tripleC 13(1): 11-34, 2015
http://www.triple-c.at

The Commodification of the Couch: A Dialectical Analysis of Hospitality Exchange Platforms

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Abstract: Online hospitality exchange (HospEx) platforms—essentially facilitating the connection between a traveller and a local resident—embody many of the cyber-utopian promises intrinsic to the Web as it started out 25 years ago. This paper investigates upon the antagonistic struggle between the commons and processes of commodification in the light of critical theory of social media for this niche social networking space and introduces two relevant examples. The biggest of those platforms, Couchsurfing.org, changed its organizational orientation from a non-profit, commons-based project towards a for-profit company in 2011—an instance of commodification. An analysis of both quantitative and qualitative community data shows that the transformation consequently concerns members on multiple levels. The structural change of ownership results in a loss of transparency and privacy, an alteration of the platform's integrity, a sacrifice of the "uniqueness" of the community, and a differing relationship between the user and the platform. To discuss an alternative, community-based governance approach, the paper further explores the specifics of a platform guided by the logic of the commons, the non-commercial and non-profit HospEx platform BeWelcome.org.

Keywords: couchsurfing, bewelcome, commons, commodification, critical theory of social media

Acknowledgement: A warm *tack* to Jakob Svensson, Uppsala Universitet, and James Losey, Stockholm Universitet, as well as a warm thank you to the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

A great paradox of the media in the 21st century is that, although more people than ever have the means to express themselves freely, corporate and state control of the media is favored through huge power asymmetries. Specifically the Internet and so-called social media are predominantly controlled by corporations, leaving little material support for alternative Internet projects. All in all, such a mix "seems to represent an existential challenge to critical media [...] and the freedoms of expression, speech, information and opinion".[1]

The ecosystem of social media comprises of a few big players and many small ones. Often, non-profit and specialized platforms are pushed out of public view by the dominant ones–in respect to cultural diversity, it is important to "point to the enormous reservoir of mostly young enthusiastic users who work on a balanced ecosystem and a diversified online sociality" (Van Dijck 2013, 176) and acknowledge the specific niches cultivated by such players. This paper strives to add to the literature by examining the case of a niche social networking phenomenon, online hospitality exchange (HospEx) platforms, in the light of critical theory and political economy of communications. A HospEx platform functions as a facilitator between a traveller looking for accommodation or company in a foreign town, and a local resident offering such things. Such an exchange of hospitality is guided by non-monetary principles. Although such services have been subject to numerous research endeavors, questions evolving around of ownership, power, and commodification have often been left out.

The task of this paper is to study the relation of the commons and commodification processes on HospEx platforms. The commons are, based on the work of political economist Elinor Ostrom, to be understood as a resource shared by a group of people that is subject to social dilemmas (Ostrom 1990), whereas commodification, from a critical political economy

[1] The Vienna 2014 International Conference "Freedom of Information Under Pressure". Control—Crisis—Culture' composed a "Declaration on Freedom of Information and Expression", more on http://freedom-of-information.info, accessed November 12th, 2014.

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perspective, refers to the "process of transforming use values into exchange values" (Mosco 1996, 141). Using the illustrating case study of HospEx platforms, exemplifying both commodification processes and the expansion of the digital commons, the paper strives to connect theoretical issues around power structures, political struggles, participatory democracy, and the strengthening of the commons with empirical data and investigates whether the current model of informational capitalism potentially endangers societally valuable projects by commodifying the ownership structures. The resulting striving for profits (and not necessarily user satisfaction) may have threatening and negative consequences for all the users of platforms and society at large. We find that the digital media are "able to support both the expansion and the commodification of the commons" (Allmer 2013, 17). Depending on the structural orientation of a platform, web users can be either participating citizens or passive consumers.

The paper proceeds as follows: After setting the stage by posing the relevant questions, critical theory of social media will be introduced as the guiding framework. Subsequently, the main concepts of the commons and processes of commodification will be explained before proceeding to apply all of the above to the empirical case study of hospitality exchange networks. The reader will be walked through the history, existing research, and the commodification of Couchsurfing before being introduced to a non-profit alternative, BeWelcome.

"The law locks up the man or woman /
Who steals the goose from off the common /
And geese will still a common lack /
Till they go and steal it back."
– Anonymous[2]

1. Theoretical Discussion

The aim or this paper is to shed light on the dialectic between two concepts in the context of digital media: the commons and commodification. Couchsurfing, with more than seven million members the by-far biggest online hospitality exchange network, was built on large extends by dedicated volunteer time, working under the promise that the site would become an official non-profit organization; that is, a digital commons: shared by all, owned by no one. However, a "recurrent problem for any successful digital commons is the temptation to privatize and monetize the value generated by it" (Bollier 2011b, online). In 2011, the owners of the platform accepted $22.6 million in venture capital. What changed through this is not the free service enjoyed by a community of travellers, but the fact that the platform now has obligations to create profits for the investors, wanting to see a return on their investment. From this development, several question arise: Are commodification processes, on Couchsurfing in particular and the Internet in general, problematic? Would non-commercial, commons-based alternatives be a better example? Does it matter who owns and governs a platform for the regular user?

Murdock (2013, 167) identifies the area around "gifting, sharing, and caring" as an urgent research challenge. Activities contributing to the commons, collaborative projects that produce material freely accessible to all are grounded in such practices, and we need to "investigate the conditions that encourage and sustain this commitment, as well as the forces that deflect, dissipate, or subvert it". Following suit, the guiding question will be: "*What role do commodification processes on the one hand and the commons on the other play on hospitality exchange networks?*" The paper will further investigate an alternative, non-profit, commons-based hospitality exchange platform, BeWelcome, to find out how alternative social media platforms work and can best be sustained. Going beyond criticism, those recommendations should be seen as a contribution towards commons-based social media.

[2] Verse four of a poem that, apart from being anonymous, seems to be extremely hard to date. Boyle (2008) made an attempt and found that it probably originated in the enclosure controversies of the 18th century; the first reference he was able to discover is from 1821.

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An exploration of all technical, economical, social, and cultural perspectives is needed to fully grasp how recent changes in our media landscape have "profoundly affected—if not driven—our experience of sociality" (Van Dijck 2013, 5). Acknowledging the fact that the Internet is a technology omnipresent and neatly enmeshed in increasingly more fabrics of (Western) everyday life, McChesney (2013, 3) claims that we are now, possibly for the first time in history, able to "make sense of the Internet experience and highlight the cutting-edge issues it poses for society", but also to "better understand the decisions that society can make about what type of Internet we will have and, accordingly, what type of humans we will be and will not be in future generations".

1.1. A Critical Theory of Social Media

This section briefly outlines the theoretical framework necessary to critically engage with media in general and social media in particular, consisting of (1) political economy of communications and (2) critical theory. Political economy deals with and analyses the structural features of capitalism, such as the causes of crises. A critical political economy of communication (PEC) is concerned with the power relations governing the production, distribution and use of information, de-centring the media by primarily analysing the workings of capitalism, thereby being committed to moral philosophy and praxis (Mosco 2009, 2–5). Such an approach chooses organisational structures as the main focus and identifies the "concrete social actors who are power holders", examining their "global networking and their local workings" (Castells 2009, 430). What such a political economy approach leaves out, however, are questions of sociality: What is "*social*" about social media? How do platforms shape and penetrate different forms of sociality? In other words, "institutional power structures *alone* do not yield insights into how platforms evolve in tandem with their users and content" (Van Dijck 2013, 28).

To fill this gap, critical theory helps to explain causes, conditions, and potentials and provides a "self-understanding [...] of the age concerning its struggle and wishes" (Marx 1997, 315). We are further reminded that "everything that exists in society is created by humans in social relationships and that social relationships can be changed" (Fuchs 2014a, 17), implying a critique of (dominant) ideology as an important cornerstone. Following the Frankfurt School tradition means to see critical theory as a critique of domination and exploitation, as ethical and concerned with human happiness, as advancing struggles and political practice and as making use of dialectical reasoning. The approach sets big emphasis on ideology critique where ideology "encompasses strategies and attempts to make human subjects instrumental in the reproduction of domination and exploitation" (ibid., 22). Contrasting instrumental and critical ways of seeing, it was noted that administrative research on communication systems tends to examine "*what is*", and critical research rather focuses on the "*why*", incorporating political, social, and economic consequences, as well as being "likely to question the implications, for all members of society, of the power relations that emerge with scientific and technological innovation" (Mansell 2012, 35).

Both critical theories, the Frankfurt school and PEC, should be understood as being complementary. A methodological combination of the two approaches will be the guiding theoretical framework, described by Fuchs (2014a, 24) as a "critical theory of social media", meaning that it "outlines the predominant forms of capital accumulation of social media, the class relations and modes of surplus value exploitation underlying theses capital accumulation models, and analyzes the ideologies underlying capitalist social media and the potentials and limits of alternative social media and struggles for a just society that enables commons-based digital media".

1.2. Commons & Commodification

More than fifty years ago, Briggs (1960) criticised that "massive market interests have come to dominate an area of life which, until recently, was dominated by individuals themselves" and arguably, the situation did not change for the better. Sandel (2012) documents the spread of commercialism and argues that we have drifted from *having* a market economy to

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being a market society in a variety of spheres, ranging from education to health to environmental protection. Looking at the digital world, the rapid growth of social media platforms since the turn of the millennium was accompanied by the incorporation of sites by existing and new information companies and, "virtually overnight, replaced dot.communism by dot.commercialism" (Van Dijck 2013, 10). Murdock (2013, 163) argues that the worldwide embrace of marketization and the global generalisation of consumer culture is "arguably the most concerted threat to the possibility of using digital technologies to construct a new cultural commons".[3] Van Dijck (2013, 4) observes:

Companies often appeared less interested in communities of users than in their data–a necessary by-product of making connections and staying connected online. Connectivity quickly evolved into a valuable resource as engineers found ways to code information into algorithms that helped brand a particular form of online sociality and make it profitable in online markets—serving a global market of social networking and user-generated content.

Commodification—seen as the process of "making things exchangeable on markets either actually and/or discursively by framing things as if they were exchangeable" (Sevignani 2013, 733)—is a helpful construct for naming such tendencies. Hyde (2010, 58) argues that developments of commodification have turned the basis of the previous settlement upside down. Where once "everything belonged to the commons", except for material removed "for a short term, and for good reasons", now the point of departure is "the assumption of exclusive ownership"; Initiatives[4] constituting to "a new enclosure movement" (Murdock 2013, 164). However, as long as mass media have been around, the precision of the commodification process have been confounded, as people share books or leave a newspaper in a café. With digital technologies, sharing became ever easier and widespread, and Mosco calls it "no surprise that music file sharing has become a way to avoid the high price of a music CD" (2005, 157). The "commodification of the commons through private media is not unchallenged" (Sandoval 2014, 159). And, as Hardt and Negri (2009, 153) point out, commercial media do also depend on the commons besides commodifying and appropriating them.

Sevignani (2013) notes that thoughts of developing non-commercial Internet services are almost absent looking at official political agendas, and processes of rethinking privacy face powerful resistance. However, the combination of technical, legislative, and self-regulatory measures can be an effective instrument for improving public policy and to resist commodification processes, making "alternative, non-commercial Internet services more powerful and popular" (ibid., 738). Further, "possessive individualism on the Internet would decrease" (ibid.), and users would be helped to "reassert control over their community resources" (Bollier 2007, 38)—a strengthening of the idea of the digital commons. Sandoval analyses that as of today, "media companies have been quite successful in capturing the social usage of media that produces media commons and transforming it into a means for generating private profits" (2014, 159). To overcome this struggle, resistance in the form of a political movement is needed, taking up the contradiction for "the expansion of the social logic from productive forces to relations of production" (ibid.), only then will there be success in establishing a commons-based media system that is "truly social". The following lines will illustrate the above by using the case study of HospEx platforms.

[3] At the heard of it is the danger that most people's online lives in Western economies are increasingly orchestrated by a small number of mainly American corporations, led by Google, Facebook, Apple, and Amazon: "Rather than providing a public park, open to a variety of uses and serendipitous encounters, the Web is becoming a series of walled gardens tailored to already-established interests and preferences" (Murdock 2013, 164).

[4] The economic base for most commercially organised Web activity relies on gathering and selling user data and thus, "the Internet has become the vehicle for increasing intensified and personalised forms of promotional address" (Murdock 2013, 164). This can either be done through online sales or increasingly, through utilising unpaid labour of 'prosumers' into the development of new commodities, sold for the benefit of a selected few (cf. Fuchs 2014b). So, the audience commodity as identified by Smythe (1981), i.e. audience attention sold to advertisers, is now additionally milked for the productivity of unpaid labour.

2. The Commodification of the Couch

Seen in its historical context, the concept of "*hospitality*" harks back to Greek and Roman or Enlightenment antecedents where it entailed a "sacred obligation not just to accommodate the guest, but to protect the stranger who arrived at the door" (Lynch et al. 2011, 4). Some thousand years later, research on the concept of hospitality is said to "bear on some of the most pressing social, cultural and political questions of our time" (ibid., 3). Hospitality exchange, then, refers to centrally organised networks of individuals who trade accommodation without monetary exchange; the aim is to connect travellers with local residents in the cities they are visiting. While such concepts find their roots in letter- and catalogue-based services after the Second World War, networks increasingly moved towards using web sites where they have been growing exponentially since the early 2000s. According to Bialski (2012), such an online-based connection between thousands of users is not unlike the search for a physical home, but in a virtual space; a habit she refers to as "emotional tourism". This is how the usage of HospEx networks differs from mainstream package tours—meeting locals usually involves a lot of emotions. Furthermore, engaging in that style of traveling is to a certain extent not fully predictable and thus more likely to feature surprises (Bialski 2007). A central element of HospEx platforms besides their non-monetary character is thus intercultural exchange—there is no standardised code of conduct of how such encounters will happen, rather meeting with strangers builds on the values of openness under the premise of authenticity and mutual respect (Steinacher 2012). Usually, one finds two distinct types of users on such platforms: A '*host*', offering a place to stay, and a "*surfer*" or "*guest*", searching exactly that. A typical user usually embodies both types and moves fluidly between those roles (Bell 2012)—a host while at home, a surfer while traveling. The purpose of a HospEx platform is to connect the two, and over the years, many different such platforms emerged—Kühner and Pagès (2010) describe 36 different networks. The following lines will introduce some of the more popular hospitality exchange platforms and their key characteristics.

2.1. Couchsurfing's Transition to a For-Profit Company

Couchsurfing.org (CS) was launched in 2003[5] as a hospitality exchange network offering free accommodation for global travellers, usually for a few nights at a time. Couchsurfing provides a platform to connect people who share passion for traveling. After signing up free of charge, new members are asked to complete a detailed personal profile: "As with other social networking sites, members' profiles are at the heart of the Couchsurfing website" (Molz 2012c, 217). Apart from biographical information like age, gender, and education, a CS profile also offers the possibility to inform others about one's past travel experiences, one's interests and philosophy, the "*Types of People I enjoy*", or "*One Amazing Thing I've Seen or Done".* Additionally, there are possibilities of uploading photos and describing one's—the couch being a "metaphor for the hospitality the host is willing to extend" (ibid., 218), but which can be any kind of sleeping surface, often literally a couch.

CS users can either engage in "*surfing*", meaning to contact members at a certain destination with the request to stay overnight at that person's home, or "*hosting*", meaning to accommodate such surfers. Also, it is common that users meet up for "a coffee" to socialise and meet local people while traveling. In any case, the focus is on physically meeting people chosen through the means of an online platform, as is CS's mission statement, to "create inspiring experiences".[6] Thus, the platform is all about sharing experiences, and offering sleeping surfaces, for reasons strictly disconnected from monetary profit.

[5] The founding story has it that Casey Fenton, an American student, got the idea for the project when he found himself with a flight to Iceland, but no place to stay; to find lodging, he e-mailed thousands of students at the University of Reykjavik asking for shelter for the weekend and accordingly, got dozens of positive replies. The idea to come up with an online service focusing on the connection between hosts and guests wasn't a far throw from that experience.

[6] http://www.Couchsurfing.org/about, accessed January 18th, 2014. This 'mission statement' is however relatively new and some see it as an effort to "rebrand" the site away from overnight stays, at least for statistical reasons.

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Initially, the CS platform was established in April 2003 as a non-profit corporation registered in the US state of New Hampshire. In 2006, the project almost collapsed and was already declared dead[7] due to a database crash, but community efforts brought the site online again. In 2007, CS registered in New Hampshire as a charitable organization and for the following years, the founders had pleaded[8] with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to grant their website official "501(c)3 status"[9] by arguing that the CS facilitates cultural exchange. However, CS was already negotiating with future investor Benchmark in 2010, where "founder" Dan Hoffer working at Benchmark, and by February 2011 it became clear that the status would not be approved, and upon receiving a determination letter from the IRS,[10] CS was given 30 days to file protest; CS's management did not reply. After the deadline had passed, the non-profit was closed down.

In May 2011, "*Better World Through Travel, Inc.*" was incorporated in Delaware, USA, under the ownership of Casey Fenton and Dan Hoffer, with the purpose of receiving the assets of "*CouchSurfing International, Inc*.", the former non-profit organization. The rhetoric accompanying the transformation was that Couchsurfing was now a "B Corporation",[11] or "B corp". There are no legal requirements connected to that label, companies passing the evaluation theoretically process aim for business goals other than raw profit, such as transparency, sustainability, or environment-friendliness; in general, "to redefine success in business".[12] The Couchsurfing leadership used the "B corp" rhetoric after the incorporation as a means to justify that such a change is "actually the best thing that could have happened", because "economic crisis made survival difficult" and "the non-profit structure [. . .] can really limit our ability to innovate". Leadership claimed that for "various legal reasons they had no choice but to convert to a for-profit structure" (Feldman 2012, 6). Further, they argued that being a non-profit "isn't Couchsurfing's core identity. Our identity is our vision and mission: We get people together".[13] In a letter to the community, Fenton declared that, "Couchsurfing is not for sale, and money is not our goal".[14] However, the assets of Couchsurfing were indeed sold, and Fenton soon found himself on the Board of Directors of a new corporation that had millions of dollars in investments. A "*Certified B Corporation*" has no legal status and is merely a label granted out by another organization,[15] paid for by the business asking to receive the label.[16]

Counting "inspiring experiences" allows CS to count all meet-ups as if they were overnight stays, inflating the numbers.

[7] See Fenton's letter to the community, http://techcrunch.com/2006/06/29/couchsurfing-deletes-itself-shuts-down, accessed November 13th, 2014.

[8] Some say that CS insiders "refused" to meet IRS rules about charitable organisations for 5 years, or that they "delayed finishing their application proposal" for 5 years to benefit from tax advantages and exploit volunteer labor until the clock ran out. "Most informed people would doubt they pursued charitable status with any vigor. While they may have been willing to accept a charitable status that guaranteed the insiders special status and financial power, the IRS explains in their refusal letter that that was not acceptable."
(Source: personal conversation with a member who has had extensive oral dialogues with Fenton and Espinoza).

[9] Effectively a tax-exempt status for being a charitable non-profit organization, see http://www.irs.gov/Charities-&-Non-Profits/Charitable-Organizations/Exemption-Requirements-Section-501(c)(3)-Organizations, accessed October 18th, 2014.

[10] The conclusion of the letter states: "Because a substantial purpose of your organization is to confer economic benefits to your members, you are operated to serve a private, rather than, a public interest. [..] Moreover, the private interests served by your activities outweigh the public interests. Therefore, you are not operated primarily for the common good of the community. You are not a social welfare organization as described in section 501(c)(4) of the Code or any other section of the Code."
Excerpt from: #19 2011 TNT 123-19 IRS DENIES EXEMPTION APPLICATION OF SOCIAL NETWORKING WEBSITE OPERATOR. (Section 170 -- Charitable Deduction) (LTR 201125045) (Release Date: MARCH 30, 2011)

[11] http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2011/aug/26/Couchsurfing-investment-budget-travel, accessed October 18th, 2014.

[12] http://www.bcorporation.net/what-are-b-corps, accessed January 18th, 2014.

[13] As explained by founder Casey Fenton in an official video about the transformation: See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCEh5wt0cU0, accessed March 26th, 2014

[14] See http://blog.couchsurfing.com/a-letter-from-co-founder-casey-fenton/, accessed March 26th, 2014

[15] See http://www.bcorporation.net/community/couchsurfing-international for Couchsurfing's official certification. Accessed October 7th, 2014.

[16] It can be added that Couchsurfing received the minimal possible score to pass the evaluation.

Furthermore, a “*B Corporation*” is *not* to be confused with a “*Benefit Corporation*”,[17] an actual legal corporate form in the US designed for for-profit entities that want to privilege society and the environment in addition to profit in their decision making process.

To summarise an arguably confusing discussion, Couchsurfing was approved by another company to be labelled a ‘certified B corporation’, deriving no legal obligations; it does not have the corporate form of a ‘benefit corporation’. From a legal point of view, Couchsurfing has been registered as a C corporation in the US State of Delaware since May 2011 (first under the name of “*Better World Through Travel, Inc.*”, which after the need for secrecy ended was renamed “*Couchsurfing International, Inc.”),* obliged under US jurisprudence to maximise stockholder profit.

Up until 2011, CS managed to be funded by voluntary user-donations; a user could decide to get “verified”, meaning that by a donation of $25 via credit card, s/he would receive a post card with a verification code.[18] That two-step process would then ensure that first, the person actually is the person s/he claims to be (via credit card), and that the address s/he provided existed (via post card). After successful verification, the user does get no additional feature-benefits, but an icon signalling the verification status to other members. That, in turn, is likely to lead to higher trust amongst other users and thus to a higher success rate while surfing or hosting. Through this process primarily, but also through direct donations and merchandize sales, Couchsurfing received $6 million in revenue, a “significant sum, considering that the organization—with no fixed office and few paid staff—had very little overhead” (Feldman 2012, 6).

The changes in Couchsurfing’s business model to a for-profit corporation attracted investments of $7.6 million in August 2011[19] and another $15 million in August 2012,[20] leaving the company with $22.6 million in venture capital.[21] This came as a “huge shock to the community”, by then exceeding two million members, as the platform had always been a not-for-profit endeavour with the expectation of becoming a “bonafide non-profit organization” (Marvelous 2013, online). Many of the dedicated members volunteering for the platform did not believe the narrative leadership communicated about the changes, but rather felt the transformation was an “outright theft of community-made, and therefore community-owned, resources” (Feldman 2012, 6). As of the time of writing, there is no official communication concerning how Couchsurfing plans to create revenue,[22] the site does not show advertisements or feature a premium account model.

2.2. Existing Couchsurfing Research

Couchsurfing.org can be classified as a social media platform (Gillespie 2010) in the sense that it provides its users with a web-based space for mutual exchange and communication. This space, in turn, is basis for the mass of users developing a sense of belonging to a community (Rheingold 2000), which is expressed in a mutual engagement in alternative ways of traveling, sharing, and “open-mindedness”, if you will. Unlike Facebook, CS is not about taking offline relations online, that is, connecting with pre-existing friends, but rather

[17] See http://craigeverett.com/benefit-corporations.html for a list of current benefit corporations.
[18] This verification process still continues, and was still called a “donation” for a considerable time after the privatization. The request to “Get verified and get more from Couchsurfing” is now presented to be the norm rather than optional and some people never discover how to sign up for free. If not yet verified, a “verify your account”-banner appears continuously beneath the navigation bar, “pushing” people to pay for verification.
[19] See http://techcrunch.com/2011/08/24/Couchsurfing-raises-7-6-m-will-users-cry-sell-out/. The investors are Benchmark, Omidyar Network, and Point Nine Capital. Accessed October 23rd, 2014.
[20] See http://techcrunch.com/2012/08/22/Couchsurfing-raises-15-million-series-b-from-general-catalyst-partners-others/. The investors are General Catalyst Partners, Menlo Ventures, Benchmark Capital and Omidyar Network. Accessed October 23rd, 2014.
[21] cf. http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20120822005334/en, accessed January 18th, 2014.
[22] There are, however, reasons to speculate that Couchsurfing will set an emphasis on leveraging its homogenous member-base to connect with services such “Transportation, Travel Insurance, Gear etc.” moving into the direction to, “work like the Facebook Platform where they will take a commission from 3rd-party sales.” See http://workingholidayvisaguide.com/couchsurfing-masterplan/, accessed November 8th, 2014.

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about contacting strangers online for then meeting face-to-face on the road (Rosen, Lafontaine, and Hendrickson 2011).

Research on online hospitality networks and their implications are "only now being analysed in depth by researchers interested in overlapping questions of trust, intimacy, friendship, identity, technology, mobility and power" (Molz 2012c, 219). Recent research on Couchsurfing.org seems to focus on those concepts, more specifically on "hospitality sharing" and "cross-cultural interactions" (Chen 2012), "network hospitality" (Molz 2012c), "mobile solidarity constructed around flows" (Molz 2012a), "intimate tourism and emotional relations between strangers" (Bialski 2007), "motivation" and how motivation influences user representation (Liu 2012), the notion of "trust" (Tan 2010) as well as "exploring elements such as sense of belonging and connectedness" (Rosen, Lafontaine, and Hendrickson 2011). Goshal (2012, 67) has identified authenticity and sociability as the two major sociological concerns regarding Couchsurfing and also notes that the platform's change into a for-profit corporation does "undermine its core promise that it will never charge users for hosting or staying." Steinacher (2012) included a question on Couchsurfing's transition from a non-profit to for-profit orientation in her empirical section and refers to two expert interviews regarding the issue, but the main focus of the study is on issues of trust. Farooq (2012, 47) discusses the platform's transition, but falls into the trap of believing Couchsurfing's PR rhetoric by concluding that the "B corporation may be an early incarnation of this potential economic paradigm shift", "legalizing the subordination of profit to enhance social and environmental goals." Feldman (2012) explicitly deals with the dynamics and mechanisms of user resistance and protest resulting from Couchsurfing's transition to a for-profit company, highlighting the conflictual relationship between democracy, oppression, and capitalism. Apart from the latter exceptions, researchers have generally neglected to critically engage with issues of ownership, digital labour, and commodification.

It can be argued that without the data provided by its users, the platform would be rather pointless. It thrives on the fact that there actually are people who are willing to share a bit of their living space with random strangers, for a limited amount of time, and share that particular interest within an online community. For that reason, notoriously detailed user profiles are created to paint (theoretically, at least) an as accurate and authentic online identity as possible. In terms of CS as an organization, as is the case with many "*Web 2.0*" platforms, lines of who is a producer and who is a user become increasingly blurred. Notions of "participatory culture" (Deuze 2006) or "prod-usage" (Bruns, Highfield, and Lind 2012; Bruns 2008) have addressed this issue but also "mythologized, rather than analysed, these changes" (Olsson 2013, 13). Olsson further questions that the former 'users' have gained power from the former "producers", as suggested by the concepts above. It can be argued that, although enjoying participatory opportunities provided by the platform, the users also work for the platform without payment by contributing all content; thus, the users are subject to exploitation (Fuchs 2014b). In the case of a non-profit platform built and maintained by users on a voluntarily basis, this seems perfectly fine, but in transforming the platform into a privately-owned for-profit business, complicated relationships arise, as only few people potentially gain from such a transition, and the bulk of the volunteers will walk away without any financial reward.

Generally speaking, hospitality exchange platforms "hark back to the early principles of non-commercial, democratic, peer-to-peer communication, and community" (Molz 2012b, 125). Due to its nature and core idea of non-monetary hospitality and culture exchange, Couchsurfing has never been about money; indeed, it could be claimed that most if its community does participate in the project for the sake of rejecting profit models and commercial tourism services. Doing so, the Couchsurfing platform helps to reassert "the 'true' intentions of the Internet: to create a global village of strangers meeting strangers" (ibid.); such a non-commercial ethos echoes some of the rhetoric surrounding bulletin boards & multi-user domains in the early 1990s and in that sense, Couchsurfing appears to fulfil the original utopian promise of the Internet to unite strangers across geographical and cultural divides and to form a global community" (ibid.).

However, the change of ownership of the Couchsurfing platform in 2011 made many dedicated volunteers alarmed, wary, or frustrated; the processes of commodification that hap-

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pened on CS seem to be totally at odds to the original spirit and ethic behind the project (Feldman 2012). At the same time, the core idea of hospitality exchange remains valued and important, however not necessarily bound to one particular platform. An alternative, commons-based platform will be discussed in the next paragraph: BeWelcome.org.

2.3. A Non-profit HospEx Platform: BeWelcome

The project BeWelcome.org grew out of the dissatisfaction with the non-transparent management and private ownership of the first online hospitality exchange platform Hospitality Club (HC), founded in the year 2000. Engaged volunteers set up the basis for a legally registered non-profit organization composed of the volunteers that built the project, named "HCvol", with the aim to encompass the HC platform within it. However, things turned out differently as imagined and HC's founder rejected the proposal. Thereafter, the organization was renamed to BeVolunteer, and a team of dedicated members started in January 2007 to invest their energy in building a new platform, named BeWelcome. The organization is registered in Rennes, France, and BeWelcome is the only hospitality exchange platform being an officially registered non-profit.[23]

	Hospitality Club	*Couchsurfing*	*BeWelcome*
Ownership	Privately Owned	C Corporation	Non-Profit
Online Platform	Closed Source	Closed Source	Open Source
Membership	250k–650k	9 Million	70.000
Leadership	Not democratic	Not democratic	Democratic
Website	Static Website	Dynamic Website	Member-Defined
Organization	Top-Down	Top-Down	Grassroots
Terms of Use	Basic ToU	Restrictive ToU	User-friendly ToU

Table 1: Three Hospitality Exchange Platforms in Comparison[24]

Besides its non-commercial direction, the BeWelcome is run on an open-source code and has high commitments to democratic decision-making. Membership is free of charge and the project is entirely volunteer-run and financed through donations only, where the accounts are published once a year to guarantee transparency.[25] BeWelcome defines its mission as to "provide a platform for hospitality and culture exchange and to manage the volunteers involved",[26] where the privacy and safety of the members are the main concerns. Table 1 provides a concluding comparison between the platforms discussed above.

3. Analysis

To back the theoretical debate with empirical data, three research methods informed the analysis of this paper: (1) a quantitative survey, (2) a qualitative survey, and (3) in-depth interviews. For (1), a link to the questionnaire was placed in various discussion forums of the

[23] For a more detailed history, see http://www.bevolunteer.org/about-bevolunteer/history/, accessed April 12th, 2014.
[24] Stats as of January 2015. Adapted from Frank Van Den Block's presentation at the '*Act Like a Local*' conference, 30th of November, 2013, Brussels.
[25] Available at http://www.bevolunteer.org/reports/financial-reports/, accessed April 12th, 2014.
[26] See http://www.bewelcome.org/wiki/mission_and_objectives, accessed April 16th, 2014.

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Couchsurfing web site[27] to get randomised and non-biased responses. To add a qualitative understanding, the objective of (2) was to dive more in-depth and gather data to comprehend the consequences of commodification processes on Couchsurfing.[28] For (3), five qualitative, in-depth expert interviews were conducted. The interviews aimed to inform the question of how alternative, commons-based social media platforms can best be sustained, and which challenges such models face. Thus, all interviewees are engaged with volunteer activities at the non-profit organization BeVolunteer, responsible for running the HospEx platform BeWelcome. The following chapters will introduce the results in that order.

3.1. Commons vs. Commodification on HospEx Platforms

For the niche social networking space of hospitality exchange platforms, both a platform subscribed to the logic of the commons as well as a platform subject to processes of commodification, thereby incorporating the commons into the logic of capital, were identified. The latter was empirically observed in the case of Couchsurfing, the biggest of all HospEx platforms, where the majority of the research subjects (59% of N=198) showed awareness of the platform's transition to a for-profit corporation; as expected, long-term members show a greater awareness (76% of N=105) than newer members (39% of N=93). As a follow-up question, this development is generally judged to be "*negative or worrisome"* by 65% of those (N=127), the majorities of both newer (58% of N=43) and long-term (69% of N=84) members. This contrasts to 5% (N=127) considering the development as a '*positive*' one. This is to say that commodification processes manifest as a threat to the stability and integrity of the community.

Inquiring upon the reasons for this negative trend, the qualitative data suggests that the role of commodification processes on Couchsurfing affect the user and her/his relationship to the platform on four general levels:

- On the *individual level*, especially if s/he contributed volunteer time and labour to the project under the promise of becoming an official non-profit organization (i.e., contributing work for the community, not for a company). A change of ownership means an exploitation of all those volunteers and changes the relationship from being a participant in a community towards additionally being a consumer of a service. This is mirrored in changes of the terms of use and the privacy policy, leaving members of the site with less autonomy and control that before;
- On the *community level*,[29] where members feel a general change of direction, by many experienced as a decrease in the quality of requests they receive and a general change of values from genuine generosity towards free accommodation and also dating aspects. The community moves into the direction of larger social networking sites and thereby loses its uniqueness on the way;
- On the *platform level*, as Couchsurfing moved from being a non-profit, community-run project to being a for-profit company. The change of ownership meant a massive increase in expenses,[30] while at the same time, the quality of the platform is perceived as becoming worse by the majority of members (54% of N=105), despite millions of invest-

[27] The discussion forums can be found at www.Couchsurfing.org/groups/. The invitation to answer the questions of the survey was places in a diverse set of interest groups, including: "Language Exchange!", "Friends", "Quit your job and travel!!!!!", "Queer CouchSurfers", "Alternative Ways of Living & Consuming", "Vegans & Vegetarians", "Hitchhikers", "We are upset that CS has become a for-profit corporation", and "What am I doing with my life?".

[28] In contrast to the first survey, the second survey was distributed to selected individuals via a personal message over the platform. The subjects were selected based on the time they have been members of the platform ('member since' on their profile) and their activeness ('profile views' & 'last login' on their profile).

[29] On this level, it has to be noted that the changes cannot be claimed to be solely consequences of a change of ownership. The growth and development of the platform started way before 2011 and many of those characteristics might also have occurred if the platform had become an official non-profit. At the same time, however, many members *did* explicitly mention the transformation as the prime cause to motivate their comments.

[30] According to Marvelous (2013, online), Couchsurfing "now burns through $800.000 of venture capital *per month",* but still hasn't figured out how to monetise 'hospitality exchange,' reporting no revenue. Ten years into the boom, it is still "difficult to actually make money on social media" (Garnham and Fuchs 2014, 119).

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ment capital. Members consequently complained about the non-transparent way Couchsurfing communicates financial issues, and are left only guessing how potential future revenue sources will look like;[31]
- On the *ideological level*, as the very idea of hospitality exchange *per se* is being altered when channelled through a commercial platform, from a mutual act of kindness to a service, adding (potential) monetary value for a company to the plain use value for a community.

The role of the commons is to constitute a counter-power against processes of commodification on the same levels outlined above. In the case of hospitality exchange networks, this counter-power is manifested in the commons-based alternative project BeWelcome, affecting its members:
- On the *individual level*, by maintaining a spirit of '*do-ocracy*' and a '*maker-culture*', encouraging users to be active participants instead of passive consumers. Being an officially registered non-profit organization means that any work done is truly done for the community as a whole, not for the profit of a few. User-friendly terms of use and privacy policy preserve the autonomy of the user and protect his or her data;
- On the *community level*, by prioritizing organic and healthy growth over a rapid increase in users and thereby preserving the core values the project is built upon. A grassroots democracy approach gives every member the (potential) possibility to have his or her voice heard;
- On the *platform level*, by maintaining the site through donations[32] only, thereby staying completely independent from financial interests. Again, being officially non-profit in effect means that the community owns the platform and decides upon the statues and therefore, possible threats of commodification are minimized;[33]
- On the *ideological level*, by preserving the intrinsic values of genuine cultural exchange and non-monetary lodging above anything else, protected by the levels above.

Even though people are aware that alternative platforms exist, the majority of those nevertheless keeps using Couchsurfing although not necessarily agreeing with the way it is managed. This finding is in line with van Dijck (2013, 158), who observes that "active users well aware of the profit-driven motives of platforms still decide to use them." Reasons include high switching costs, meaning that members accumulated references and a network of friends by investing a huge deal of personal time, money, and energy over the years.[34] Those assets, manifested in a virtual user profile, cannot be transferred to another site, leading to the fact that many users feel '*locked in*.'[35] The role of the commons, driven by values of co-creation

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[31] The author of those lines also tried to enquire about possible monetization strategies by contacting the Couchsurfing media team as well as Casey Fenton, but unfortunately, am still waiting for a response from the CSHQ (CouchSurfing HeadQuarters). Apart from the lack of official information, there are speculations on how a possible revenue stream could look like, possibly coming from sales of a 'freemium' account model or charges for a mobile app. See, e.g., http://mechanicalbrain.wordpress.com/2013/10/11/more-bad-news-at-couchsurfing/, accessed May 12th, 2014.

[32] BeWelcome is currently running on 3420€ ($4740), *per year*. Compared to the (speculative) sum of Couchsurfing's expenses above, BeWelcome (albeit only one tenth of the size) uses 0,05% of the monthly monetary resources.

[33] BeWelcome is owned by a non-profit organization registered in France, BeVolunteer. Official members of the organization decide on legal issues and the statutes can be modified only by an extraordinary General Assembly. At least half of the voting members of BeVolunteer (31 members as of January 2014) have to be present or represented and 3/4 of them would have to agree to the changes of the statutes.

[34] Also, the size and the resulting activity level of the site is an important factor, Couchsurfing has around seven million profiles versus 60.000 on BeWelcome.

[35] For the case of hospitality exchange platforms, the 'lock-in' effect can be perceived as somewhat weaker than, for example, for users desiring to switch from Facebook to Diaspora*. This is due to the nature of hospitality exchange, where the guiding principle is to connect with people not yet known, contrasted to maintaining a network of (mostly) already established relationships in the case of the latter example. On the other hand, as one's reputation is built mainly by the accumulation of references from other members, it is nevertheless a big barrier for many members to leave those behind and start with an empty profile somewhere else. However generally, the role of commodification processes is to strengthen lock-in effects for any given platform, as monetary profits are calcu-

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and community ownership, is to oppose locking-in effects by dominant platforms by means of providing user-friendly terms of use and privacy policies, watched over and adapted to the needs of the community instead of to the needs of capital.

As argued by Fuchs (2009, 85), critical theory aims to point at the societal antagonisms that shape the relationship between Internet and society and furthermore identifies not yet realised development potentials. In a similar vein, it can be concluded that the role of the commons is to be in a constant antagonistic struggle with the role of commodification. For the example of HospEx platforms, this means that the degradation of one commons (Couchsurfing) spurs the growth of another (BeWelcome). As the developments on Couchsurfing led to a spike of new members on BeWelcome, they did not show a correspondingly high increase in people willing to volunteer for the project. This is to say that most users, after all, primarily seek a functioning service to use, and only a small percentage is in the end willing to actively contribute. The role of the digital commons, therefore, is for the moment to hold a niche position by upholding opportunities for participation in an online space that became primarily dominated by corporate interests, following a general consumerist logic; a regular user often becomes "happily dazzled by the Spectacle" (Hardt and Negri 2000), but at the same time seems to be "gladly logging on and buying into it" (Kreps 2011, 699). In the realm of hospitality exchange networks, the role of commodification processes was to transform Couchsurfing, a once flourishing digital commons reaching an impressive size and global scale,[36] into a profit-oriented company with obligations to venture capital investors, naturally seeking an return on their investment and therefore, having the logic of capital triumph over the logic of the commons. The theory outlined that the temptation to privatise and monetise the value generated by a successful digital commons (i.e., its commodification) is however a recurrent problem for the community building it. Although Couchsurfing's management tried to calm the waves by soothing its member base using the rhetoric of the "socially responsible B Corporation", thereby acting as an "Internet service with a populist, happy-face marketing veneer" (Bollier 2014a, online), the result is a platform initially subscribed to the moral economies of gifts and public goods being subsumed under the moral economy of the commodity (Murdock 2013). This, in turn, has a direct impact on the community, nurturing a shift in the platform's cultural ethics and values as the focus is now on quantity, not quality; Couchsurfing now feels 'more mainstream' to many members, precisely what was once treasured not to be the case. The role of the commons is to provide an opportunity for proactive participation outside the dominating moral economics of commodities, a refuge for users striving to engage with projects subscribed to values of public goods and gifts instead. Spaces where the community itself is in full control and in ownership.

An important issue of struggle to achieve commons-based social media will therefore be to overcome the prevailing form of passiveness and foster an understanding that the collectiveness of contributions from all members of a community does count, and can indeed lead to outcomes that sometimes far exceed the expectations.[37] The role of a digital commons, therefore, is to preserve users as *members of a community* instead of as *consumers of a service*. In a digital commons, users are motivated to actively engage in the way the platform evolves, therefore maximising use value, whereas for a corporate platform, users are bound to contribute in narrow channels engineered to maximise the exchange value of the platform. The research showed that users are well conscious of their labour, willingly contributing to a commons, but not to a company. On a more general level, the role of the commons is to challenge the very *norms* by which online sociality is enacted upon users by corporate plat-

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lated per user in the established business models for social media platforms. For the ecosystem of social media as a whole, then, a strengthening of this effect will lead to a narrowing of choices, leaving the users with restrictive terms of use, and ever-more power to the owners of biggest authentication platforms, as of now Google and Facebook—as noted by Andersson (2010), an 'ease of use' is commonly chosen over values of openness on the Web.

[36] Seven million member profiles translating to (roughly) two million active users, being situated in more than 100.000 cities worldwide.

[37] See, for example, the discussion of Firer-Blaess and Fuchs (2014) on Wikipedia's modes of production.

forms.[38] This is an important field of struggle for the power of norms, as Foucault (1980) observed, far outweigh the power of law and order.

3.2. Consequences of Couchsurfing's Commodification

The empirical data shows that consequences of commodification—the process bound to make "things exchangeable on markets either actually and/or discursively by framing things as if they were exchangeable" (Sevignani 2013, 733)—on Couchsurfing have been clearly visible from the perspective of the user. All in all, a majority of 57% of the subjects said they were aware of Couchsurfing's incorporation in 2011, for longer-term members the percentage climbs to 73%. Of those, a general 76% judge the development as "*generally negative/worrisome*", and 2% as "*generally positive*". The tradition of critical research motivates to inquire on the *"why"*, and to incorporate social, political, and economic consequences by questioning "the implications, for all members of society, of power relations" (Mansell 2012, 35). In that respect, the qualitative data suggests a variety of answers.

As a direct consequence of the commodification process on Couchsurfing, many users complain about the decline in the "*quality*"[39] of the community since the acceptance of venture capital in 2011. Many long-term members complain that they feel this development was profoundly at odds with the fundamental values that the community started out with and that the platform would lose its original spirit. Recognising that the value of a given platform in today's social media environment is often articulated "as value per customer" and that "large, active, and demographically interesting user base is usually a platform's most precious asset" (Van Dijck 2013, 36), a motivation to maximise the user base is the most logical step for a for-profit social network. The question of Couchsurfing's ownership is of utmost importance here since users are correspondingly transformed from being participants (of a non-profit) into a commodity (of a corporation). This is problematic because the core values of the idea—a genuine, non-monetary way of cultural exchange and sharing accommodation—are directly opposed by an attempt to commodify hospitality exchange: A "*community-fication*" leads to a perceived degradation of those values, as the voices of the established community suggests that many new members seem to join primarily for the financial benefits of free accommodation. New members, however, seem to share the same motivations for participation with the long-term members and show the same patterns of activeness for using the platform.

The qualitative data further suggests that as a consequence of commodification, the uniqueness of the community is being sacrificed for the sake of quantity and is moving into the direction of bigger social networking sites and becoming more "mainstream". This is underlined by the possibility of using the Couchsurfing services by utilising the "*Connect With Facebook*" feature, presented as the primary option to "get started" on Couchsurfing, creating an even bigger influx in members.[40] On another note, this further increases the 'locked-in' position of members—as pointed out in the previous section—leading to a "chain of interlocking platforms": A "mutually beneficial arrangement because it boosts traffic for all parties in-

[38] Van Dijck (2013, 19) lists the example of how the norms of "sharing" private information and accepting targeted ads changed considerably between 2004 and 2014: By a gradual implementation of new features users got habituated to, the "norms for privacy and accepting monetisation were stretched accordingly", leading to the fact that what is the norm today was rendered unacceptable just ten years ago.

[39] With "*quality",* users generally refer to the fact that couch requests seem to generally get shallower and less personal, that the number of random copy/paste requests dramatically increased, with this the number of requests not interested in a genuine hospitality exchange but rather a free accommodation increased, and that they observe more "dating"-related communication on the site, attracting a "18–25 party crowd". A huge increase in possible hosts in large cities also made it, paradoxically, much harder to find a match, since a few popular hosts end up getting "spammed" with multiple requests per day, whereas others being ranked lower in the search results receive non at all. In May 2014, a search for hosts in Paris reveals "66,026 interesting people"—more than the entire, global community of BeWelcome gathered in one city.

[40] The "Connect with Facebook" login option allows every new user to simply connect his or her Facebook account with the Couchsurfing platform without separately signing up for a new account. Members complaining about the weak performance of the Couchsurfing web site noted that often, events and discussions are *organized on* Facebook instead.

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volved–while the platform's owners also want to lure and lock users into their chain of platforms" (Van Dijck 2013, 156)—going a short way from providing a "frictionless online experience" to making experiences manipulable and saleable, putting evermore power to decide over the norms of an entire generation's online sociality into the hands of a few mega-corporations.

Some survey participants go even as far as declaring Couchsurfing "dead as a community of travellers", and many see their mutual kindness abused: Acts of hospitality now not only add value to people's lives, but additionally contribute to the monetary value of the platform itself and with it, to potential profits of the site owners. Especially those members that were actively involved in volunteering for the platform expressed strong feelings of betrayal that their work and time was sold without their consent, for this changes their relationship to the platform from being participants to being commodities. This also manifested in a changing privacy policy and terms of user for the site; as a consequence of the commodification process, the user is now clearly worse off than before.[41] To state an example, the 2012 changes of Couchsurfing's terms of use state the following:

> If you post Member Content to our Services, you hereby grant us a perpetual, worldwide, irrevocable, non-exclusive, royalty-free and fully sublicensable license to use, reproduce, display, perform, adapt, modify, create derivative works from, distribute, have distributed and promote such Member Content in any form, in all media now known or hereinafter created.[42]

Further, Couchsurfing reserves "the right to make changes or modifications to these Terms, or any policy or guideline of our Services, at any time and in our sole discretion".[43] This did not only upset vary users, but also led to an official complaint from Germany's Federal Commissioner for Data Protection and Freedom of Information.[44] Because the company is registered in the US, European users have to deal with the terms of use although they do not even comply with EU law, or look for an alternative.

Many members were not against the transformation into a for-profit corporation *per se*, arguing that a boost of financial resources and consequently an improvement in the services the platform is providing is generally welcomed. However, when asked whether such an improvement has yet taken place, only 17% of the members feel that the experienced quality of the web site improved, contrasted to 37% who felt that it actually worsened (a higher 58% of the long-term members).

Therefore, the research shows that, for the case of Couchsurfing, the consequences of commodification processes are primarily responsible for a perceived decline of the community's quality and for most, do not bring identifiable benefits. Taken to a wider societal ground, the development investigated upon can be seen as yet another example of an increasing

[41] For BeWelcome's ToU, see: http://www.bewelcome.org/terms;
For Couchsurfing's ToU, see: https://www.couchsurfing.org/n/terms;
The project '*Terms of Service; Didn't read*' (http://tosdr.org) aims to translate legal text from the ToU into plain English. For Couchsurfing, some of the findings include (as of May 2014):
- *Terms may be changed any time at their discretion, without notice to the user;*
- Couchsurfing may close your account at their sole discretion;
- The copyright license on user data is broader than necessary;
- Couchsurfing keeps the license on your content, even after you close your account;
- Couchsurfing may retain your data after deactivation for legitimate business purposes.

[42] See 4.3 'Member Content License' on https://www.couchsurfing.org/n/terms, accessed May 12th, 2014.

[43] See second paragraph, https://www.couchsurfing.org/n/terms, accessed May 12th, 2014.

[44] As the complaint named "CouchSurfing without data protection" states: "The changes are unacceptable. Under German and European data protection law, they would be inadmissible. The new Terms of Use force the users to waive any control over their data if they want to continue to use the service. [...] Under the new Terms of Use, by uploading contents such as news, photos and personal data, the members grant the company CouchSurfing a full and irrevocable license to a quasi-unlimited use of those contents. Moreover, in the Privacy Policy, the company reserves the right to share data with third parties and to change the Terms of Use and the Privacy Policy at any time, without having to provide specific notice to the members about any changes." See http://www.bfdi.bund.de/EN/PublicRelations/PressReleases/2012/18_CouchSurfing.html for the full text. Accessed May 12th, 2014.

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"commodification of everything", contributing to the development of *having* a market economy towards *being* a market society (Sandel 2012). However, commodification processes have always been confounded, both in the physical or the digital world (Mosco 2005). For the case study at hand, another direct consequence of the commodification process happening on Couchsurfing was an urge to actively work up against what is happening. Feldman (2012, 14) describes three forms of user resistance[45] on Couchsurfing and concludes that those forms of resistance from within were in themselves limited for they were "launched through the very structure whose legitimacy is under attack", and did not succeed in changing the direction the platform took. As another option altogether, many members thus transferred their volunteering energy to an alternative project.

To put the empirical findings in line with already existing theory, the new "Web 2.0" sphere was seen as to incorporate the potential to "promote community over commerce, or, at the very least afford their peaceful coexistence" (Van Dijck 2013, 14). However, as observed by Smythe (1981) for TV audiences and expended upon by Fuchs (2012) to fit for the Internet, user attention is another resource that can be monetised and given an exchange value. Facing an advancing digitalisation of content, new possibilities to specifically target users according to their specific 'needs' become available (Mosco 2005). As a result of the prevailing business model on social media where sites sell aggregated user data to third parties for the sake of delivering targeted advertisements to the user, an increasing commodification of privacy online takes place (Sevignani 2013). Companies are primarily not interested in communities, but in the data resulting from user interactions (Van Dijck 2013).

As a consequence, users are at the same time "consumers who have too little knowledge of platforms' operational and economic logic" to fully understand their "locked in" position "agents in the production process" (ibid., 171). 98% of the top 100 websites are for-profit undertakings (Fuchs 2011), mostly adding advertisements to the "commercial clutter there is in the media and culture" (McChesney 2013, 44). As a result, to increase an user's dissatisfaction with current affairs becomes the guiding principle and "taken together, these initiatives constitute a new enclosure movement" (Murdock 2013, 164), challenging the values of openness and sharing that were once inherent in the technology of the Web through a "seeping commodification" (Prodnik 2014), trickling down into all fibres of our social lives, including social relationships and acts of hospitality.

3.3. An Alternative, Commons-based Model

On the cornerstones of a critical theory of social media is that it invites the researcher to analyse the "potentials and limits of alternative social media and struggles for a just society that enables commons-based digital media" (Fuchs 2014a, 24). Therefore, one focus of the empirical research was on the question of how to best organise a digital commons and how to handle the associated challenges by examining the case of BeWelcome, a non-profit hospitality exchange network. One key differentiation characteristic to corporate social media is its user-centric governance structure. Utilising a grassroots democracy approach in the sense that everybody's voice should be listened to has both advantages and disadvantages, and direct impacts on the democratic relationship of users to the platform.

On the one hand, such an approach is highly valuable as it brings a great deal of diversity of opinions and viewpoints, but on the other hand, it tends to be slow and at times frustrating. Sometimes, a certain problem is discussed extensively, draining many resources, when at the end it turned out to be of minor interest for most members of the community. The BeWelcome community developed a grassroots decision making tool to make it possible for every member to suggest an idea, which is then voted upon, prioritised, and implemented if agreed. However, in usage for a year now, experience shows that after an enthusiastic start with lots of members participating, there seems to be a drop in new members filing sug-

[45] Feldman (2012) identifies three ways of user resistance on the platform: (1) *watchdog disclosure* (rebellion through transparency in forums), (2) *profile reappropriation* (a practice whereby users made their CS profiles into unsanctioned spaces of protest and information sharing), and (3) *reference warfare* (a campaign advocating the posting of negative references to the profile of Casey Fenton, CS's founder).

gestions, the danger of a few people colonising and thus disrupting the process, and the fact that people sometimes vote for a suggestion without even reading through it.

This is to say that such a grassroots decision-making process tends to be very difficult to control, if it has to be controlled. Another downside is that few physical meetings pose a challenge to communication and engagement, and the dependence on certain key developers is high: In the case that an important programmer stops working for the project, it might take a successor a long time and great effort to continue where the other person has left the work. A clear benefit of a commons-based structure, on the other hand, is that control is decentralised and not restricted to a small elite, which reduces possible steering or monetising attempts significantly. With this, it is important that a given project is protected by an appropriate legal framework, i.e. being run by an organization that is registered as an official non-profit.

The legal stewardship and governance structure has to be clarified and secured right from the outset, as digital commons are under constant threat of commodification, especially when growing successful in the sense of reaching a certain size of user-base. Being a legal non-profit makes it possible to refer to the official statues when problems arise, and therefore gives stability and security to the community. Another huge factor is the belief in the usefulness of the volunteering work, and the motivation to give something back to the community and doing useful work that is truly needed, instead of working for the benefit of a company. With this, the biggest challenge is the way the majority of users approach online services situated in a consumerist society—as passive consumers—where only a small percentage feels the need to engage as active participants.[46] BeWelcome differentiates itself as a commons from other HospEx networks as its governance structure is democratic in a sense that every user is actively encouraged to help running and improving the site. However, the democratic nature of BeWelcome is in a paradoxical relationship to the speed of service delivery: On the one hand, there is a burden on the regular use to actively engage in the "*maker-culture*" or "*do-ocracy*", for example if unhappy with the status quo of a given future or design—everyone is encouraged to simply go and change it. This is contrasted to the usual, consumerist approach to an online service, where a regular user would, at best, file a complaint for the support team, and then wait for changes to happen. The paradox being that although, in theory, every user would be able to immediately contribute to a solution, for the majority of changes to happen,[47] there often is a certain technological expertise required, which, for the ordinary user, makes it quite difficult to contribute, leaving a lot of workload to the volunteer developers of the platform—slowing down the whole process. This suggests that participation in developing a digital commons project has to be seen in a nuanced way, posing a challenge "since technical know-how is unevenly distributed among groups in society" (Söderberg 2011, 3), and because there often is a mental barrier to simply "do things". For commercialized social media platforms, the empowerment of users to also be egalitarian co-creators is necessarily restricted to a limited contribution of content within clearly defined boundaries, suitable to be harvested for profits by the owning class of those media. Projects subscribed to a commons-approach, like BeWelcome, motivate and invite the user to transcend those limits and participate in defining the boundaries as well. This is to say that one of the key difference for a digital commons is how users can relate to the site: as "*participating citizens*", instead of participants "*for corporations (and capitalism more generally)*" (Olsson 2014, 207).

[46] Due to the very open way that BeWelcome is governed, it is hard to put an exact number on how many people are actively volunteering at a given time, as often, members jump onboard for a given task, and then disappear again. An estimated number though would be 120 people, given the official positions (see http://www.bewelcome.org/wiki/Who_does_what) plus 50 volunteers for the translation group plus 25 from the communications team plus 15 from the support group. Given 60,000 members as of May 2014, the percentage of people volunteering is 0.2% of the total membership. An acknowledged suggestion to increase volunteering rates is to make volunteering easier and thus more attractive, or to introduce volunteering teams.

[47] There are, of course, a myriad of activities that do not require programming skills to volunteer, for example forum moderation, newsletter creation, translation tasks, or legal matters; Since the heart of the project is a web platform, however, the technical development and constitution of the site is the basis for all other activities to happen.

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Intimately connected to this is the question of financing, where Fuchs (2014c, 135) notes that alternative media face "structural inequality" and the problem of "how to mobilize resources in a capitalist world". The research shows that donations are a good and sufficient way of financing the project at hand. Furthermore, the popular example of Wikipedia demonstrates that this approach can successfully work for large-scale projects as well. The biggest benefit of a donations-based approach is the complete independence of financiers, meaning that the community can freely decide in which direction it wants to evolve and focus on its core mission. Also, the absence of (targeted) advertisements is generally welcomed by users, at the same time meaning a great deal more privacy in regards to their user data as it will not be passed or sold on to third parties. This, in turn, is reflected in much more user-friendly terms of use (ToU), giving more control to the user.

Another important factor regarding the organization and sustainability of a digital commons is size. As outlined in the theory, a physical commons is most likely to sustain when managed by "small, homogenous groups" (Hess and Ostrom 2007, 49). The empirical data confirms this view for the digital commons as well, however put to different dimensions: with user bases reaching millions, platforms simultaneously become valuable assets reaching considerable exchange value on the market, thereby threatening the actual use value for the community by treating the "community as a commodity" (Kreps and Pearson 2009). Couchsurfing is one of many examples[48] where processes of commodification destroyed a commons after having reached a critical mass of users.[49] Therefore, an organic growth rate whereby the homogeneity of a digital commons can be preserved is crucial for its sustainability, whereas an explosive growth constitutes a possible threat to the stability. The problems of "lack of visibility" and a small user base as identified by Fuchs (2014c, 136) for alternative social media usage by activists does not apply for HospEx platforms; on the contrary, the users BeWelcome seem to be content with their size and worry about an explosive growth to disrupt their community spirit.

BeWelcome, at the time of writing constituting less than one tenth of Couchsurfing's member size, thrives as a digital commons for all eight principles identified by Ostrom (1990, 90–102) to make a (physical) commons long-term sustainable are (digitally) fulfilled.[50] Due to its non-profit status and the ethic of transparency and participation does legally prevent individuals from profiting from the site. The analysis further concludes that BeWelcome can be classified as a 'truly social' media platform according to Sandoval's (2014) criteria, for it is (1) socially owned (*economy*), (2) socially controlled (*politics*), and based on (3) socially inclusive values (*culture*). Further, truly social media are bound to "benefit all members of society rather than serving private profit interests" (ibid., 159), which, given BeWelcome's non-commercial orientation, can also be confirmed.

The measures described above protect its existence as a commons in the space of online HospEx platforms, successfully opposing possible threats of commodification and experiencing the same fate as Couchsurfing or HospitalityClub. The challenge to scale up is met with a focus on 'organic growth,' meaning that no outside advertisements are made to 'force growth,' but rather welcome members that truly subscribe to the values of the community. The great challenge ahead will be to support such kinds of digital commons, enabling them to grow and to become a sustainable and durable institutional form where the real use value for a community triumphs a theoretical exchange value on the market.

On top of the empirical data for the case of hospitality exchange networks, the theoretical discussion further outlined various practical suggestions to sustain digital commons in gen-

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[48] Other examples would be "The Huffington Post", an American online news blog and aggregator, initially build on voluntary contributions of its columnists, was taken over by AOL in February 2011. Or, Mitfahrgelegenheit.de, a once free-to-use platform to connect private persons offering and searching for car rides, introduced a 11%-share for its users after being sold to a bigger firm, carpooling GmbH. Those are other examples of how a free and societally beneficial online service got forced into a product, i.e. for commodity fetishism.

[49] It is impossible to put an exact number on that 'critical mass' as every community is different. However, given that the predominant social media business models calculate the value with a per-user formula, growth is a necessary condition when a community gets commodified.

[50] A detailed analysis of how BeWelcome (and other digital commons) fit with Ostrom's principles is tempting but outside the scope of this work.

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eral. Changes in (1) *legislation* advocating more user rights and a stricter data protection, making sure that economic interests do not automatically outdo consumer privacy interests, i.e. *stronger data protection laws*[51] (Fuchs 2014a, 259). Also, a (2) *mandatory "opt-out" option* giving users the possibility to change platform without paying the switching costs would help, as well as an "opt-in" advertising policy would strengthen every user's possibility of self-determination[52] (Van Dijck 2013, 171–2). Fostering and valuing (3) *self-regulation*,[53] going beyond the state as well as the market, and (4) *supporting alternative projects* with state funding or donations.[54] On the (5) *technological level*, switching to a *de-centralised strategy* and peer-to-peer technology can safeguard against undemocratic power aggregations in certain states or organisations.[55] A strengthening of an already existing mesh of (6) *corporate watch organisations* (cf. Fuchs 2014b, 261f) would lead to an increasing transparency in terms of economic power and point towards asymmetric power relations.[56] Finally, (7) establishing new sorts of *commons-based governance models* with financial viability and legal standing would help to protect a community's volunteer-work from being privatised as "path of least resistance: familiar, legal and lucrative" (Bollier 2011b, online). Terranova (2013) suggests to de-privatise platforms and give ownership to the users, as they generate the wealth by free labour in the first place. All those measures would make non-commercial Internet project more powerful and popular, resisting commodification processes. The idea of the digital commons would be strengthened for "possessive individualism on the Internet would decrease" (Sevignani 2013, 738), and users would be helped to "reassert control over their community resources" (Bollier 2007, 38). As common-based peer production might be sustainable for the collective, it is not for the individual (Kostakis and Stavroulakis 2013). For the long-term perspective therefore, a commons-friendly and legally structured environment where commoners control their own governance and have ownership is needed.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper aims to contribute to critical Internet studies by examining the antagonistic struggle between the commons and processes of commodification for the case of hospitality exchange platforms in the light of political economy of communications and critical theory. The work is seen as an exploration of the moral economies underpinning communicative action: Both activity contributing to the commons (being "grounded in practices of gifting, sharing, and caring" and "directed toward collaborative projects that produce material freely accessible to all") as well as on the "forces that deflect, dissipate, or subvert it" (Murdock 2013, 167) constitute cultural production in society. An apparent development during the last three decades, spurred by the spread of neoliberal capitalist ideologies around the

[51] An example of this is the initiative "*Europe vs. Facebook*", founded by Austrian law students to struggle for more user privacy on the social network Facebook. The initiative asks the Irish Data Protection Commissioner whether Facebook is infringing European data protection law in 23 cases. See http://europe-v-facebook.org/EN/Complaints/complaints.html, accessed May 7th, 2014.

[52] The report "*Why Johnny Can't Opt Out: A Usability Evaluation of Tools to Limit Online Behavioral Advertising*" concluded that "non of the nine tools we tested empowered study participants to effectively control tracking and behavioural advertising according to their personal preferences" (Leon et al. 2012). This is to say that commercial platform's attempts to define opt-out privacy defaults as the accepted norm is simply because an opt-in option would "impede commercial exploits" (2013, 172) as many site users would not choose to be targeted by advertisements.

[53] Examples like BeWelcome or Diaspora* are actual outcomes of self-regulation and their growth is spurred by the participatory spirit of a relatively small, uniform user-base.

[54] Both financing models are burdened with limitations themselves as donations are an unstable income and state funding can create political pressures. Popular examples like Wikipedia however show that such undertakings are not impossible on a large scale as well.

[55] Cf. Meinrath et al. (2011, 478) where the authors argue that broadband connection is simply "too precious a resource to be solely overseen by an oligopoly of profit-driven corporations who must care for their bottom line first and foremost", therefore suggesting policy measures for a "business model neutral infrastructure that allows for public players such as municipalities and non-profits, as well as public-private partnerships and private corporations and philanthropies" to provide Internet services.

[56] WikiLeaks (https://wikileaks.org) is an example on an international non-profit journalistic watchdog organization that raises a lot of mainstream media attention by leaking secret documents about political and economic power.

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globe, has been an intensifying subscription to market values and dynamics, leaving social responsibilities of citizenship to be "comprehensively trumped by the promise of expanded opportunities to consume" (ibid.). As a result, "nonmarket values worth caring about" (Sandel 2012, 9) have been crowded out, particularly values of "altruism, generosity, solidarity, and civic spirit" (ibid., 130), essential to the renewal of public life.

The same developments are also visible for the field of communications. As Kreps (2009; 2011) points out, social media cannot be seen as separate from capitalist institutions, but are rather part of a hegemonic transnational agenda of conservative venture capital reinforcing hierarchies of consumption, thereby viewing online '*communities as commodities'.* This maintains the productive structures of "*communicative capitalism*" (Dean 2009) by continuing the "offline trend rooted in neoliberalist ideals of free markets and deregulation", leading to the "incorporation of sociality, creativity, and knowledge" (Van Dijck 2013, 166).

The research has demonstrated that a move towards the corporate holds true also when looking at the alternative social media space of hospitality exchange platforms, where members of such communities create an exceptionally strong sense of identity connected to the platform.[57] This is where a network becomes a community, leading to potentially strong emotional involvements of users by having them truly believe and live the ideas and values behind it: To literally "*Participate in Creating a Better World, One Couch at a Time".*[58] The influx of venture capital on Couchsurfing, the largest HospEx platform, and the corresponding representation in the media, as well as the integration with the biggest social network, Facebook, all contribute to a remarkable growth rate of the platform.[59] The data analysis showed that the Couchsurfing community as a whole loses more due to the consequences of the commodification process to which it is subject to than it gains.

This is not to say that Couchsurfing stopped delivering value to people and enriching traveler's lives; On the contrary, with a vastly growing community, more people than ever now enjoy the opportunity to experience hospitality exchange on a global scale. This is however to say that the question of ownership and governance does matter greatly for the majority of users being engaged with a community, and even more so for longer-term members. What is lost in the transition is the existence of a project run as a flourishing commons, a cyber-utopian dream come true; an example of genuine exchange outside and free from the dominant logic of capital, a space highlighting cultural instead of monetary values, understanding instead of commerce. This space still exists, but instead of outside, now *within* the market. This is insofar problematic as markets "tend to have thin commitments to localities, cultures, and ways of life; for any commons, however, these are indispensable" (Bollier 2011a, online). The voices coming from the Couchsurfing members were affirmative of this statement, noticing that for them, the quality of the community decreases as noticeably as many new members seem not to be familiar with the values the project stated out with, thereby losing its uniqueness on the way. This further manifests in the connection with Facebook as well an increased loss of user privacy and control through updated terms of use and privacy policy. Molz (2012a, 135) describes a Couchsurfer's participation in the community as "forms of resistance to the distancing forces in modern social life;" An incorporation of the means to achieve this seems to be totally at odds to such a spirit.

Couchsurfing's transformation from a commons into a commodity is not only problematic for the very users of the platform, but constitutive for the way users relate to a digital media in general: The potentials of a participatory architecture in '*Web 2.0*' move from benefiting the "*participating citizen"* to benefit the "*corporation, and capitalism more generally"* (Olsson 2014, 204f). The case study shows that even alternative, niche spaces of social networking sites can easily shift from prioritising use-value for the community over exchange-value on the market, small steps in further transforming the Web it into a technology of mass surveil-

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[57] A member of a community proudly is a "*Couchsurfer*" or "*BeWelcomer*", whereas the same person is unlikely to call him- or herself a "*Facebooker*" or "*Twitterer*", if subscribed to both platforms.

[58] Slogan of Couchsurfing, visible beneath the logo of the web site before it was re-designed in 2011.

[59] There are no official figures for active members available, but as far as the total amount of member profiles is concerned, Couchsurfing was going from a bit over two million in 2011 to seven million in 2014, and an estimated 15 million in 2017.

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lance where personal data is the new currency to be sold to advertisers and agencies (Curran 2012, 59), and where the "tremendous promise of the digital revolution" has been compromised by capitalist appropriation (McChesney 2013, 97).

Although some claim that "relationships, after all, are the one thing you cannot commoditize" (Tapscott and Williams 2006, 44), it is ironic that corporate platforms found that commoditising relationships is precisely "the golden egg their geese produced" (Van Dijck 2013, 16). For corporate platforms, the rhetoric of accumulating *social* capital as an emancipatory benefit for users means in effect is that the owners of platforms are amassing *economic* capital through profiling and behavioural data, the heart of today's social media business models.[60] Recognising that the value of a given platform in today's social media environment is often articulated "as value per customer" (Van Dijck 2013 36) makes the maximisation of the user base a necessary priority for a corporate platform striving for profits. Apart from the discussed consequences for the composition of a community, this crucially transforms users and their relationship to the platform, from participants delivering use-value into a commodity having exchange-value. Users in the role of "*prosumers*" (Toffler 1980) are exploited for both their active volunteering contributions and their passive user data; users become "double-objects of commodification" (Fuchs 2014a, 169), meaning that they are commodities themselves and through this commodification their consciousness becomes increasingly exposed to the commodity logic.

Yet, in all spheres of the social life, commodification processes have always been confounded (Mosco 2005). As much as leaving a book in a café, setting up commons-based Internet project is an example of resistance against commodification. On those lines, Firer-Blaess and Fuchs (2014, 100) argue that it should be the "primary political task for concerned citizens to resist the commodification of everything and to strive for democratising the economy, that is, building a participatory grassroots economy that is not controlled by corporations but the people." The study found this exemplified for the case of hospitality exchange platforms as well, manifested in the non-commercial, non-profit, and open-source platform BeWelcome.

What makes this and other digital commons a viable alternative is the emphasis on community, showing that a "small, homogenous groups" (Hess and Ostrom 2007, 49) are more likely to be able to sustain a commons. The question of size however uncovers a paradoxical face, as a growth in members does potentially lead to an increased value for the community, as there then are more available options for 'surfers' and 'hosts'. But at the same time, if that growth does happen too fast or the community becomes too big, proper community governance becomes a challenge and the community becomes prone for delusion, for not all new members might be in line with the ethics of the community. Therefore, organic and non-forced growth is crucial to a common's sustainability. Besides that, commitments to total transparency, grassroots democracy decision-making, independent financing through donations, software and content openness, a legal non-profit status, and collective administration are amongst the differentiating characteristics to other HospEx networks; those all help to minimise a potential threat of commodification. Because benefits never come without challenges, it is hard to motivate a sufficient number of active volunteers from the mass of passive users,[61] a revenue stream based solely on donations is potentially unstable, and development progress is usually slow and cumbersome, given that all members should have their voices heard and respected. But after all, "individuals enter the commons to enjoy the participatory nature of a productive and/or creative endeavour carrying the belief that the involvement of other members alongside with theirs builds a sum that belongs to all and from which

[60] For an cinematic introduction to the issue of how today's Internet companies handle user data and what the consequences are for society, see Cullen Hoback's 2013 documentary '*Terms and Conditions May Apply*,' http://tacma.net.

[61] It is hard to put an exact number as volunteers frequently come and go, but the research estimated that 0,2% of BeWelcome's member-base actively volunteer. Following a popular explanation, the '*1% rule*' explains that, as a rule of thumb for participation in an given Internet community, only 1% of the users of a website actively create new content, while the other 99% of the participants only lurk. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1%25_rule_(Internet_culture), accessed November 8th, 2014.

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all benefit from" (Kostakis and Stavroulakis 2013, 416). The conviction that volunteering time and energy is spent to directly benefit members of a community is at the heart of a digital commons project, and the experience and discussions of hospitality exchange platforms emphasise the importance of having a legal framework in place right from the start, protecting this conviction from forces of commodification.

If Wikipedia only had readers, there simply would be no Wikipedia; the same holds true for hospitality exchange, because for some, being a user is not enough. Actively contributing to an idea that is believed to have intrinsic value and at the same time belongs *to the community* is a driving force for participation; who, after all, would like to be a volunteer for a *company*, such as Facebook of LinkedIn, without payment? This is to say that although a range of participatory technologies in today's "social media" sphere offer the "promise of emancipation", they most often do so "through the discourse and architecture of capitalism" (Feldman 2012, 14). The paper aimed to contribute to the insight that the capitalist character of digital media, the grounding in profit and commodity logic, is "not a necessity, but a historical consequence of the commercial and capitalist organization of the Internet" (Fuchs 2014a, 24). Digital media are spaces of power struggle that are at the same time able to expand the inherent emancipatory potentials, through projects subscribed to the logic of the commons, and jeopardise the digital commons by incorporating them into the logic of capital (Allmer 2013).

BeWelcome is an example of a digital commons project, underlining that the Internet as of today is the most significant nesting place for commons-based innovations (Rifkin 2014). The closing lines should however emphasise that the commons are not to be seen as a mere Internet phenomenon (nor are processes of commodification),[62] but rather at the "heart of a major cultural and social shift now underway" (Bollier 2014b, online). In that shift, the role of the commons is to change people's attitudes about corporate property rights and neoliberal capitalism—but we need to "do more than simply postulate them—we need to construct them in struggle" (de Angelis 2009 online). On the margins, we already see that commoners start to build a "very different kind of society, project by project" (Bollier 2014b, online). Ostrom's (eg. 1990; 2012) work shows that a commons can be managed in an entirely sustainable way, but the idea of the commons as a "paradigm of social governance appears either utopian or communistic, or at the very least, impractical" (Bollier 2014b, online) to conventional minds.

Castells (2009, 431) concludes that we need to work towards preserving "the commons of communication networks made possible by the Internet, a free creation of freedom lovers." For it is not the idea of the commons that is impractical or utopian, but the neoliberal fantasy of ever-expanding consumption, inflicting social inequity and ecological disruption, amongst other problems, in the process. The thriving platforms of BeWelcome is one of many examples that, albeit being pushed away from public view, cultivate specific niches and are crucial to add to the rich cultural diversity that still populates the Web. The enthusiastic volunteers of BeWelcome participate to "work on a balanced ecosystem and a diversified online sociality" (Van Dijck 2013, 176) and to "advance the public good and the common interests of all" (Fuchs 2014c, 161), thereby counterbalancing the corporate credos by truly working towards making the online world more transparent and user-friendly: *Il faut cultiver notre jardin*.

[62] A pressing example are the on-going, massive land-grabs in Africa, Latin America, and Asia by international investors or the governments of Saudi Arabia or China, thereby replaying the English enclosure movement on a global scale.

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