

# **Repositioning CoDesign in the age of platform capitalism: from sharing to caring**

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# Special Issue Introduction

## Repositioning CoDesign in the age of platform capitalism: from sharing to caring

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### Scope

This [special issue](#) presents contributions interrogating how co-design is positioning itself in the age of “platform capitalism” (Snricek, 2016). It brings together theoretical reflections on the position of co-design and empirical cases of co-design that can shed better light on these dynamics, with an accent on sharing and caring.

A workshop co-located with the Communities and Technologies 2017 conference organised by the editors of this special issue constituted the starting point. The workshop, entitled “Collaborative Economies - From Sharing to Caring” (Avram et al., 2017) was an initiative of the “Sharing and Caring” COST action and invited wide participation around the themes of digital social innovation, design for change, environmental sustainability and ecological concerns, as well as platform cooperativism. To follow up, the workshop “Collaborative Technologies on Strike”<sup>1</sup>, a one day of collaboration between scholars, union members, and activists to discuss the possibilities for a technology design, development, and appropriation strategically aligned with the goals of industrial action, took place in Genk, Belgium, co-located with the Participatory Design Conference 2018. The Special Interest Group on “Cooperativism and Human-Computer Interaction” (Fedosov et al., 2019), another event in this series, had its inaugural meeting at the CHI 2019 conference. Such events have been revealing the limits of both practical and theoretical knowledge in these areas and, certainly, the gap in literature linking them.

The call for papers for this special issue was launched in September 2017, and resulted in 30 abstract submissions involving approximately 70 authors. Each abstract was reviewed by two of the editors, and based on these recommendations, full paper submissions were invited for 19 of these. In May 2018, we received 12 submissions; each submission underwent double blind peer review by two external reviewers. The authors of 9 of the papers were invited to address the reviewers’ concerns and resubmit by December 2018. A

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<sup>1</sup> <http://sharingandcaring.eu/event/collaborative-technologies-strike-cost-workshop>

new round of reviews followed, involving the same reviewers - where possible - and, in April 2019, 6 of these papers were accepted for this special issue, with two others sent to the journal's normal submission track.

The accepted papers cover a diverse range of topics - from data hacking, digital currency and learning, to more general topics such as theorising care, discussing the commons in the context of platforms, and creating a common ground for social welfare practices in Europe.

## Platforms, Economics and Everyday Life

Digital platforms, often labelled as part of the "sharing economy", are becoming increasingly relevant to both the daily lives of private individuals and to the direction and operation of social and political systems. These tools are transforming communities (of interest, place, practice, and circumstance, to name a few) to establish new forms of connection, welfare, labour, and service. As they do so, there emerge fundamental questions around the perils of their design and use and the possibilities for fair alternatives.

Two narratives on the *sharing economy* tend to dominate the current discourse. One group of accounts focuses on social innovation, creating more sustainable economic and environmental models in which sharing access to goods and services allows for a more efficient and sustainable utilisation of resources (see Light and Miskelly 2019 for a critical analysis). The second group centres on the idea of market-focused digital innovation radically changing business models and generating economic activity, often threatening the working conditions of other social groups (e.g. Uber and the taxi drivers) or the texture of local communities (e.g. the effect of AirBnB on the rental market), seen in work by the likes of Lampinen et al (2015) or Vyas and Dillahunt (2017).

In both cases, a prominent role is played by platforms that seek to quantify collaborations for purposes of profit, labelled as platform capitalism by Snricek (2016). For example, likes and other emoticon-based responses to a Facebook post are often used as quantitative measure of the post's impact and success of engagement. Through algorithmic filtering, these become the measure of our affective, political, and cultural identities and the guide for further design of our experiences on the platform. In fact, digital platforms are in essence connective and collaborative, creating a digital action point where multiple networks meet. These qualities have been enhanced through the development of on-site collaborative features. However, with the impact of venture capital in the market and increasingly driven by financial motives, many platforms have been adjusting their algorithms in order to commodify collaboration. Hence, novel forms of exploitation (of social relations as well as labour) have been established (van Dijck, 2013).

Co-design, as well as other related domains of research and practice such as Participatory Design and Computer Supported Cooperative Work, starts from a perspective where collaboration is valued for both its politics and what it can deliver. Particularly, it has been used to support the emancipation of workers from the capitalist production process (Ehn, 1989). These approaches stress collaborative design and production of technologies, places, and services with a praxis that postulates that designing collaboratively will increase the impact and use value of the designed things and the quality of life for the people using them, in what has been called "design for future use" (Ehn, 2008). It thus becomes relevant

to ask how these approaches position themselves with regard to the challenges posed by platform capitalism, associated with commodification and quantification of collaboration.

In thinking about how an emancipatory codesign agenda might be taken forward in the age of platform capitalism, a possible direction involves placing attention on the commons (Ostrom, 1990; Hess and Ostrom, 2007) as collectively managed and shared resources, or the common (Hardt and Negri, 2009; Dardot and Laval, 2014) as the ensemble of the material and symbolic resources tying together human beings (Teli et al., 2017). Another direction for consideration is the different and often unequal relationship that exists between the subjects involved in co-designing, and the object of the action (Hansson et al., 2018). Power differentials persist, regardless of intentions. But one can embark on structuring social relations as a kind of care (Light and Akama, 2014), mindful of such concerns and working with them, rather than ignoring or “solving” them. With this perspective, highly-networked economic relations could evolve beyond the misleading narratives of the “sharing economy”, promoted by platform capitalism, and engage in structuring a *caring economy*, oriented toward nurturing respectful and ever-transforming collaboration (Mol, Moser and Pols, 2010).

The tension between commodification of collaboration and collaboration as productive in itself, considered as a basis for design and production, offers fertile ground to scholars, practitioners, and activists interested in co-designing practices of care for the common/s. Moreover, this tension does not characterise only platform capitalism and the economy in the age of digital platforms but also co-design as a professional and activist practice. As a situated practice, co-design can deliver forms of caring design based on collaboration. Nevertheless, since collaboration has become one of the main elements in value production and capital accumulation, being collaborative per se is not a sufficient condition. Regarding co-design as a professional and activist practice for delivering a design for a caring economy requires reflection on political questions as both theoretical and methodological issues. The papers included in this special issue deal with this potential contradiction, identifying trajectories for co-design for a caring economy and questioning co-design practices in the light of current platform-related economic practices.

In the next sections, we give an overview of the special issue themes and how the papers address them.

## Codesign Practice

A first key theme of articles in this issue concerns the nature of practice. All the papers to some extent demonstrate co-design practice that directly engages with the tensions of collaboration and commodification identified above. In particular, articles by Bassetti and colleagues (this issue), and Beck and colleagues (this issue) present very different perspectives on the use and experience of co-design in this context. Bassetti and colleagues (this issue) bring social cooperation to the forefront of the design process of ‘Commonfare’, to promote a welfare of the common, a politically engaged project that has involved participation of many people across three European countries as pilot sites. Where the Commonfare project seeks to support participation on an inter-country scale across Europe, Beck and colleagues (this issue) present a study of involvement between their research team and water quality experts across multiple co-design hackathons in a small area of the USA. Beck and colleagues’ (this issue) contribution highlights the role and visibility of resources and stakeholders in their co-design process, in particular the contribution of stakeholders to the research goals, questions and the parameters for collaboration. These

articles speak to the relationships and entanglements between researchers and participants (and how these roles are blurred).

## Care

Another key aspect brought forth by some papers in this issue is the necessary complicating of care as fundamentally dialogic and adaptive tinkering that defies a factual evaluation or judgement of practice (Mol, 2008; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011). With increasing social, economic, and planetary precarity, how might we make sense of shifting assemblages that re-make our individual and collective lifeways (Tsing, 2015)? In such conditions, questions arise particularly around scalability, accountability, and impact of co-designing for and/or with care. [Light and Seravalli's \(this issue\)](#) article, comparing case studies of municipalities, considers how platforms can be involved, trusted and/or relied on in the co-design of shared services and amenities with (and despite) the existing civic structures in Sweden and UK. They argue that care is manifest through collaborative reflection as part of co-learning. [Brown, Choi & Shakespeare-Finch's \(this issue\)](#) contribution interrogates the current approaches to supporting mental wellbeing outside of therapy environments through the lens of care. It problematises the dominant neoliberal discourse evident in these existing endeavours. They emphasise the criticality of involving trusted others and call for placing relatedness and mutuality at the centre of co-designing care encounters towards posttraumatic growth. The two papers reflect on the institutions and structures of care outside traditional contexts, using this to interrogate the politics of both codesign and existing social provision.

## Commoning

Another dimension in the papers relates to the notion of the common and design processes associated with it. As platform capitalism is an expression of appropriation and quantification of collaborations for purposes of profit (Snricek, 2016), a reaction and an emancipation from this is the creation of platforms that can nurture common goods. Cooperation and interaction on platforms and their building, rather than being subject to appropriation should then become a common good benefitting all participants and, where possible, society more widely. Thence, fostering a common becomes both a goal in itself and a principle around which to structure or conduct co-design. In his paper, [Poderi \(this issue\)](#) offers a map of possible orientations for designers to frame their work, research or interventions around the sustainability of platforms as commons. The emphasis of this contribution is also that of learning from successful initiatives, in particular, from the available knowledge on Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) as a paradigmatic case of platform as commons. [Bassetti et al. \(this issue\)](#) give a case study of co-design for developing a digital space that promotes and facilitates the 'Commonfare', a complementary approach to social welfare. They show how the use of co- and participatory design processes is fundamental to achieving a common good that values cooperation and rejects commodification. The papers point to a different ethic for platforms, as well as a different process for their creation.

## The Age of Platform Capitalism

Platforms now exist as both sociotechnical constructions and tools for building larger social and political structures. As noted, platforms can further exacerbate inequalities and uneven access to resources through exploitation and value extraction from digital social interactions.

Contributions to this special issue show the potential for platforms to shape and be part of a diffused caring economy. Indeed, the tension here is on how platforms' design can offer alternatives to platform capitalism in ways that are viable, sustainable and respond to diverse, at times conflicting, needs and desires of individuals and collectives. As [Light and Seravalli \(this issue\)](#), in this issue, show, care can manifest between the state and citizens, and co-design allows people to work together to build caring platforms through co-learning. [Huttunen \(this issue\)](#) offers a study that shows how it is possible to create, via collaborative design, complementary currencies with particularist and inclusive approaches, which contrast with the exploitation of platform capitalism. Currencies indeed are part of and shape the economic structure of society and new technologies allow for their design with social and political goals in mind, as a process of re-thinking money. Huttunen makes clear that complementary currencies offer underutilised opportunities for supporting what she calls a fair and sustainable sharing economy. [Poderi \(this issue\)](#) reflects on design principles for fostering a commons based peer-production, bringing reflections on sustainability and its components. The contribution offers a map for organising co-design in ways that support the structuring of platforms around the maintaining, scaling, replicating, and evolving of sustainability. These papers hint at, but cannot alone tackle, the many aspects that are in need for consideration in offering alternatives to the dominant paradigms of the age.

## Raising Questions

A single themed issue is never going to be the final word on a topic, especially one as all-embracing as this one. Instead, we see it as an opportunity to open up concerns and point to the need to study the complex intersections introduced by the emergence of platform capitalism. Particularly, our motivation has been to engage those affected by these changes in a consideration of how we can work together constructively within these constraints and to challenge the seeming limits imposed by current imaginaries. As these papers show, there are also possibilities to make use of the tools that have come out of the networking of society to change relations away from capitalist individualization and monetization. Many of the papers contain stories of working together to share and to care for other living beings without thought of financial gain. This is an area in need of further urgent work. What else might we ask in addressing this set of confluences? We suggest, as a starting point, to consider:

**What role could co-design play in establishing new and different commons-based forms of economic activities and systems?** And here we might consider theoretical relations between co-design and commons-based peer production as well as empirical cases of co-design in the context of commons-based peer production.

**How does the collaborative character of co-design interrelate with the commodification of digital social relations?** This might lead to a critical analysis of co-design in the context of platform capitalism and a discussion of co-design and commons-based peer production as forms of activism.

**How might co-design be interrogated, redefined, and evaluated as a means to encourage care and social collaboration?** This would be a call for theoretical elaboration of criteria for evaluation of co-design activities promoting social collaboration, with empirical evaluation to accompany it.

Last, we can ask how to frame all these matters in the urgencies of our time, as climate crisis and mass migration, inertia, populism and failures of leadership point to the need for

dramatic changes in how we engage with each other and with the socio-material fabrics of our world.

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