

N: NEW MEDIA

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The relationship between co-operatives and new media may be explored in many ways: one is by examining the development of technologies, their role and their governance within enterprises (by perhaps highlighting differences with other enterprise systems); another is by examining the role of new media in the dynamics of internal and external communication (there are many research questions to be asked: how is co-operative identity communicated online? Is new media also an instrument of electronic democracy or just a series of e-brochures?).

Here, I have decided to explore another path. Rather than attempting to answer similar questions of a systemic nature, I would like to recount two stories (one almost unheard of, a second one that certainly not everyone is aware of) which demonstrate the complexity of the relationship between new media and co-operatives, beginning with the specific nature of the latter.

First of all, a note on terminology: new media generally refers to digital communication and information technologies (Bettetini and Colombo, 1998). The Internet is obviously a good example, but other technologies such as digital TV or the mobile web can also be included.

The first story regards The Well, one of the oldest online communities in the history of the Internet, and at the centre of Howard Rheingold's famous book, *The Virtual Community* (Rheingold, 2000).

'The Well' (an acronym for The Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link) was founded in San Francisco in 1985 by Stewart Brand, a key figure in the counterculture of the 1960s, when the Internet was very different from the one we know today: there were no graphic browsers and no World Wide Web, the most popular part of the Internet today, and connecting to the Internet via mobile phone was not even a figment of our imagination. However, electronic mail existed and so did BBS systems, a sort of on-line bulletin board, rigorously text-based, which allowed the asynchronous exchange of messages. The Well, with its links with the counterculture of the 1960s/1970s, quickly went on to create a closely knit online community of a few hundred people willing to discuss a wide variety of themes. In 1994, when the community had extended to a few thousand users, something happened that took many of its members by surprise: its founder sold the community to a Silicon Valley businessman, Bruce Katz, who had



great plans for The Well and also owned 50% of shares: he wanted to create a community that could consist of hundreds of thousands of users as a base for big commercial operations. The net-economy boom was about to start and at the time users were the most precious asset for boosting company valuations. There was nothing wrong with Katz's plans, but this situation did not please many of The Well's most loyal users, who feared that their community would lose its original identity.

To resolve this situation and create a new community in which a limited number of people could carry out high-quality conversations without running the risk of being 'sold', Rheingold and a group of other users came up with the idea of establishing a co-operative-based virtual community. This new community, which was launched in 1995, was called The River.

Rheingold, in an article written in October 1995, explained how this came about: 'we argued for weeks, then raised thirty thousand dollars from three hundred people in six days, incorporated as a California co-operative corporation, bought a computer, found a place to put it, connected it to the Internet, installed computer conferencing software, and started having conversations' (Rheingold, 1995). Up to a few years ago, on the home page of The River (<www.river.org>, now offline), you could read the co-operative's mission: 'the River is an open, self-governing, uncensored, economically sustainable, computer conferencing system.' The experiment lasted a few years and then disappeared. Competition from the web and emerging social media was too strong.

The Well is certainly not the first Internet community to be sold. Recently, Craigslist was sold to the online auction giant, eBay, MySpace to Fox and Flickr to Yahoo! (already an expert in these integrations having bought out Geocities and eGroups in the past). It should be noted, at least in the American system, that participants in these online communities have little control over their personal data and can really be 'sold'. In 2001, for example, the famous politics portal, Voter.com, once it closed, put its list of members and their party affiliation up for sale (Pressman, 2001).

I would like to make one more point about The Well. Its trials and tribulations did not end with it being sold to a private investor. The community was resold for 5 million dollars in 1999 to Salon Media Group, the editor of an online magazine of the same name (<www.salon.com>, [accessed on 25 Mar. 2016]). At the time, it had 6000 users. Under the aegis of Salon Media, the subscribing members of the community continued to decrease and the company was forced to look for a buyer. Unfortunately, at this point of its history, The Well did not appeal to



anyone. In the end, it was saved from oblivion by another user buy-out, if that is what we can call it. In September 2012, Salon sold The Well to a new company specially created for the purpose, The Well Group Inc. (The Well, 2012). The new company was set up by a group of eleven investors who were all original members of the community. The sale price was 400,000 dollars, a bargain considering its past glory. Here, the epilogue was very different from that of The River. As a joint-stock company, the users have no say in matters even if they pay an annual subscription to the community which is still operational at the address <www.well.com> (accessed on 16 May 2016). The paradox is that with the same amount it could easily be self-managed.

What is the moral of this first story? The co-operative form, at least in theory, can meet the needs of users to create and manage spaces for interaction which are free of commercial influences in a sustainable way.

The second story concerns the .coop domain. In 2000, ICANN, the American corporation responsible for the allocation of IP addresses (domain names) decided to add new top-level names to the classic ones, .com, .net., .org, .edu, and the various top-level domains for countries (for example, .it). At the time, this was seen as a revolutionary development and during this period, new domains were created such as .biz and .info, .museum, etc.

The National Co-operative Business Association (NCBA) made the most of the opportunity and presented a proposal to add the domain name .coop. Its proposal was successful and in 2002, the new top-level domain name was created for registering co-operative enterprises and their affiliates worldwide. The initiative was an interesting attempt to demonstrate co-operative identity online using an Internet address. What happened? Like many of the domains created in 2002, diffusion of the .coop domain is still rather limited. If we look at the statistics available on the website <www.directory.coop> (data as of November 2014), we can see that most registrations are made by Americans, with a total of 2319. Another 890 registrations come from the United Kingdom, 488 from France, 311 from Spain and 297 from Italy. Outside Europe, the country with the most registrations is Japan with 163 domain names. In all, <www.directory.coop> lists just under 6000 domains. This is a very small number if we consider that the domain .biz which was created at the same time as .coop and is not hugely widespread has over 2 million registrations (Zooknic, 2008). The .coop figures are even lower if we consider that many companies register to protect themselves from attempts to appropriate their brand, and in this case there is no active website linked to the registered domain, which is dormant.



Although these figures should not be used to judge the success or otherwise of an initiative which is in any case a niche one, they appear to show that co-operative enterprises are not very interested in explicitly demonstrating their own identity online. Other reasons for the limited diffusion of the domain, especially outside the USA, can be found in the limited availability of sites for registration, costs which are higher than those of traditional domains, and the limited knowledge of them by professional web operators. Whatever the reason, it is interesting to see that the co-operative movement has achieved a significant victory by creating a top-level domain name, but has then left it largely dormant.

References

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