

**DIGITAL
SOCIAL
INNOVATION**



Ethical Platforms

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the early days of the internet, some commentators trying to describe the new invention and the experience of using it reached for a particular metaphor with a physical space. [Google nwords shows](#) that the term “cyberspace” grew in popularity until a peak in 2000, and then went into decline. Within this metaphor, the online platform is the plaza or the pub: a place where people encounter and interact not just with a particular website, but with one another.

Today a significant proportion of our everyday interactions – whether you’re looking for a screwdriver or a subletter or a spouse – are mediated through an online platform. As a consequence, those who have been successful in creating such platforms have gained enormous power to influence the lives of many people – not to mention enormous wealth. In a now-well known article for *TechCrunch*, [Tom Goodwin observed in 2015](#) that today’s most important companies are not those that provide a concrete product, but rather those that can position themselves at the “interface” of an interaction between others, writing:

Uber, the world's largest taxi company, owns no vehicles. Facebook, the world's most popular media owner, creates no content. Alibaba, the most valuable retailer, has no inventory. And Airbnb, the world's largest accommodation provider, owns no real estate. Something interesting is happening.

But as these platform behemoths have emerged, it has become increasingly clear that they are causing real damage to the social fabric through value extraction, exploitation of workers, rampant collection and monetisation of user data and negative effects on whole markets and the environment. This trend analysis is about efforts to use the power of the platform model, but in ways that are maximally socially beneficial and ethical, working to cure some of the pathologies we are currently witnessing in “platform capitalism”.

The drive to attempt just this has given rise to an impressive international movement under the banner of Platform Cooperativism. This community brings together socially-minded technologists (what we understand as “DSI”; more on this in part II), activists of various stripes, and thought leaders and academics who give theoretical substance to the models they advocate and oppose.

Although this trend analysis aligns closely with the agenda of Platform Cooperativism, and refers to it at several points, it consciously does not adopt the

term 'Platform Coop', and uses instead the term 'Ethical Platform' (EP). This is simply for clarity's sake, to enable critical reflection on the approach of the Platform Coop movement, and to avoid the risk of misattributing to that community ideas or beliefs. The new term Ethical Platform is coined only for the purpose of this analysis and is not intended as a new concept for widespread use alongside Platform Coop. The latter will surely increasingly become a watchword in the coming years.

II. THE PATHOLOGIES OF COMMERCIAL PLATFORMS

The success of many commercial platforms, while driven by billions of dollars of investment, is by no means surprising: they are extremely effective, and demonstrably offer something that a lot of people want. Humans are a social species and almost everything we do of any consequence, both in our working lives and personal lives, involves the linking up of two or more parties for a mutually beneficial exchange. Since online platforms can so often outperform whatever mechanisms previously did the job of creating these matches, it is hardly surprising that they've so quickly transformed and disrupted so many industries. The development of the platform model is an enormous boon for many of our collective endeavours.

But at present, this improvement is coming at a significant social cost. And on the whole, it's not to do with the nature of platforms per se, but rather the way that platforms are created and run. This in turn has to do with how the commercial tech industry works.

Among the most worrying negative effects of commercially-focused and -driven online platforms we can include:

- **Exploitative treatment of workers** who provide services through platforms. Through exposure to merciless competition and the proliferation of "gig economy", the rise of platforms has gone hand-in-hand with more precarious situations for many workers and increasing inequality on a societal level, and

has been exacerbated by practices such as [exclusivity clauses](#) and lack of data and reputation portability.

- **Collection and monetisation of personal data**, which enables companies to understand trends, deliver marketing more efficiently, and sometimes sell to other companies. These [practices are opaque](#) and raise serious concerns around privacy, surveillance, equity and justice. Even if users understand and object to such practices, they have little sway to change them.
- **Negative effects on social equity, markets and the environment.** A growing body of evidence is showing, for example, how online platforms can repeat or exacerbate systemic bias and [discrimination](#); how accommodation platforms such as Airbnb are [pricing local residents out of city centres](#), and how platforms like Uber and Lyft are contributing to [congestion and pollution](#).

These dynamics are in many ways hardwired into commercial platforms, as the willing investment available in the tech industry also comes with intense pressure to generate quick and handsome returns and achieve first-mover advantage. The damaging practices we see are driven by the imperative to extract as much profit as possible – and if you don't, you'll likely be beaten by someone who will. These are exacerbated by, systemic (although not intractable) problems including the culture, environment and lack of diversity within tech companies.

If these faults really are inevitable consequences from setting out to build a platform from within the structures of the commercial tech industry, it follows that our best hope for creating the Ethical Platforms we need is to start from a totally different place – to work from a different model. Could DSI provide that alternative?

III. A FRAMEWORK TO DESCRIBE ETHICAL PLATFORMS

Before trying to answer that question, let's take a step back to get more clarity and precision on what platforms do, and what we might mean when we label them as ethical.

Our working definition of a platform will be a website or app where the core interaction is not between the user and the organisation that runs the platform, but rather between different users. To give a concrete example, when amazon.com was just an online store selling books and other items, this fell outside the definition of a platform; however, once it introduced the “Amazon Marketplace” function which let outside merchants sell their products on Amazon’s site, this constitutes a platform.

In some cases, there is a clear division between two or more different groups of users, for instance buyers and sellers, or producers and consumers. On platforms to provide domestic help, cleaners advertise their services and home-owners employ them; on other platforms artists or musicians display their work and customers pay for it. In other cases, the interaction takes place between peers: people mostly use social networks to connect with their friends and acquaintances; single people using a dating platform want to connect with other single people. Often, it is somewhere in between, or the boundaries are blurred: on YouTube, for instance, a subset of video watchers also upload their own videos (so-called “prosumers”).

What, then, constitutes, an *Ethical* Platform? There is not a single criterion that cleanly defines what does and doesn’t fall into this category. Instead, I propose a framework of four relevant dimensions (ownership, management, conduct, and sector), and argue that an Ethical Platform in the broadest sense is one that stakes a claim to some combination of these.

1. Managers: Who runs the platform day-to-day?

As mentioned above, many of the faults of the platforms that dominate today’s digital landscape are closely tied to the nature of the organisations who create and run them – namely, for-profit tech companies. Whether startup, scale-up, large machine, subsidiary of a megacompany, a commercial company is likely to run a platform in a certain way. But this is not the only type of organisation that is able to build and run online platforms.

As the DSI4EU has shown, as well as our work at betterplace lab over the past nine years, ‘Digital Social Innovation (DSI)’ is a tricky term. Awkwardly, it is not widely used, even by the people who it denotes, and it overlaps (and sometimes competes with) other terms such as ‘civic tech’, ‘tech for good’, ‘social tech’ and ‘public interest tech’. Nevertheless, all have at their core the use of digital technology for social causes, while common ideas and vocabulary have emerged as well as infrastructure like incubators, funding programmes, conferences and co-working spaces.

This is by no means a unified or homogenous, but certain types of projects crop up again and again. [In a 2017 report](#), betterplace lab developed a typology of DSI organisations. The five types are:

- a) **Newbies** – Many DSI projects are launched by recent graduates, or even students still at university (in some cases, such a project can constitute part of their course). Our research in other settings has shown that, although these are typically talented and passionate individuals, in most cases their lack of professional experience shows and they struggle to gain funding, a user base and, consequently, any kind of sustainable impact.
- b) **Social Entrepreneurs** – These projects tend to be set up by people with a few years’ professional experience who are influenced by the methods of the private sector and tech startups in particular. Relative to the other four types, these have been more focussed on, and more successful at, fundraising, and pragmatic about seeking money from various sources.
- c) **Hackers** – The “hacker” subculture goes back decades to the early days of computing, and today is embodied by groups such as [Chaos Computer Club](#) and large parts of the open source movement. It is made up of individuals with a background in programming who may be employed in a commercial tech company but like to spend their spare time on socially beneficial projects, often drawn by the technical challenge and the social element as well as the ideological appeal.
- d) **Professionals** – Some mid- to high-level professionals, some but not all from the tech sector, are motivated to use their skills and influence to engage on a social issue by launching a DSI project. In the most part, they do not intend to make this their full-time job, rather they want to be initiators and then hand over operations to someone else.
- e) **Activists** – Whereas the Hackers start with tech skills and start to think about social applications, with the Activists it is the other way around. These people are driven by a political and/or ideological commitment to a particular issue, and develop the idea for a digital approach. They are often selective about funding options, being especially wary of corporate or government funding, and are likely to turn to crowdfunding instead.

In the context of this trend, a platform being run by one of these species of DSI indicates a way in which they could be considered EPs, as compared with a **commercially-run** platform (whether run by an established corporation or a tech startup).

Alternatively, a platform might be run by a local or national government. A discussion of “**eGovernment**” and different approaches to digitising government services is beyond the scope of this analysis. However, it should be pointed out that in many cases, such governmental initiatives are tendered, so that they’re actually

build and run by outside contractors. This highlights the difference in this framework between managers and the next category: owners.

2. Owners: Who's behind the platform?

If we examine more closely the pathologies of platform capitalism outlined above – including value extraction, exploitation of workers, and questionable use of data – they are driven by the imperative to deliver profits to the company's shareholders. In other words, the model of private ownership by investors pushes platforms strongly towards these problematic behaviours.

It should be pointed out that private ownership can have more benign incarnations. The “social entrepreneurship” movement uses the private company model (or a quasi-commercial variant, such as the B-Corp) as a vehicle for social change, and some angel investors aim to make these ventures financially feasible without exerting malign pressure.

But with that said, many people have concluded that ownership is centrally important, and many EPs are based on a fundamentally different ownership model.

There are various models of collective ownership, the most familiar of course being publicly owned, be it through national or local government. Indeed, some left-wing commentators argue that dominant platforms such as Facebook and Amazon have become so vital in our everyday lives that they now have the status of utilities and [should be nationalised](#). Less radically, regional or city-level authorities might be able to improve public services (such as elderly care) by setting up new platforms.

Probably most widely discussed is the cooperative ownership model, whereby the platform is collectively owned by users or stakeholders. This arrangement is meant to guarantee that the platform is developed and run in the best interests of these stakeholders.

Finally, there is growing interest in the idea of steward ownership. This imposes legally binding restrictions on the power and rights of owners, above all making it impossible to sell the organisation for a profit, or for any current or future owner to extract profits. While not a platform, [the most high-profile DSI project to go down this route is Ecosia](#), a German search-engine which invests its profits in planting trees.

The relative merits of these different models are discussed in more detail below.

3. Behaviour: What about business practices?

Platforms could distinguish themselves through a commitment to ethical business practices, for instance: fighting exploitation by ensuring fair payment to workers and providers of services through the platform; a rejection of surveillance by refraining from collecting and monetising user data; or pledging a significant portion of generated revenue to pro-social causes (for example [FairBnB](#) promises to donate 50% of commissions to community projects).

The platform economy is automating interactions – such as housesitting, cleaning and household help, or lending of personal possessions – which were previously often limited to trusted acquaintances and existing social relations. There can be a cost both to individual dignity and to the broader social fabric if these become commodified at the cost of personal interaction, for which reason we might also consider the extent to which a platform humanises workers and service providers, and whether the interactions it facilitates contribute to an increase in overall social capital in the community.

4. Sector: Is it for a tangibly “good cause”?

This is a question whose answer inescapably subjective - and more of a spectrum than a clear divide. But it is still clear that some platform functions – for instance donations to charitable causes, matching volunteers to projects, or the sale of fairtrade or sustainable versions of consumer products – have an especially clear pro-social purpose.

But that’s certainly not to disparage EPs where this connection to a prosocial cause is less immediately apparent. Be it finding a taxi, selling graphic design services, running a dating website, the list goes on – no matter what the sector, running a platform with high ethical standards can have great impact relative to the alternative.

Are these four criteria equal, or does ownership trump everything else?

To recap, I propose that, rather than operating with a binary definition of Ethical Platforms, we consider how any given platform relates to the four criteria above. It might stand out in one of the four, or some combination – some projects will resonate with all four.

In this framework, the four criteria may well correlate with one another, but they can also vary independently from each other. The Platform Coop community views this somewhat differently. Specifically, although they wouldn't disagree with any of the above, they place an especially heavy emphasis on one of the four: ownership. Indeed, one of its manifesto documents is entitled [“Own This!”](#) and a key work is a collection of essays entitled [“Ours to Hack and to Own”](#).

Simplifying somewhat, it's possible to interpret the ideas of Platform Cooperativism as claiming that, important though the other dimensions are, addressing the ownership part is the key, and with this the other parts are likely to take care of themselves. Let's consider this argument.

Overhauling ownership in the digital age

There's something curious happening with the very notion of ownership – and it's happening on two different levels.

The first level is on the level of whether a particular user owns a particular product. Where the product in question is digital, established practices around owning, buying and selling have of course been disrupted by the fact that digital copies can be made infinitely. Unlike, say, a bicycle, a digital recording of a song is what economists call a “non-rivalrous good”, which means that one person's having it doesn't stop another from having it. And even in the world of material, non-duplicable objects, the emergence of early platforms and the “sharing economy” promised to revolutionise our relationship to them. It would no longer be necessary for everyone to own their own power-drill or car, the rhetoric goes, because we just borrow from one another, using online platforms to coordinate.

This basic principle is still present, both in commentary about technology, and in real shifts in people's lives. For instance, in Kevin Kelly's 2017 *The Inevitable*, one of his principles was “Access” – i.e. the idea that the focus is now on having access to products, with questions of ownership becoming less relevant and arguably meaningless.

This dogma of the digital age was turned on its head by Nathan Schneider in [a 2014 blog entitled “Owning Is the New Sharing”](#). In it he turned the focus on the second level: what about the platforms which *mediate* this access, who owns *those*? “There

are many ways to own,” Schneider writes. “Simply giving up on ownership, however, will mean that those who actually do own the tools that we rely on to share will control them.” He went on to be a founding and central figure in the Platform Coop movement.

Ownership, Power and Trust

On the first level, the shift towards a mindset of access is precipitated by the realisation that in most cases ownership isn’t an end in itself: the point is to be able to use a particular item, listen to a particular song, etc., and platforms facilitated that access without necessitating ownership.

If we apply a similar thought process to the second level, we see that behind questions of ownership, we’re actually talking about questions of power. With regard to platforms, we’re talking above all about the possibility of value extraction, as well as decisions about how the platform is structured and run. Traditionally, the ultimate power over these matters simply lay with the owners. But there are various ways that these could be decoupled.

The softest version is for an Ethical Platform to gain the *trust* of users, without formally altering the fact that it retains all the conventional privileges of ownership. Through some combination of the background of the project and its founders (see factor 1 above), as well as the values and culture it projects to the world (see factor 3), a platform can gain credibility among (some) users that it will act in an ethical way and not against their interests.

If this does not seem sufficient, there are two stronger versions. The platform can win over the more mistrustful by retaining ownership but placing binding limits on the powers that this bestows. The [growing interest in steward-ownership](#) is of course trying to do just this. But older versions also exist, in the form of registered charities (and accompanying rules about revenue and profit) as well as B-Corps and the like.

Alternatively, ownership above can be distributed and collectivised – and hence also the powers discussed above can be collectively exercised (or not).

Of course, if decisions about how a platform is run are decentralised to a collective of coop members or other stakeholders, this comes with practical challenges. Some within the Platform Coop community claim to be influenced by the Occupy Movement, with its egalitarian rejection of hierarchy in favour of consensus-based decision-making. But many critics of the Occupy Movement have argued that this ultimately led to inefficiency and paralysis, rather than creativity or dynamism. This is far too complex a question to explore in any depth here – suffice only to point out

that there can be a tension between democratising decision-making and remaining effective and competitive.

IV. THE ROLE OF DSI IN THE AGE OF PLATFORMS

Today's landscape of Ethical Platforms

There appears to be a proliferation of Ethical Platforms in many countries and on many topics. In its [online directory](#), the Platform Coop Consortium lists 281 projects which have at least some of the features it advocates.

To give a sense of current activity, we can identify some of the specific ways that these EPs hope to have an impact.

- **A fairer deal for producers.** Many commercial platforms let the producers of digital content sell it to consumers, but in the process force prices very low and/or extract much of the revenue for themselves – thereby squeezing the producers that the whole model relies on. These EPs employ different pricing models, where more of the profits go to the person who made the content.
- **A fairer deal for workers.** Across various industries, some platforms aim to protect workers both by securing them better pay but also giving them a say in the running of the platform itself.
- **Democratising the data economy.** Whereas commercial platforms monetise user data, often without their knowledge or informed consent, some platforms aim to wrest control of this data back to users themselves. This might allow users to selectively share their data with causes they support, such as medical research – or else monetise it but realise those profits for themselves not somebody else.

The challenges facing Ethical Platforms, and disillusionment with the sharing economy

But this narrative of experimentation and proliferation stands in tension with the difficulties that many EPs demonstrably face when trying to enter and thrive in a domain occupied by commercial platforms.

There has been considerable disillusionment over recent years about the “sharing economy”. In the 2000s, there was a lot of utopian rhetoric about the opportunity to radically reduce consumption and increase community bonds by sharing more with each other. Many of the early platforms in this space were recognisably DSI in terms of their backgrounds and values. [Couchsurfing](#) was a vision not just for an accommodation option in foreign cities, but for a global community of like-minded people who could host each other to stay (for free) and share experiences. Ride-sharing platforms like [The Pasty Connection](#) aimed to reduce the environmental cost of travel and also increase mobility for those in isolated places or with limited resources.

As noted in the introduction, however, the sharing economy has come to be dominated by corporate giants. The idealistic Couchsurfing is now dwarfed by Airbnb, which no doubt still creates many warm and sincere connections, but is nevertheless much more transactional and commercialised. A similar change has taken place in the ride-sharing sector, which is now dominated by companies such as BlaBlaCar (and in fact Uber).

This is a sobering turn of events. But is it inevitable and irreversible? What role, if any, is left for DSI in the age of platform capitalism?

Building a platform in an emergency

In September 2015, cities across Europe were receiving large numbers of refugees, mostly having fled civil war in Syria. Due to the acute need and the extensive media coverage, many citizens were motivated to volunteer in the effort to make sure the new arrivals were adequately housed, fed and clothed during their first weeks. But there was no real infrastructure – either analogue or digital – to manage and coordinate so many would-be volunteers. A group of software developer friends in Berlin spent a weekend building [volunteer-planner.org](#), which allowed the administrators of refugee shelters to list what kind of help they needed when, and

people could then use the platform to sign up for particular shifts. For several months during peak strain on reception processes, the platform was heavily used.

Volunteer Planner illustrates one instance of when an EP could be built to meet a need, and a commercial platform would be unable to fill the gap, namely in a crisis situation, where actions need to be rapid in response to a fast-moving situation. The Volunteer Platform was programmed from scratch over the course of a weekend. Technically speaking, it was rudimentary and it didn't look pretty. It was built in the absence of a formal organisation or company, which makes the question of ownership less than straightforward. But in the circumstances, these factors were unimportant.

This example fits into [a tradition of crisis response within the DSI community](#) (mostly drawn from the Hacker and Activist categories from the typology above). Depending on the situation, a platform can be a powerful weapon in their armoury.

Building a platform when there's no business case

Some EPs may be able to thrive free from competition from profit-driven alternatives if there is no clear business case to the platform. If, to put it another way, it's not possible to extract monetary value from the platform's interactions (or at least not enough to finance the platform's operations).

There are different reasons why a platform might be non-monetisable.

Perhaps the scale and number of interactions remains very small, because it serves a very narrow niche and/or because it is a specifically local service. [The Pasty Connection](#), for instance is a ride-sharing platform for the region of Cornwall in the south-west of England, which appears to thrive with the loyalty of locals despite the availability of large commercially-developed alternatives.

With certain types of interactions, users might be especially resistant to paying a fee to a platform. Take for instance the many volunteering platforms, whereby NGOs can list volunteering opportunities, and members of the public can sign up. The vast majority of these platforms appear to be DSI projects, not built by private tech companies, and it makes intuitive sense that both the NGOs and volunteers would be more drawn to non-profit sites that are free for them to use.

Taking this idea further, the internet has broadened what volunteering can mean. It no longer necessarily takes the form of an afternoon serving soup to homeless people, helping children to read, or the like. Now crowdsourcing approaches let people volunteer their time and expertise in myriad different ways – and DSI

platforms can be instrumental in this. Examples include the [Savannah](#) repository for people to share their open source code, and citizen science platforms like [Zooniverse](#).

Building an ethical “knock-off” of a commercial service

I began this section by suggesting that several pioneers of the early sharing economy came from DSI, but they have been edged out over time by commercialised services. But disillusionment with these capitalist giants could create a demand for more ethical alternatives. As indicated above, DSI projects may attempt to compete with corporate platforms and use their ethical credentials as a competitive advantage, to lure away ethically conscious consumers.

There are some examples of such ethical “knock-offs”, some even going so far as to ape the names of platform giants. [FairBnB](#), for example, offers a similar service to AirBnB but with a commitment to the principles of platform cooperativism with the vision of a more community-centred kind of tourism.

The fate of the now-defunct [ethicalBay](#), aiming to offer a more ethical alternative to the platforms eBay or Amazon, shows that a pitch of this kind involves serious challenges.

The funding gap between EPs and commercial platforms

The biggest underlying challenge here is funding. Commercial platforms have access to the massive infrastructure of funding and capital investment which has built up around the tech industry over the years: patient venture capital and other funds investing billions in companies that they hope will eventually return big profits.

As a rule, ethical platforms will not have access to resources that are remotely comparable – because they are not private companies (dimension 1: managers), and/or they are not for sale to investors (dimension 2: owners), and/or they reject some of the most common means to generate revenue and so are not attractive investments (dimension 3: behaviour).

This massive disparity in resources is likely to outweigh any competitive advantage that an EP might have on account of being “the good guys”. An EP is inevitably going to struggle if their commercial competitor has a team and a marketing budget that are an order of magnitude greater.

In fact, the reality is even more extreme: the economics of the tech industry are such that commercial platforms often have enormous reserves of cash *and* run at an enormous loss. Uber, for instance, [operated at a loss](#) of over 7,000,000,000 USD in the years 2017-18. This is because they hope to gain a monopoly share of a market and recoup money later. But this dynamic merely serves to stack the odds still further against DSI hopefuls who can't resort to such tactics.

An interesting variant on this, but with a similar effect: Facebook recently introduced a ["donate button"](#) to allow nonprofits to fundraise on its platform. This places a new pressure on existing DSI donation platforms (disclosure: betterplace lab's parent company, gut.org, also runs such a DSI platform, [betterplace.org](#)), since Facebook not only has greater reach but also the ability to run that particular function without generating direct revenue; it can be absorbed by Facebook's overall earnings.

Some people have argued for the creation of new investment funds to finance EPs. For example, [the report by Simon Borkin](#) cited above calls for a "Platform Coop Fund" 1 million GBP. This would no doubt be a positive thing, but in the end it would probably do little to close the gaping funding gap we're talking about here.

In the end, then, since EPs are unlikely to outcompete commercial platforms, they are likely to be limited either to those niches where commercial approaches *can't* be employed (as in the sections above), or to taking just a small market share and gaining much of their impact not through direct usage but rather a kind of advocacy role, i.e. creating pressure on commercial rivals by showing a more ethical path is possible.

V. THE FUTURE OF ETHICAL PLATFORMS

The platform is here to stay. Letting people find and interact with each other more easily and effectively is a cornerstone of what makes the internet so powerful and valuable. But as we come to appreciate what's *not* working about today's platform economy, we realise that creating something better must be one of our major collective priorities.

We celebrate DSI in its various incarnations, which does so much to find uses for digital technology that serve the common good. But specifically when it comes to platforms, our optimism for the role DSI is currently able to play is modest. The inescapable fact is that platforms are resource-intensive undertakings with very strong network effects, and today's tech industry and its funding infrastructure is

such that DSI alternatives will very often struggle to compete. As such, they may be limited to the margins, where special circumstances create a niche for a non-commercial alternative.

There are possible responses to this rather dispiriting conclusion, but they would have to go beyond just trying to create a really good Ethical Platform and hoping for the best. It would require genuine and deep systemic change. One avenue advocated by voices in the Platform Coop movement is to level the playing field through a muscular policy approach. Policymakers could create incentives and support for Ethical Platforms while enacting policies to contain the excesses of platform capitalism, e.g. through antitrust law or even nationalisation.

Right now, such proposals seem very radical. But given how high the stakes are, and how far platforms reach into our lives now and in the future, a radical stance may be warranted.