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Our Tools and Our Values, response text

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Comments on Ethan Zuckerman's talk "Our values, our tools" October 26, 2021

Thanks to the organizers of OA Week for the invitation to be part of the conversation and to Ethan Zuckerman for his thought-provoking work on Digital Public Infrastructure.

In my remarks today, I'd like to highlight the value of Ethan's work for ongoing discussions on the relevance of information commons approaches to institutional initiatives and public policies that promote both public service media and open access to knowledge (OA2K). In doing so, I'd also like to suggest a few ways in which different constituencies and organizations that coalesce under the big umbrella of the OA2K movement –libraries included– have an important role to play in the push we're currently witnessing around the world for more accountability and democratization of platforms and social media sites.

Contributions of Ethan's work

Ethan takes a grounded approach to underlying ethical (and I'd say existential!) dilemmas facing all information commons nowadays: How could the information commons live up to its promise of democratizing knowledge production under surveillance capitalism? How does the commons-based peer production model of open access initiatives around the world would survive the increasing pressures of hyper-commercialization generated by the dominant commodity-model of the web?

1. Why is the experience of public service media organizations (such as VPRO and Public Spaces) relevant to examine for the dilemmas facing information commons?

Most of the A2K literature draws from case studies and analyses of the free and open-source software movement, and from successful peer-production experiences such as Wikipedia. BUT public service media is a form of information commons that has tended to be ignored by this literature even though they offer unique opportunities for the study of processes of institutionalizations of the 'commons', their relation with the state, and with policies that respond to "public interest obligations" in communication and information services. To be clear, information or communication commons are decentralized, open, collaborative, non-proprietary forms to generate information and knowledge through social production. Open-source software projects, creative commons licensing systems, open publishing journals, Wikipedia, community wireless initiatives, AND public, community-based media are ALL organizational projects where loosely connected individuals cooperate and share resources, seeking to enhance their communicative power in networked environments. The commons, Yochai Benkler (2006) argued, is potentially an autonomy-enhancing form of social organization and is thus able to support more democratic ways of production, exchange, and use of information and culture. However, in recent years, many of these experiments have been challenged by the increasing intermediation role of online platforms that have made users' data commodification and exploitation their main business model.

Here are why we need to study public service media as a form of information commons:

- Public service media emerged and operated since the last century to fulfill public interest obligations in media systems around the world
- Europe and Netherlands in particular, are probably the best-case scenarios to analyze how these institutions have evolved and operate with relative independence from the government, and as expression of different groups in society.
- Ethan is right when he argues that there are important lessons to be learned from the Dutch cases for building the new digital public infrastructure we all need in the era of the 'commercial platformization' of the web. Here are some questions I'd like to see answered by this exciting research:
 - o What *ethical* information-intermediary practices do VPRO and Public Spaces want to enact? How are these solutions of "privacy by design" implemented/negotiated through the "power wash"? What can be changed or not and why?
 - o What are the processes that support and promote the cooperation of public service media organizations in Netherlands around these issues? What facilitates or limits their inter-institutional response? What is the role of public policy and private initiatives in this process? How is "the public interest" conceptualized and represented by those enacting the changes etc.?

2. The importance of "public service" approaches to information intermediation

Ethan's work also brings us to ask: how would a "public service approach" to information intermediation should look like? Going beyond accounts that are either purely celebratory or too critical of commons-based peer production models, Ethan's analysis of VPRO/ Public Spaces shows the complex relationship between peer production activities and the commercial pressures of global online platforms. The good news is that, although uneven, these power dynamics are not absolute and even small public media operations can DO something about it.

- **Why is important to focus on growing information intermediation and platformization?** Platforms are environments, computing or otherwise, that connect different groups and derive benefits from others participating in and exchanging information on the platform. The underlying concept covers companies from Google to Facebook to video game platforms Steam to Taser. Following the lingo of today's web economics, a **platform strategy** is more critical to commercial success than the idea or product behind the platform itself! A platform strategy is an approach to entering a market which revolves around the task of promoting and generating user engagement to benefit from the presence of others. It is generally assumed that "customers" can determine their "willingness to pay" for the product or service independently. However, this assumption breaks down when considering practices of data exploitation and the lack of transparency of algorithms employed by commercial platforms. As he aptly argues, we need platforms that are optimized for "participation, for civility, for diversity"...

3. A different, more "critical" interpretation of "Openness"

Proponents of open-access policies can be found across the political spectrum, offering diverse interpretations of what "openness" means. From a liberal, market-oriented perspective, openness is thought of as a mechanism that reduces the cost of entry to information markets.

Information commons are not seen in complete opposition to markets but rather as coexisting and supporting them through information sharing, innovation, and creativity.

I see Ethan advancing a more social democratic or even a participatory democratic articulation of the information commons approach for the public interest, where openness, collaborative, sharing practices are deployed to mediate pressures of increasing hyper commercialism on the web. It's not only an act of resistance to market dynamics of data exploitation, but also a capacity-building approach to the construction of non-proprietary relations of social production in public spaces built in response to 'public service' policies and concerns.

Benkler (2010) stressed the importance of this capacity-building approach to information commons in his writings about the Access to Knowledge (A2K) movement and its implications for social justice:

access to the information commons in the abstract is insufficient ... freedom, justice, and innovation all require effective agency [...] access to material means, as well as, to material capabilities and educational faculties" and yes, the consideration of the production relations it supports

We cannot keep having these discussions in the 'abstract'! We have to ground them in the contexts of institutions, policies and societies with uneven power relations... (refer here to the different policy contexts in Europe and the U.S. in regards to data protection regulation, systems of incentives for cooperation between public media organizations etc.)

Reclaiming OA to platform governance

1. Time to knock the door and claim a space in platform governance?

Changes in problematic business and information intermediary practices or platforms may be also achieved by collective action of organized professionals, consumers and social interest groups. Privacy by design is an important strategy but we may need to go father and reclaim our spaces in 'platform governance'.

- Here is the U.S. we have a great example in the work of the "[Change the Terms](#)" coalition which is pushing social media platforms to change their business practices in dealing with hate groups fundraising, advertising and outreach efforts. Are there opportunities to be part of the coalition and bring other important points on the OA2K agenda?
- Reference to opportunities opened by the controversial Facebook Oversight Committee; what would happen if OA2K groups act as a 'movement' and bring their grievances and cases to them?

2. What libraries can do to "redistribute the wealth of networks?"

- My final point is that when we talk about OA, we essentially talk about journals published by big, commercial publishers from the Global North. We need to bring the OA journals of the South to the discussion. Many argue that editorial process and quality of these journals are not up to the mark, and do not meet the "Impact Factor" or "CiteScore" recognized by our institutions. However, they do publish update, crucial data and information important for a particular countries and regions, researchers need here. An example of that: OA journals and initiates during the pandemic ...

- Investing in the capacity of the researchers, reviewers, and editors of the South is also important.
- To make effective collaborations in academic publishing between institutions in the North and the South through OA publications
- Improved policies and practices that can make Southern research and research communication/exchanges more impactful