to carry the same licence. In doing so, they protect in the long term against private appropriation and ‘commodification’. This is not only applied to software and code, but also, for example, to Open Access scientific publications.

A technology with permissive licences is ‘radically’ open: modifications do not have to carry the same licence; commercial use is allowed and usually a mention of the original work is sufficient.





# Wikipedia: a web of principles, procedures and licences

Wikipedia is an online encyclopaedia built and maintained by a self-organising community of 43 million registered users. Anyone with an account can edit and add content and pages to Wikipedia. To ensure the quality and openness of the added knowledge, Wikipedia has a complex set of editorial rules, licences and public discussion forums.

Much of the content that appears on Wikipedia carries a copyleft licence, the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike (CC BY-SA), one of six widely used Creative Commons licences. CC BY-SA means that web content may be copied, modified and redistributed as long as the copied version is made available to others under the same conditions.

When a new Wikipedia page is created, the principle AGF applies: assume good faith. Every 'fact' requires an RS, a reliable source. Experienced editors keep lists of unreliable sources. NPOV stands for neutral point of view, a principle to ensure neutrality and diversity of perspectives considered. Behind each page lays a debate page on which editors discuss their entries and try to reach consensus. Failing that, they can submit their arguments to an arbitration committee, ArbCom, a virtual court consisting of 15 elected Wikipedia administrators.

## More than one possible model

One of the key differences from mainstream, private governance models is that Digital Commons deliberately seek to abandon hierarchies and replace them with more distributed and decentralised models. The aim is to spread decision-making power among a broad group of administrators and users and avoid a single central entity – public or private – controlling the digital resource or technology.

To put this into practice, different governance models are used for Digital Commons. A common variant is the community-foundation model where there is a division of labour between (semi-)volunteers from the community and foundation staff. The model is widespread in the world of open-source software development and open knowledge development. Sometimes a commercial company or cooperative assumes the role of the foundation.

The division of labour between community and company or foundation is often necessary: the community does not have the resources to deal with financial, legal and administrative matters in addition to the knowledge or software project. A legal entity is also needed to apply for funds or licences or to ratify objectives or statutes by law. Professional developers often work side by side with volunteers although this is not always a sustainable model given the important societal functions of Digital Commons.



Platform and data co-ops adopt a different, cooperative model that often involves stakeholders as ‘members’ and co-owners directly in decision-making. As opposed to more open Digital Commons and communities, the relative closed nature of a cooperative allows virtually every user of the digital resource to have a voice in the collective governance of the Digital Commons.

<b>Model</b>	<b>Community + Foundation</b>	<b>Community + business</b>	<b>Community = cooperative</b>
<b>Features</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foundation supports the community (licensing, fundraising, etc.) and operates on a non-profit basis</li> <li>• Community builds and maintains open-source resource</li> <li>• Companies can act on as co-developers and service providers</li> <li>• Open licenses determine terms of use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business or coop collaborates with larger community</li> <li>• Business and community jointly develop open source digital resource</li> <li>• Business and outside businesses operate as service providers</li> <li>• Open licenses determine terms of use</li> <li>• Public values potentially secured through models such as steward ownership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooperative consists of members of the larger community</li> <li>• Cooperative economic model underlies operation and use of the technology</li> <li>• Cooperative does daily management</li> <li>• Profit flows back to the community or other community projects</li> <li>• Community members directly involved in major model and technology decisions</li> </ul>
<b>Examples</b>	Linux, Apache, Wikimedia	NextCloud, Cryptpad, Alkermio, Meet.coop	Salud.coop, Drivers Cooperative, Gemeinwerk

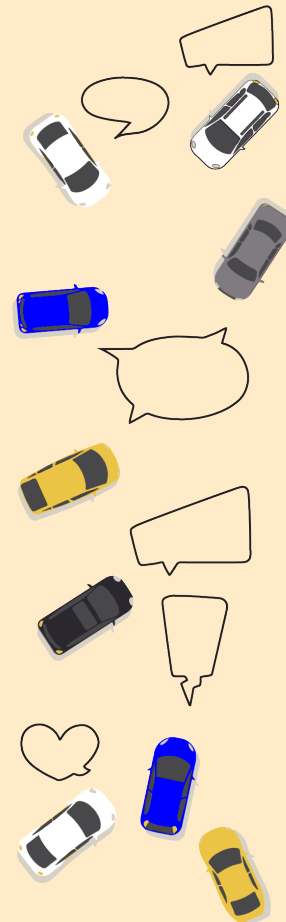


# Drivers Cooperative: taxi drivers as platform owners and decision-makers

New York-based Drivers Cooperative is one of the most prominent examples of the platform cooperative. Founded in 2021, the cooperative has a driver app (Co-op Drive) and a customer app (Co-op Ride). The roughly 3,000 drivers of the Drivers Cooperative share legal ownership of the cooperative and thus of the internet platform on which they find their customers. The technology has not been developed open source.

The drivers have a voice in the organisation. Every two years, they elect a new board and can vote on key business decisions such as changes to the patronage model, which requires that earned profits are paid out to drivers based on hours worked.

Drivers Coop also has an elected drivers' council that organises hearings on customer complaints. Instead of unilateral discipline mechanisms, as is common in most mainstream ride-hailing apps, drivers can present their stories in-person to a panel of peers.



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

**In cooperation with the Dutch  
Ministry of Interior Relations**

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