Digital economy and the rise of open cooperativism: the case of the Enspiral Network

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Summary
This article explores how autonomous workers/contributors, involved in peer-to-peer relations, can organise their productive efforts so that they have sustainable livelihoods. The discussion is guided by the concept of 'open cooperativism', which argues for a synergy between the commons-based peer production movement and elements of the cooperative and solidarity economy movements. To this end, we review the case of Enspiral, a network of professionals and companies that empowers and supports social entrepreneurship. We explore its values, operation and governance as well as the chosen strategies for autonomy and sustainability. Finally, some lessons are summarised for the cooperative and union movement, which point to open cooperativism as an integrated vision.

Résumé
Cet article examine comment des travailleurs/contributeurs autonomes, qui sont engagés dans des relations peer-to-peer, peuvent organiser leurs efforts productifs en vue de parvenir à des moyens d'existence durables. L'analyse est inspirée par le concept de « coopérativisme ouvert », qui plaide pour une synergie entre le mouvement de production entre pairs basée sur les communs et des éléments de mouvements de promotion de l'économie coopérative et de solidarité. À cette fin, nous examinons le cas d'Enspiral, un réseau d'entrepreneurs indépendants et d'entreprises, qui favorise et soutient l'entreprenariat social. Nous analysons ses valeurs, son fonctionnement et sa gouvernance, ainsi que les stratégies choisies pour promouvoir l'autonomie et le développement

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durable. Enfin, nous résumons certaines leçons à tirer pour le mouvement coopératif et le mouvement syndical, en situant le coopérativisme ouvert dans le cadre d'une vision intégrée.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel untersucht, wie autonome Arbeitnehmer/Auftragnehmer im Rahmen von Peer-to-Peer-Beziehungen ihren produktiven Output so organisieren können, dass er ihre Existenzgrundlage nachhaltig sichert. Bestimmend für diese Diskussion ist das Konzept des „offenen Kooperativismus", der für eine Synergie der commons-basierten Peer-Produktionsbewegung und von Elementen kooperativ-solidarischer ökonomischer Bewegungen steht. Zu diesem Zweck untersuchen wir den Fall Enspiral, ein Netzwerk von Unternehmen und Freelancern, die sich gegenseitig unterstützen und sich sozial engagieren. Wir befassen uns mit den Werten, der Funktion und der Governance sowie mit den Strategien für Autonomie und Nachhaltigkeit. Schließlich werden einige Erkenntnisse für die Genossenschafts- und Gewerkschaftsbewegung zusammengefasst, mit der Perspektive eines offenen Kooperativismus als integrierte Leitidee.

Introduction[1]

'This is not capitalism, this is something worse' (Wark, 2015). This statement eloquently summarises the criticism of profit-maximising business models within the so-called 'collaborative' or 'sharing' digital economy. Such models have given rise to a new form of neoliberalism which resembles modern feudalist practices. If feudalism was based on the ownership of land by an elite, the minority controlled resource now is networked data. While in classic neoliberalism labour income stagnates, in feudal neoliberalism society is deproletarised, that is, wage labour is increasingly replaced by isolated and in most cases precarious freelancers (Bauwens, 2013; Kostakis and Bauwens, 2014). The salaried status of labourers is being lost.

Prominent 'sharing economy' platforms, like Facebook, Flickr and YouTube, forsake direct production and instead create and maintain platforms that allow people to produce. Users produce content (videos, photos, texts, etc.), but their attention is what creates a marketplace for the owners of the platforms. The content creators often go unrewarded in terms of monetary value, which is mainly realised by the proprietary platforms. The latter allow peer-to-peer (P2P) communication while controlling its potential monetisation through their ownership of the platforms for such communication.

Typically, the front-end of the technological infrastructure is P2P, in that it allows P2P sociality, but the back-end is something entirely different. The design is in the hands of the owners, as are the private data of the users, while the attention of the user-base is marketed through advertising. The financialisation of cooperation still predominates. The back-end of these platforms is generally a

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1   The introduction is based on Kostakis V and Bauwens M (2014) *Network Society and Future Scenarios for a Collaborative Economy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 22–29 and Bauwens M and Kostakis V (2016) Why Platform Co-ops Should Be Open Co-ops. In: Scholz T and Schneider N (eds) *Ours to Hack and to Own: The Rise of Platform Cooperativism, A New Vision for the Future of Work and a Fairer Internet*. New York: OR Books, pp. 163–166.

centralised system where personal data are appropriated. The monetisation of the surplus value produced is exclusionary, keeping the users/producers out of that process. Nearly everything is controlled by the owners of the platforms and there is a clear power discrepancy between owners and users.

The same applies in other proprietary platforms, like, for instance, Airbnb, a platform that helps people to rent out lodging, including private rooms, entire apartments, boats, and other properties, or in the case of Uber, a platform which enables users to submit a trip request which is then routed to users who use their own cars. In other words, they both commodify things, that is, idle resources (rooms or cars) that were not previously up for sale. Close examination of the back-end of Airbnb's or Uber's productive structure reveals that there is neither collaborative production nor governance, and that the control rests with the owners of the platform.

In essence, platform owners, who are dependent on the trust of user communities, exploit the aggregated attention and input of the networks in different ways, even as they enable it. Such platforms are dangerous as trustees of any common value that might be created, due to their speculative nature and the opaque architecture (closed source) of their platforms (Kostakis, 2012). The parasitic nature of this neo-feudal mode becomes evident by the fact that an empty networking platform is arguably a platform of much less value. In addition to this, search engines and social networks limit the diversity of information sources so as to please their advertising customers, potentially minimising the development of critically thinking citizens (Pariser, 2011). Thus, since we are indeed talking about something worse than traditional capitalism, any proposed alternative should be quite ambitious in both scope and methods. This article points to the emergence of an alternative form of socio-economic organisation that builds on the conjunction of two collaborative movements and phenomena.

On the one hand, commons-based peer production is a term coined by Benkler (2006) to describe a new logic of collaboration between networks of people who freely organise around a common goal using shared resources. Prominent cases of commons-based peer production (CBPP), such as the free and open-source software and Wikipedia, inaugurate a new model of value creation, different from both markets and firms. The creative energy of people produces innovative projects, largely without traditional hierarchical organisation or, quite often, financial compensation. Moreover, through global open design communities, digital commons are linked to localised manufacturing technologies, as is the case with the OpenBionics prosthetic hands, or with the Wikihouse open platform for sustainable building and construction (Kostakis et al., 2016a, b).

Nevertheless, the nascent political economy of CBPP (Bauwens, 2005) is not yet able to provide sufficient support for the numerous contributors, in terms of financial compensation and security. Most projects by and large depend on contributions made by volunteers, who can either lose their enthusiasm or do not have enough time to dedicate to the project. Those contributors, whether freelance open-source developers, writers, bloggers or artists, produce significant value through their 'virtual work' (Webster and Randle, 2016: 3). However, they usually cannot rely on this work to make a living and have to find other sources of income, in many cases under conditions of precarity and insecurity (Lerner and Tirole, 2005; Webster and Randle, 2016).

On the other hand, the cooperative form of organisation with its numerous types has been a widely adopted alternative to the dominant capitalist firm since the 19th century. According to Cooperatives Europe (2016), about one in five people in the EU are currently members of cooperatives. Cooperative enterprises in Europe have a total annual turnover of more than €1bn with nearly 180,000 cooperative enterprises providing employment for about 4.5 million people. On a global scale, extensive experience from successful cooperatives, such as the Mondragon Corporation or more recently the Catalan Integral Cooperative, prove the exceptional capacity of

cooperatives in providing employment and security, along with the promotion of a wider recon-struction of the social structures.

Regardless of their significant contribution to the welfare of workers and society, tradi-tional models of cooperativism are facing certain limitations. As they have yet fully to deploy the current Information and Communication Technology (ICT)-driven techno-economic para-digm (Perez, 2002), traditional cooperatives fall rather short in harnessing the dynamics and potentialities from networked collaboration. Besides, cooperatives that work within the capi-talist marketplace tend to gradually adopt competitive mentalities, and even when they do not, they chiefly operate for the benefit of their own members. They usually have to rely on the patent and copyright system to protect their collective ownership and may often self-enclose around their local or national membership. As a result, the global arena is left open to be dominated by large corporations. These characteristics have to be changed, and they can be changed today.

In response to the negative externalities of the corporate 'sharing' economy and the ever-increasing inequalities endured by the global digital labour force, new types of social organisations have surfaced. For instance, platform cooperatives aim to fundamentally redesign the ownership and relational dynamics towards ICT, placing democratic governance, solidarity and social benefit at the epicentre (Scholz, 2016). Inspired by the CBPP and the solidarity economy movements, platform cooperatives create an enabling environment for workers to mutualise resources and make positive contributions to the commons and more widely to society. For an extensive over-view of platform cooperativism see Scholz and Schneider (2016).

However, if cooperativism is to play a transformative role in capitalism, a more radical reconfiguration of social relations to the technological means of production is arguably needed. That is, cooperative structures should be expanded and interconnected so as to aggregate, support and protect the collective knowledge, tools and infrastructures. The final goal is to create a commons-oriented counter-economy, so that CBPP can be emancipated from the confines of the dominant system.

This emerging counter-hegemonic movement seeks to create new types of vehicles through which self-organised workers realise the surplus value themselves. Conaty and Bollier (2014: 2) have called for 'a new sort of synthesis or synergy between the emerging peer production and commons movement on the one hand, and growing, innovative elements of the cooperative and solidarity economy movements on the other'. To a greater degree than traditional cooperatives, open cooperatives are statutorily oriented towards the common good. This could be understood as extending, not replacing, the seventh cooperative principle of concern for community. For instance, open cooperatives internalise negative externalities; adopt multi-stakeholder govern-ance models; contribute to the creation of immaterial and material commons; and are socially and politically organised around global concerns, even if they produce locally (Bauwens and Kostakis, 2014).

Hence, the question we attempt to address is if and how autonomous workers/contributors, involved in CBPP, can organise their productive efforts so that they have sustainable livelihoods. At this point a clarification is necessary concerning our understanding of 'sustainable livelihoods'. The current article mainly concerns the conditions under which the people eager to contribute to CBPP projects could provide themselves with enough resources, so as to sustain their contributions and thereby overcome the issues of insecurity and precarity.

To this end, we review the Enspiral Network, based in New Zealand, which is considered an illustrative case of an emerging ecosystem of 'ethical' entrepreneurial coalitions. We discuss its chosen strategies for autonomy aligned with a strong purpose to serve the community. Enspiral is

thus presented as emblematic of a new transitional post-corporate form, labelled as 'open cooperativism', for autonomous workers/contributors involved in CBPP.

Enspiral Network: a case study

The case of the Enspiral Network is explored in order to provide a primary body of empirical evidence in relation to the concept of open cooperativism. The main method used is that of the exploratory case study (Yin, 2009), using data from various sources. The analysis is focused on the network's core values, its operation and governance, as well as the chosen strategies for autonomy and sustainability. Enspiral is thus approached as an instrumental case (Stake, 1995), in an attempt to deduce from those elements the theoretical premises of open cooperativism.

The case study method has been chosen due to a number of reasons. First of all, following Yin (2009), a case study is suitable for the investigation of distinct, under-researched phenomena where the researcher has limited or no control over the objects of study. Furthermore, there is currently a general lack of academic literature, both on the main concepts concerned, as well as on an adequate number of cases covered. Finally, the selected topic represents a contemporary phenomenon, which can only be approached within its real-life context, whereas it is difficult to differentiate the phenomenon from the context (Yin, 1981).

The data gathered consist mainly of information available online, to a large extent directly from the main parties involved. Since openness is a fundamental principle in the Enspiral culture, there is indeed an abundance of primary data made widely available through its main communication channels. This concerns various online sources, including internal working and communication documents and discussions (white papers, wikis, etc.), shared on online repositories (GitHub, P2P Foundation, Quora, etc.). Furthermore, a significant body of information is provided on the Enspiral website and in various online videos featuring interviews and conversations with the people directly involved in Enspiral, while a number of online media have over time covered various stories about the project. In addition, data have been gathered from field observations during a one-week visit to the base of Enspiral in Wellington, New Zealand, as well as through personal communications of the authors with key persons from Enspiral.

Structure and participation

Enspiral is a network of professionals and companies aiming to empower and support social entrepreneurship. It comprises an ever-growing web of independent, though interlocking entities. We may distinguish three main parts: (a) the Enspiral Foundation, a custodian of collectively owned assets legally representing the network; (b) Enspiral Services, a set of teams of professionals offering a wide range of business support under a unified umbrella; and (c) Enspiral Ventures, a group of independent companies, linked to the network through flexible revenue-share agreements (Davies-Coates, 2015; Krause, 2014).

The Foundation is the 'root node' of the network (Vial, 2012a), providing support and guaranteeing its vision and social mission. The Foundation holds the intellectual property (including the Enspiral brand) and infrastructure of Enspiral and is the entity with which all companies and individuals of the network have a formal relationship. Its legal form is a limited liability company (Ltd) with a charitable constitution, which mandates its non-profit purpose and the reinvestment of all income in its social mission. It is often described as a hub, a platform, an umbrella or a garden encircling all the people and companies of Enspiral, with the mission to support the network as a whole and facilitate collaboration (Enspiral, 2016c). Even though legally a limited liability
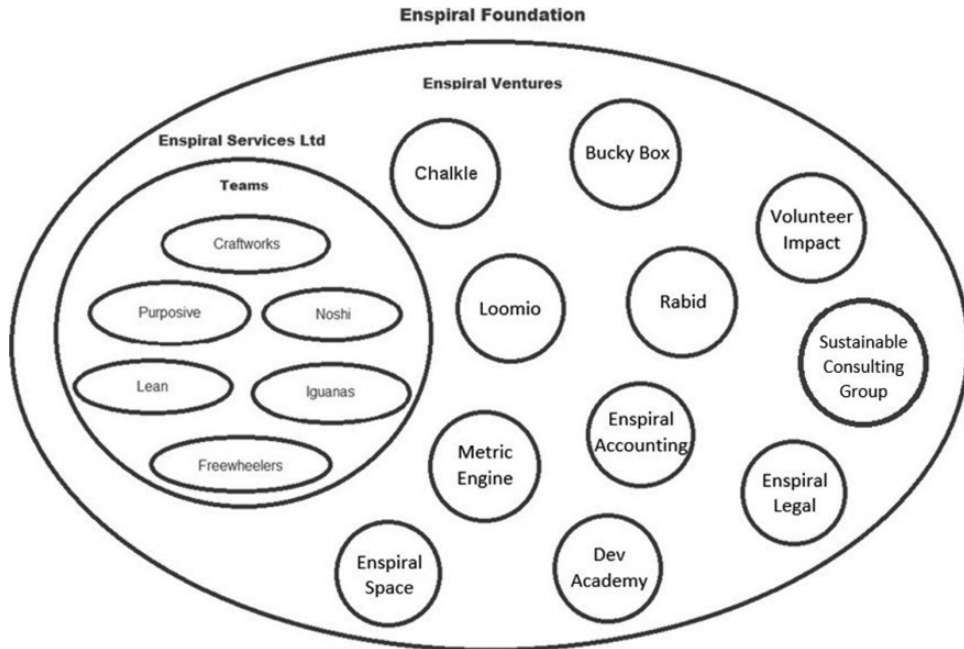
Figure 1. The Enspiral Network: The Enspiral Foundation encompasses the companies of the network, including Enspiral Services Ltd and multiple ventures.
Source: Adapted from What is Enspiral Services? In: GitHub, retrieved 3 July 2016, from https://github.com/enspiral/services/wiki/What-is-Enspiral-Services?

company,[2] on a practical level the Foundation functions as a worker-owned cooperative. Every member owns one share, which cannot be transferred, while no additional shares are allowed to be issued to the same person and no dividends are distributed. Moreover, all assets held by the Foundation are managed collectively by the members.

Enspiral Services is the first company launched by Enspiral and currently the largest in terms of turnover. The company, also a limited liability company and independent from the Foundation, houses multiple teams of professionals from various disciplines (Figure 1). Each one of the teams functions as any other individual venture of the network and is able to create and present its own brand to clients (Enspiral, 2015a). The various teams provide a wide range of services, including custom development of websites and applications as well as project management and creative services. The teams share a common legal structure, which serves the purpose of increasing agility and collaboration and reducing overheads and transaction costs (Enspiral, 2015b).

Enspiral Ventures is a group of companies producing innovative digital-based solutions that create value for the society (Enspiral, 2016a). The various ventures are independent in their operations and maintain a voluntary relationship with the Foundation. They benefit from the

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2   The limited liability company has been preferred to a formal worker-owned cooperative for reasons that are merely of practicality. The initial members had been more accustomed to the registration and legal procedures of limited liability companies, while the legal framework for cooperative businesses was not seen to offer many advantages compared to a limited liability company with an appropriately formulated constitution.

connections, skills and expertise of the network in order to develop new solutions for social challenges. In turn, they contribute with time and skills as shared resources to the Enspiral Foundation, as well as with monetary contributions, usually in the form of flexible revenue shares (Enspiral, 2015b, 2015c, 2016c). Those contributions compose the Foundation's budget, which is collectively managed through collaborative funding processes, in which the ventures can participate and direct what their contributions support. Some indicative examples of Enspiral Ventures are Loomio, a cooperative offering an online platform for participatory decision-making; Enspiral Academy, an educational company specialised in intensive training courses on web developing for emerging industries; and Rabid, a tech company offering expert services on web development.

We should clarify that Enspiral Services is in fact an Enspiral venture, like all the others. We give it special prominence due to the fact that it constitutes the first Enspiral venture, which for a long time provided the blueprints for the early experimentations. At this point, with an increasing number of other successful ventures taking off, the prominence of Enspiral Services is diminishing; nevertheless it still retains its historical significance.

Like Enspiral Services Ltd, there are additional types of ventures that have a somewhat special relation to the network. Some ventures, for instance 'Enspiral Accounting', carry the Enspiral brand in their name and use the Enspiral logo as part of their visual identity. For this, some additional rules apply in relation to staffing and distribution of revenue. Also, some entities are referred to as 'proto-ventures', which are either early-stage initiatives with no definite structure and business model or external established companies exploring the possibility to join Enspiral. Finally, a number of companies are wholly owned by the Foundation (e.g. Lifehack) and therefore constitute assets collectively held by the network (Enspiral, 2016c). Figure 1 illustrates a simplified representation of the three integral parts of Enspiral and their relations to each other.

Above all, Enspiral stands for a group of people and the high-trust relationships among them. People engage in the Enspiral ecosystem in three ways: as *members* of the Foundation; as *contributors* and as *friends* (Vial, 2012a). The Foundation members act as the caretakers and guardians of the Enspiral culture and social mission and collectively own the Foundation as shareholders. The Foundation members are expected to participate in collective decision-making, as well as in various events and retreats when possible, while members' meetings are held on a bi-monthly basis.

Any member can invite new persons to become contributors, who then also participate in the decision-making and communication channels through the shared platform of the collective. Their contribution consists in time and skills within the Enspiral internal gift economy. Also, an annual fee is requested to help cover the core costs of the Foundation, whereas the possibility of exemptions is considered in cases where this poses barriers to entering the collective. Contributors often work for various Enspiral ventures and they can also propose projects for collaborative funding. Even though they have the freedom to focus their contributions on one single project, overall contributors are expected to engage with the wider range of activities of Enspiral. Lastly, the friends of Enspiral are people who maintain an unofficial relationship with Enspiral, but also participate in the collective decision-making and information channels.

History and evolution

In order to provide an outline of how Enspiral operates, we first have to present briefly the short history of Enspiral. We shall see how the core values of the Enspiral culture have been formed and have determined the network's core operations.

Enspiral was initiated in 2008 by Joshua Vial, who was then a freelance computer programmer and had some ideas that would help people do more 'meaningful work', in terms of fulfilling a social purpose. As a result, a group was formed along with other freelancers, who shared the same interest. To this end, they collaborated to provide themselves with the relevant resources and flexibility to do so (Krause, 2014). The idea was that if each one of them worked part-time as a freelancer and contributed a part of his or her income to the group, the aggregated resources would allow them to commit the rest of their time to socially oriented projects.

Soon, a larger and more diverse group of professionals, sharing the same vision, started to be interested. The initial success of the experiment evolved into a tentative organisation and business model, where self-organised individuals would distribute money, information, knowledge and control in a networked environment. This emerging organisation was driven by the core values of its initial members regarding business for social purpose, excellence and empowerment. This was the original company of Enspiral, which has evolved into Enspiral Services Ltd. From the beginning, the vision has been oriented towards an organisation managed in a distributed and collaborative manner, without the need for central control and hierarchies.

By 2011, the network started launching other companies and the Enspiral Foundation was established. As the contributors and the companies supported grew in numbers, collaboration and internal communication processes improved. To this contributed a series of web-based tools, starting with Loomio, the network's participatory decision-making platform, which organically evolved into one of the early Enspiral ventures. Initially a core group of people, called the 'support crew', were responsible for the management of the network.

However, since 2013, decision-making procedures and financial management have been gradually decentralised. In 2014 the network started to develop a common vision to set out a broader strategy. At the time of writing (2016), the Foundation has over 40 members and is supported by over 250 contributors and friends on a global level (Enspiral, 2016a; NZ Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2016).

Governance and operation

As mentioned earlier, the Foundation is the formal legal entity representing Enspiral. It is steered by a board of directors as mandated by its constitution. The directors hold the legal responsibility to ensure that the Foundation is solvent and can meet its obligations (Vial, 2012b; NZ Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2016). However, the ultimate power in the Enspiral ecosystem is held by the members of the Foundation. They have control over the money and shares and decide which people and companies can join Enspiral, while the role of the board is minimised to mainly custodian duties. Furthermore, the members are the ones that hire or fire the directors and the permanent staff of the Foundation, while they can also rewrite the constitution of the Foundation itself (Enspiral, 2016b).

Regardless of the formal power structures, the Enspiral culture is successfully maintaining a balance between autonomy and collaboration (Enspiral, 2014). The Foundation is run as a collection of autonomous units and, in practice, the members rarely have to intervene or make decisions on this level (Enspiral, 2016b). People in Enspiral work on a P2P fashion even though their formal relations and contracts are in fact very conventional.

The distribution of power is achieved through an appropriate mix of process and technology, rather than carefully designed legal arrangements, while a strong emphasis is placed on culture, team building and communication (Enspiral, 2014). In fact, the legal structures chosen for each venture vary significantly and a wide range of different legal forms are encountered, including

worker-owned cooperatives (e.g. Loomio) and limited liability companies, either for-profit (e.g. Enspiral Accounting, Rabid) or non-profit (e.g. ActionStation). For their funding, several financial instruments have been used featuring carefully selected investment solutions, such as redeemable preference shares (Schneider, 2016; Vial, 2016), which ensure that the control remains in the hands of the workers.

On the operational level, collaboration takes place online, through digital tools, and offline, in a shared co-working space as well as on regular retreats (Enspiral, 2015c). Alanna Krause (2016), a core member of Enspiral and current director of the Foundation, explains how this works for the people of Enspiral, providing an example from Enspiral Services Ltd that depicts any other Enspiral company. On the individual level, people are doing their job as usual according to their occupation and expertise – as computer programmers, legal consultants or other experts. They are contracted by clients to do a job, an invoice is issued by Enspiral Services Ltd and the payments are made to a normal business bank account. In turn, this account is virtualised at the back-end to multiple small accounts on the Enspiral platform ('my.enspiral'). A proportion (by default 20 per cent) is then automatically transferred to a common pool, which has the form of a collaborative funds account, and the rest of the amount to the personal account of the people who have done the job. They are then free to use this money independently, within or without Enspiral. The withheld proportion is partially (50 per cent) used to fund the Foundation's fixed costs and reserves, while the rest remains at the contributor's discretion to allocate to the support of new projects or ventures through a collaborative funding process.

Everyone at Enspiral, regardless of whether they have contributed funds or not, can propose a project that requests funding from the collective funds. For this they create a standardised proposal, called 'bucket', using a simplified online form available at the network's intranet (Krause, 2014). On a regular basis (e.g. monthly), those who have contributed funds decide collaboratively in which 'bucket' they would like to invest their contributions. This process was initially coordinated through a series of shared spread sheets and forms, but is now facilitated by another open-source application called 'Cobudget', also developed as an Enspiral solution.

New projects stem from real needs and identified challenges. A range of professionals from various sectors come together and form teams to work around interesting ideas. Novel solutions are developed in the form of Minimum Viable Products, with relative agility and on a case-by-case basis (Krause, 2014). An experimental process of trial and error is followed to test, iterate and improve the solutions. Once an appropriate process is identified, the solution is standardised and open-sourced, so that others can make use of it. The idea is that whatever is 'light', i.e. of cognitive or digital form, is being openly shared for everyone to benefit from. Moreover, open-sourcing encourages the engagement of the wider community, by providing interactive feedback and further improvements to the solutions developed.

Perhaps the best example to demonstrate this process is the development of Loomio, one of the essential tools of Enspiral for collaborative decision-making. Loomio was initiated as an idea by a team of activists from the local Occupy movement in Wellington, New Zealand. They joined forces with Enspiral to help self-organised communities make decisions without centralised coordination (Schneider, 2016). A prototype was developed in 2012 and it was immediately taken up by an increasing number of early-adopters.

At the same time, a social enterprise was formed within the Enspiral Network and two crowdfunding campaigns contributed to its first stages, in order to ensure the necessary resources. Loomio began as an internal project to solve in-house decision-making challenges, but soon it was obvious that a wider range of users could benefit, including businesses, government agencies, community groups and political movements. Ever since it has facilitated

thousands of decisions on a global scale, while Enspiral continues to use it for its core decision-making processes.

Innovation in Enspiral concerns not only new or improved products, but also the various processes involved. For instance, an innovative process has been developed for the creation of Cobudget, as, at the time, there were not enough resources available to cover the desired requirements. For this reason, an internal process in the form of equity in earnings (later named 'Fairy Gold') was enacted in order to finance the team that had been assigned the work. Moreover, Cobudget is integrated to support other budgeting operations as well, such as reporting on the project's finances, income and expenditure flows as well as project life-cycle assessment using visualised content (Krause, 2014). This could further enhance the overall effectiveness of the projects, by reducing management and coordination costs and allowing the persons involved to focus on the product scope.

According to information provided by Alanna Krause (email communication on 29 July 2016), Enspiral currently provides employment for around 100 people, under various work relations. Every Enspiral venture has people working and earning a living through it. For instance, Loomio, which Krause has co-founded, employs 12 persons; 25 people are employed at Enspiral Academy; five at Action Station; three accountants are full-time employees at Enspiral Accounting; and 20 people work at Rabid.

The employment relations vary, from salaried employees to freelancers contracted through Enspiral Services, according to each one's preference and needs. A large number of people are also not directly employed by Enspiral companies, but are involved in various projects and receive occasional payments. The relevant rates also vary, from lower-end junior levels up to very highly paid professionals, depending on the person and the type of the job. Furthermore, some people are co-owners or they are earning equity on start-ups and receive payments based on the respective market rates.

Based on the core values of Enspiral, no one receives lower rates than the living wage and the rates are at least in line with the national labour legislation, which already enforces a relatively high minimum wage.[3] After all, New Zealand is traditionally considered one of the most prominent good examples in labour and social justice issues, as is also suggested by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2016). In principle, volunteer work is kept at a minimum in Enspiral, while interns, who are occasionally employed in the context of educational partnerships or organised programmes, also receive income, when possible, even when this is not formally required. Moreover, about NZ$100,000 are dedicated annually through collaborative funding to support the efforts of people interested in building up the network itself through new projects or ventures.

Towards forms of open cooperativism

Enspiral is arguably disrupting every organisational process and transforming them from the old top-down hierarchical form to a collaborative one (Krause, 2014). It allows people to work for a social purpose and simultaneously make sustainable, ethical livings. This way, on the one hand, the lines between activism and work are blurred and people are able to concentrate their efforts for the benefit of society. They no longer rely on a conventional 'day-time job' to earn their living and contribute to the community on a voluntary basis during their discretional time. Civil society can

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3   The minimum wage rates in New Zealand have been further raised from 1 April 2016, while several changes in the law have also strengthened the enforcement of employment standards. See more at: http://www.business.govt.nz/laws-and-regulations/employment-regulations/minimum-pay

thus be emancipated from the restrained role of a 'third sector' and become productive in its own right (Bauwens and Kostakis, 2015). On the other hand, people are enabled to work on things in which they are personally engaged and motivated to a degree that managerial gimmicks and corporate incentive mechanisms could hardly ever achieve.

Furthermore, a number of lessons can be drawn with regard to the cooperative and the union movement, which are briefly outlined in the following sections.

Lessons for the cooperative movement

Dynamic structure and open design

Enspiral has been perceived by its core members by and large as an ongoing experiment. As such, a certain pattern can be identified on every level, where the structural arrangements are just good enough to get things going. Regardless of the official legal arrangements adopted, the real focus has been placed on communication and meaningful collaboration. A dynamic structure is composed by a web of interoperable entities, which simultaneously manage to remain viable, both on their own and as integral parts of a broader ecosystem. Beer (1981) with the Viable System Model has provided an analytical framework for designing such flexible and adaptable organisations that can provide inspiration and useful lessons with regard to open cooperatives (Davies-Coates, 2015).

At the same time, by promoting an open-source mind-set, Enspiral initiates a collaborative process that enables and supports open governance. Open-source design in Enspiral is related to much more than simply software codes. It effectively cedes power to the community, which is engaged collectively to build common tools and infrastructures for social change. It is thus enhancing those organisational patterns that could fulfil the necessary conditions for the 'circulation of the commons': 'connecting eco-social, labour and networked commons to reinforce and enable one another' (De Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, 2010: 45).

Culture over technology

Amidst a widespread techno-optimism, a network initiated by software engineers refreshingly shows that genuine decentralised governance is not to be sought through trustless and immutable technologies or infallibly designed tools. While the development and early adoption of customised innovative digital tools may have been within its core operations, the role of technology in this process is not the principal determinant. It is rather the interpersonal and community relations, as well as a shared commitment to common matters that is driving the Enspiral business operations and enabling cooperative forms of governance.

In recent debates on the potential of emerging P2P technologies, such as the blockchain (P2P Foundation, 2016), harsh criticism has been placed on the impression that we might as well 'programme away' with the real issues related to power, autonomy and collective ownership. By contrast, the development of Enspiral has been based on a safety net of high-trust personal relations and a strong shared sense of purpose.

Leadership as a function, engagement as control

Enspiral is substantially an entrepreneurial space, dedicated to the creation of opportunities and necessary connections (Enspiral, 2014). It does not directly offer any jobs but is rather providing a fertile ground for entrepreneurship. It thus gives people agency to create new things, while generating social and environmental benefit. This is encoded in the core values of Enspiral with the notion of 'Leadership', in relation to which it is clarified that 'everyone should lead some of the time, no one should lead all of the time and leadership should be balanced with active followership'

(Enspiral, 2016b: 3). In this sense, leadership in Enspiral is not imposed by hierarchy but is rather a process or function. Hyman (2007) argues on this notion of leadership as a prerequisite for direct democracy. Coupled with engagement and collaboration it can effectively unleash the benefits that stem from the distribution of power and diversity of viewpoints.

Lessons for the union movement

Balancing autonomy and security

The Enspiral culture rests upon a dynamic balance of autonomy and collaboration, which is translated into a common strategic vision. This could provide valuable lessons for the discussions on the strategic capacity in trade unions (Hyman, 2007), so as to harmonise better with the rapid changes in the world of work. A vibrant part of the economy is moving towards a new workplace comprised of networks of independent agents, where autonomy is becoming increasingly important. Certain solutions are necessary to proactively enable people to keep their autonomy, but simultaneously provide the protection and security that unionised workers traditionally used to enjoy. Following Jarley (2005) and the concept of 'social-capital unionism', Enspiral points to a tentative proposition that builds upon collaboration, mutual support and common purpose to support a golden ratio between autonomy and security.

Reinventing economic democracy: individual agency and collective control

Like traditional cooperatives, Enspiral promotes democratisation of the workplace, through participatory governance and collective ownership. In addition, people in Enspiral further enhance their personal sense of commitment by engaging in collaborative funding, thus developing a collective strategic vision. Every new idea supported by Enspiral is backed by a group of motivated people who believe in its purpose for society. They invest money, time and skills to make it work. Therefore, they create a collective pool of vital resources and the necessary tools to realise a better future for themselves, for Enspiral and for the world.

Hyman (2016) points out that economic and workplace democratisation should be viewed as a multi-level process beginning from the bottom-up. The cooperative movement has hitherto been successful in building local resilience by creating niches of counter-power. Enspiral provides people with agency and resources to expand collectively and extend this process. This particular element points to a new vision for the union movement, one that goes beyond 'contentious politics' (Tarrow, 1998). It rather builds on the democratisation of finance, open knowledge and transparency to grant the power and the duty for change directly to the people. The aggregated individual commitments in material and immaterial resources may create a collective investment fund, with a social purpose, under democratic control to reinvent economic democratisation (Hyman, 2016). This could constitute a real-life utopia and a benchmark to proactively pursue a persuasive vision of a better society and economy.

Limitations

However, some limitations have to be taken into account. Although Enspiral has demonstrated constant improvement throughout its evolution, its overall sustainability in the long term remains to be proven. It represents a niche practice that owes its very success, to a large extent, to a process of constant experimentation at the margins of the current socio-economic environment, supported by highly motivated enthusiasts with a common vision. The legal and socio-institutional

arrangements that would eventually support and sustain this governance model are yet to be identified and applied.

Also, the available information on the case of Enspiral consists mainly of representations provided by either the main persons involved or closely associated ones. Therefore, the views presented could contain a certain degree of subjective bias, over-emphasising the overall success of the case.

Moreover, there is currently no academic literature on the concept of open cooperativism. The present article constitutes a first attempt to apply some academic rigour to the topic, while bringing it to scholarly attention. An adequate number of different cases illustrating various perspectives of the concept are necessary to provide some initial hypotheses or the development of a more concrete and critical theory.

Conclusions

This article asked one question: how can autonomous workers/contributors, involved in CBPP, organise their productive efforts so that they manage to have sustainable livelihoods. We return to this question here to address the potential of open cooperativism.

Through this brief presentation of the Enspiral Network, a story of experimentation and innovative problem solving has unfolded. A group of people started exploring new ways to work together, aiming to shift their productive efforts towards achieving a social impact, or, as Enspiral puts it, to work on 'stuff that matters' (Enspiral, 2015c). They collectively invested their shared resources, including money, time and skills, to create commons. Using democratic decision-making processes, more people have been empowered to contribute, whilst enhancing their autonomy through collaboration.

On the one hand, as a CBPP system, Enspiral has succeeded in unlocking the virtuous effects of the core P2P dynamics. An ever-growing number of highly motivated people have been mobilised to share knowledge, skills and ideas and contribute their unique creative energy to a common goal. They used open design to co-create common tools and infrastructures to pursue social change. On the other hand, as a cooperative, it has provided a sustainable livelihood for an increasing number of people, allowing them to self-organise and realise the surplus value of their work. Finally, through participatory governance, Enspiral actively reinvests the aggregated value for the benefit of social reproduction.

We can thus observe how Enspiral achieves that sort of synthesis of the dynamics of CBPP, with the traditional values of, as well as a new strategic vision for, cooperative organisation. This vision of a self-expanding virtuous spiral of ethical entrepreneurial coalitions illustrates the context and potential of open cooperativism.

Funding

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