Hacklabs to technological cooperatives

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Techno-political collectives mix technical and political concerns. A perfect example is Riseup which defines its mission as a provider of "*online communication tools for people and groups working on liberatory social change. We are a project to create democratic alternatives and practice self-determination by controlling our own secure means of communications*". Nowadays the field is composed by very different types of organizations ranging from loose and informal networks of hacktivists, free software communities, formal organisations such as foundations, start-ups invested in the so-called civic tech and even public institutions and council towns.

Some years ago, technological sovereignty meant the development of free technologies[0] by and for the civil society. Empowering society by developing tools, hardware, services and infrastructure that meet social needs based on the ethics of free software and self-management. Nowadays, with the transition to open source things have become messy as big corporations promoting *open source* software basically for their own benefit have broken the relation between technological development and social responsibility.

In this text I will rethink what role cooperatives have, or could have, as economic and social actors in reclaiming this relationship. To do so, I will depart from the broad galaxy of techno-political collectives[1], and then focus on the format of technological cooperatives as they have been deployed in Spain.

A galaxy of initiatives

We find foundations which can be committed to create open source and free software solutions and services (FSF,

Mozilla, Blender, etc.) and/or to protect and defend digital rights (Electronic Frontier Foundation, La Quadrature du Net, X-net) mobilizing and pulling economic resources to make those project run in the mid and long term. People can support foundations as a donor, volunteer, intern. They normally look for experienced and qualified professionals and count with formal and legal structures when many techno-political collectives are based on informal groups and communities.

Another weird aspect of the current scene consists in local government initiatives which are working towards openness and transparency based on citizen participation. Many "rebellious" council towns located in Spain are supporting the development of free software tools focused on citizen driven political participation[2], and behind those developments, *freelancers*, small companies and cooperatives are working on setting up viable, robust and trustful systems to promote open democracy.

Technological cooperatives can be found at the intersection of both previous options as they have an economical goal aiming towards sustainability and also a political and social approach to technology. Besides, as most of their clients come from the third sector (non-profit oriented, such as NGOs, associations, collectives) they can help build products based on their specific needs and desires. Examples include[3] Candela (Amnesty's activist management app), GONG (project/budget manager for NGOs), Oigame (on-line petition platform), Nolotiro (platform to exchange things), Mecambio (repository of energetic, financing and connectivity alternatives).

Creating a coop...

From now on, I will focus on the particular story of how we founded a free software cooperative, Dabne, in Spain – but simultaneously others were doing the same[4]. In the 90's, when Internet started to be accessible, several projects[5] wonder what it meant to escape from established identities, self-organize online transgressing borders, create a collective brain. *Hacklabs*, in squats or association offices, were places to experiment, learn about things that were not easily available as not everyone had an Internet access yet, nor a computer. Until then *hackers* were barely visible and *hacklabs* became that meeting point where "isolated" hackers came in contact with social movements. A passionate hybrid came out of that, it knock a strong free/libre software community which had a high impact on society's approach to free technology.

Spain has quite a long tradition of agricultural and industrial cooperatives and at some point, some of us started thinking that our hobby could turn through cooperativism into a way of living. As each cooperative have their own agreements regarding work and labour, I will share the terms under which we founded our own:

- We wanted to make a living but not at all costs.
- We wanted a shared decision making process.
- We wanted transparency.
- We wanted to define our goals, and change them when needed.
- We wanted everybody to be treated equal and in a fair way.

- We wanted to continue learning, have fun and promote free software.
- We didn't want to be slaves of our work but work with others in a collaborative and cooperative way.

With that in mind, we analysed how the "enterprise world" worked and wonder if we could become "business people" doing something that until then we did for free. A key element lied in the belief that we were going to found companies and step into "the market", that thing governed by capitalist rules which we were deeply against. Vertigo. There were no previous references of free technology cooperatives neither money to invest (we needed 250€ each). There was a strong determination and will to not work for big capitalist companies that make you uniform, dull and slave to their rules. The libre/free software community was there so we were not alone, we had our computers and skills, our beliefs that free technologies empower society, that free software brings sovereignty and that the digital era should make knowledge accessible, open doors to people and bring democratic alternatives to societies. We were choosing a way of living not just a job.

Dabne was founded in 2005 and it took us one year to understand what it meant to create a company, to manage a business and to decide a legal form that would favour our values of collaboration, transparency and responsibility. We went to workshops, talks, trainings, wrote business plans, attend appointments at the Chamber of Commerce. It seemed endless but little by little things began to take shape.

Becoming a coop happens in a specific environment of cooperatives advisers which is by far more friendly and easy

to ask than in the start up world for instance. Mantras like "success", "fame", "competitiveness","big profit" are not part of their vocabulary. They gave us a social approach, an understanding of how to address our impact and empower social organisations in the technical aspect.

Our friends xsto.info had founded one year before a free software cooperative in Madrid, they were a small group of *sysadmins*, web developers, wireless experts also committed to the free software community. Their experience helped us, we could share our doubts, difficulties, and see how others had gone through similar situations.

All in all, we managed to set up the company, and one good thing about software is that to start up, you basically need nothing but knowledge, a laptop and Internet access which means that costs are minimum – but the first challenge is to get the first clients. Through friends and contacts, we started our way, then the word spread mouth to mouth and slowly we had our group of clients.

Our mainly technical profile made us look for alliances like with noez.org focused on design and innovation centred on people. With them we could share different perspectives of technologies and made our work more understandable. Then Dabne became in an unplanned way a women's free software cooperative. So far we do not know of any other women's software development cooperative in Spain. This led Dabne to IT counselling: as active listeners we could make technologies comprehensible to non-technical people, adjust projects rhythms, be honest and able to say no when we cannot do it.

Building a multi-verse of communities and networks

Cooperatives are most of the times fragile. But by working together, building and taking part in existing communities, creating and nurturing networks, they can strengthen their resilience and sustainability over time.

Through a cooperatives' platform (UMCTA) we got in contact with environmental, agroecology, social work and social adviser cooperatives willing to share their longer experience and knowledge. To become a coop also meant to enter the social and solidarity economy community[6] At that time Coop57-Madrid, an ethical financial service cooperative was founded and its goal has been to finance social and solidarity economy projects thanks to investments from civil society. Red de economía alternativa y solidaria (REAS) and the social market are networks for the production and distribution of goods and services based on the principles of social and solidarity economy. Among those we found ones concerned with social transformation, environmental sustainability, commons, gender equality, transparency, participation, self-organization, internal democracy.

Interestingly, most social and solidarity economy networks share a lack of interest towards techno-political issues, making difficult to include the concerns of free software cooperatives in their agenda. Because of this, in 2007 technical cooperatives set up the initiative "Software libre y ONGs", dedicated to promoting the use of free software and free technologies. A call for breakfasts while having short talks complemented with a conference focused on Free/Libre software and Third sector organizations. At a

bigger scale, in 2008, the Federal Association of Free software companies (Asolif) and other platforms[7] were created for promoting free software, create new business models and achieve responsible wealth.

On the other hand, communities were built around each specific technology, programming language, content management system, operating system distribution or hardware, in order to advance knowledge, share good practices, come up with improvements, and welcome *newbies*. A small cooperative uses several technologies, so the best option would be to participate in the different technical communities and attend their events (conferences, meet-ups, etc). But being able to take part of IT community events requires people, time and money, which is very difficult to handle in a small cooperative with limited resources...

Yet, time has shown that new people are founding cooperatives and collectives[8] around free technology, so the wheel keeps rolling.

SWOT for coop

I will recap dimensions introduced previously using a Strength Weakness Opportunities Threats (SWOT) analysis where:

Strengths refers to characteristics and internal factors of the cooperative or project that give it an advantage over others:

- Small team can change and adapt quickly
- Flexible working environment (home, office, client's office)

- Ability to make decisions and define company goals
- No initial capital needed
- Define own timing
- Good corporate image
- Creativity
- Curiosity
- Have fun

Weaknesses refers to characteristics of the cooperative or project that puts it at a disadvantage relative to others:

- Strain of working
- 24/7 involvement
- No business management experience
- No specialized profiles
- Difficulty to grow
- Communication
- No financial cushion
- No legal counselling

Opportunities refers to external factors of the environment that the cooperative or project could exploit to its advantage:

- Able to develop own ideas & projects
- Ability to chose partners & projects
- Be part of different networks & communities
- Capacity to respond to concrete and uncommon needs and desires

Threats are external elements in the environment that

could cause trouble for the cooperative or project:

- Exhaustion and burn out
- Uncertainty about future
- No update on technical issues
- Price reduction

Now some open questions remain

Cooperatives can make possible the building of new autonomous zones while responding to many challenges:

- **Economy:** how to shape an economy of the commons, social and supportive?

- **Self-organization:** how to be sustainable in a long term run, while questioning unquestionable truths like, consensus, horizontality, participation, leadership?

- **Technological freedom:** how to fight for free software, digital rights, open knowledge and *copyleft*?

As years pass by, technological cooperatives still looks like a small field based on strong personal relationships, which are key to building trust and assuming new challenges, but that can be also a limitation when there is a need to scale up. Besides, the precarious and uncertain economic situation makes it difficult to integrate new people. However, there is always a moment when the project grows and with it, should the team grow, how … or not?

Then who should be part of the cooperative? Should they have specific technical skills? Should they have a versatile profile? Are technical skills always needed? Is it affordable and ethical to have apprenticeships?

And what about decision making processes? Cooperati-

vism is about sharing the decision making process but experience shows that not everyone wants to take part of it – should they be excluded from the cooperative? Is the ability to make decisions key to be part of a cooperative? Should all decisions be taken in common?

These challenges give a comprehensible vision of the times to come, and the creation of these autonomous zones opens possibilities to different ways of understanding work, the commons, sustainability and economy.

[0] As a reminder, free technologies, in a nutshell, are the technologies and services based on the freedom given by free/libre software and it's philosophy. Freedom 0: The freedom to run the program for any purpose. Freedom 1: The freedom to study how the program works, and change it to make it do what you wish. Freedom 2: The freedom to redistribute and make copies so you can help your neighbour. Freedom 3: The freedom to improve the program, and release your improvements (and modified versions in general) to the public, so that the whole community benefits.

[1]
- http://riseup.net (USA)
- http://autistici.org (ITA)
- http://www.free.de/ (GER)
- http://so36.net (GER)
- https://www.boum.org/ (FR)
- http://nodo50.org (ESP)
- http://pangea.org/ (ESP)
- https://www.immerda.ch/ (CH)
- https://mayfirst.org(USA)

[2]
https://github.com/AyuntamientoMadrid/consul
https://github.com/AjuntamentdeBarcelona/decidim

[3]
- Candela: https://github.com/amnesty/candela
- Gong: https://gong.org.es/projects/gor

- Oigame: https://github.com/alabs/oigame
- Nolotiro: https://github.com/alabs/nolotiro.org
- Mecambio: http://www.mecambio.net/

[4]

Dabne: http://dabne.net

- Xsto.info: http://xsto.info/
- aLabs: https://alabs.org/
- Semilla del software libre: http://semillasl.net/
- Enreda: http://enreda.coop/
- Gnoxys: http://gnoxys.net/
- Grupo Ikusnet

[5]

Some of the projects:

- http://sindominio.net (ES)
- http://autistici.org (IT)
- http://samizdat.net/ (FR)
- http://espora.org (MX)
- http://thing.net (USA)

[6]

http://coop57.coop/

- http://www.economiasolidaria.org
- https://madrid.mercadosocial.net/
- http://tangente.coop/

[7]

- Asolif: http://www.asolif.es/
- Esle: http://esle.eus/
- Olatukoop: http://olatukoop.net

[8]

- Deconstruyendo: http://deconstruyendo.net/
- Interzonas: https://interzonas.info
- Talaios: http://talaios.net
- Shareweb: http://shareweb.es
- Reciclanet: http://www.reciclanet.org
- Buenaventura: http://www.buenaventura.cc/
- Itaca: http://www.itacaswl.com
- Saregune: http://www.saregune.net
- Cooptecniques: http://cooptecniques.net/

Some other cooperatives, groups or initiatives working around free/libre technology:

- Latino América Kefir: https://kefir.red/
- Vedetas: vedetas.org
- Cooperativa tierra comun: https://social.mayfirst.org/tierracomun