# 12. Digital Commoning and the Fight for a Human-Centered Internet

by Mai Ishikawa Sutton

It rarely gets hot out in San Francisco, but especially not in the peak of summer. You're much more likely to be engulfed by a cold fog than be graced by a single ray of sun. It was July 2018. I wrapped my coat tightly around myself and walked out of the Powell BART station onto the bustle of Market Street. I wasn't only bracing for the weather, but for the gut wrenching feeling I get when walking through this part of town.

On the sidewalk, chattering flocks of perky tech workers float by. To their left and right, downcast people look roughed up by the elements. On the bright green painted bike lanes, people zoom by on $1,500 Onewheel skateboards, dodging those who push all their possessions in a shopping cart. Shiny glass buildings tower over the realities of the people who live at street level. The homeless crisis has gotten so bad here that a UN official has called the conditions ["shocking and intolerable."](http://www.ktvu.com/news/un-report-singles-out-homeless-conditions-in-oakland-san-francisco-as-cruel-and-inhumane-)1

The Internet has taken the world by storm — transforming economies, societies, and politics. But the eye of this storm is the Bay Area, where the human cost of the tech boom is acutely experienced day-to-day. Here is where people invest billions of dollars in new apps, gadgets, and services. Here, smart people work overtime to build things that utterly transform the way people live. Yet in the midst of all this exertion, public infrastructure is crumbling and thousands of people have become unhoused. Even on the warmest days in San Francisco, the city has an air of indifference that is chilling.

This crisis of material human suffering shares its roots with the rise of human rights violations that pervade the internet, including mass corporate surveillance, the exploitation of personal data, and the censorship of online expression. These cases of neglect and exploitation are familiar because we see them happening in every part of the economy. They are by-products of capitalism — an ideology that justifies even the most harmful policies and practices for the growth and wealth of private firms. People are still grappling with the worst externalities of internet capitalism. Many activists are working hard to hold tech companies accountable and pass laws to stop their exploitative practices. Yet there are others who build alternatives. They are exploring how things could be better altogether by revolutionizing how we approach technology, innovation and the internet. These builders are looking at how we can move away from an internet that is based on profit, to an internet that is built on solidarity.

## Internet of Profit

As one of the first generations of digital natives who grew up using the internet as a child, I've seen how it can be a source of joy and empowerment. It provides global spaces that allow us to share information and media that is beautiful, absurd, and heartbreaking. Memes and hashtags give us a common vocabulary to share our feelings and stories. The internet has become a critical platform for us to confront sexual assault, racism and hate. It has given people community. The global network of networks that we call the internet has triggered a worldwide exchange of ideas and creativity that is unprecedented.

But most of these positive aspects have come at a cost. Largely without our consent, we have become test subjects whose private data is harvested. Our data enables companies to manipulate our material needs and emotional desires. They condition us to become increasingly docile consumers, addicted to convenience and quantifiable fame and attention. We don’t have to look far to see why the internet’s worst elements are eclipsing the good.

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Many of the worst human rights violations online can be directly attributed to for-profit corporations. Legally, they are obligated to maximize the wealth of those who own the companies. It says so in their bylaws, the legal contract that dictates their operations and objectives. These for-profit motives drive most social networks, hosting services and internet service providers (ISPs), to name just a few. As long as they are for-profit corporations, their primary focus must be to make money. Therefore it's usually only a matter of time before some aspect of their business violates human rights. The payoff — for instance, to exploit personal data — is too great, while the consequences for their actions are often negligible. The wonderful things that the internet can provide are thus all too often outweighed by the abuses that are justified by capitalism.

Violations to our privacy and freedom of expression are common in this internet of profit. However, I'd like to point to a few other harmful externalities that have also gotten recent attention.

## Worker Disempowerment

As users are exploited, the workers who build and maintain internet services are too. The maltreatment of Uber drivers, Deliveroo riders and the rest of the contingent workforce is rampant, while companies pamper those higher up in the chain. High salaries, free meals and excellent social benefits are a norm among those in the tech workforce elite. But even these coddled workers are locked into highly managed hierarchies — with the shareholders at the top, the board of directors is under them, then the CEO, and a long line of managers overseeing everyone else. Each is beholden to their superiors. No one is to prioritize the well-being of their colleagues, the users of their product, or even themselves — except for those shareholders who'll someday profit off the whole operation.

## Violating Net Neutrality

Net neutrality would not be an issue if internet service providers (ISPs) could not profit handsomely by discriminating between different types of content they serve to subscribers. But they can. Without net neutrality, companies can therefore be free to charge more for certain types of access. Legal protections for users can prevent ISPs from limiting who can see what on the internet based on what they can afford. Net neutrality regulations are urgent and required to protect the free and open internet because ISPs are much too inclined to squeeze their subscribers for extra monetary fees.

## Environmental Externalities

The cell phones we carry in our pockets, the laptops we use for work — all of these networked devices contain a wide range of toxic minerals that are extracted from the Earth. For instance, most rechargeable lithium ion batteries contain cobalt from the Congo, obtained by people [under hazardous conditions](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/oct/12/phone-misery-children-congo-cobalt-mines-drc)2. While some effort has been made by [EU lawmakers](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/world/20170314STO66681/conflict-minerals-the-bloody-truth-behind-your-smartphone)3 to curb the human rights violations associated with the manufacturing of our internet-enabled products, it is still far from enough.

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Meanwhile, companies do little to nothing to make devices last longer than a few years. Longer-lasting devices would lead to falling sales. Apple does everything in its power to make it [more difficult to repair parts](https://boingboing.net/2018/11/09/straight-to-landfill.html)4 on their phones. These devices are treated as disposable, enabling widespread neglect of the human and environmental costs involved in building them.

## Undermining Democracy

As is common practice among large corporate firms, tech companies are not shy about throwing around their resources to influence government policies. In the EU, they have quickly risen to become one of the [most powerful industry blocs](https://transparency.eu/uber-lobbyists/)5 to lobby their way through Brussels. [Airbnb](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/airbnb-san-francisco-proposition-f_us_56366676e4b0c66bae5cc3b6)6 and [Uber](https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/yp337g/why-uber-lost-austin)7 are infamous examples. They spend millions of dollars at local city elections in the U.S. and [the EU](https://corporateeurope.org/pressreleases/2018/05/airbnb-lobbies-eu-fight-cities-attempts-protect-affordable-housing)8 to stop regulations that would adversely affect their business, even when the laws are designed for the public interest.

Multinational technology companies are also actively undermining national governments through international law. Tech companies are [influencing trade agreements](http://globalnetpolicy.org/digital-trade-agenda/)9 to win favorable terms, framing data as a commodity that must flow freely across borders. Even constraints on how data is collected and shared between companies, such as to protect user privacy, are framed by industry representatives as a trade barrier that must be stopped.

This internet, built out of profit-seeking organizations, is unhealthy. It is disempowering, restrictive, and environmentally unsustainable. What if — instead of the internet being built out of profit — it were built out of solidarity?

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## Internet of Solidarity

The commons is often mistaken to be a passive shared resource that is used and easily exploitable by people. But it's not. The commons is an economic and social paradigm that is fundamentally about prioritizing solidarity. In a commons, the resource is a shared problem that invites our collective concern. It provides an opportunity for people to have better relationships with each other by caring about the same thing. This expands our empathy and encourages better communication. Instead of being competitors in a struggle for artifically scarce resources, it inspires us to see each other as neighbors, as equal collaborators for survival.

Internet services and platforms can prioritize collective human empowerment. In an ideal world, they would be fully committed to it, both legally and culturally. They would have to institutionalize participatory and inclusive governance. Direct democracy, representative democracy, and sortition are only a few examples of ways that internet-based companies could be run as a commons. These decision-making models are usually exercised in government, but they can also be applied to companies — namely, cooperatives. There are many well-known examples of internet commons projects, such as Wikipedia, the Internet Archive, the Tor Network. But there are still many legal, political and economic challenges that prevent such commons from emerging or thriving in the current world.

To shed light on some other types of internet commoning, I'll share a few examples. Even though they do not fully embrace the commons concept, in their own way these projects address one of the problems of the internet of profit as explained above. They point us toward what an internet of solidarity may look like.

## Worker Empowerment

New movements are emerging to make tech companies more accountable to their workers. [Platform cooperativism](https://platform.coop/about) is a movement to shift ownership and control over internet platforms from managers and shareholders to its workers and users. The thinking is to democratize the governance over these platforms and expand their priorities to encompass a wider array of issues concerning the community. [Tech Workers Coalition](https://techworkerscoalition.org/)10 is a group organizing to improve the working conditions of those in the tech industry. They are active in working to hold their companies accountable for projects that undermine human rights or are otherwise ethically misguided.

## Protecting Net Neutrality

If ISP subscribers owned and controlled their own last-mile internet infrastructure, then they would likely decide not to throttle their connections or raise monthly subscription prices. A community network is one that is built and operated by the people who use it. It's not about extracting profit. It's about providing a service that's best for its user-owners, and that includes making it inexpensive for them to connect to the internet. A report published by the [Internet Society and Centre for European Policy Studies](https://www.internetsociety.org/resources/doc/2018/meeting-europes-connectivity-challenge/)11 explored five case studies of community-owned networks across Europe. It concluded that such networks could help bridge the digital divide by providing affordable connections to people in remote areas.

## Environmental Sustainability

The source and method of mineral extraction to build our devices is an immense design challenge that must be grappled with. In the shorter term however, we must find ways to make technology less disposable. [iFixit](https://www.ifixit.com/)12 is an online community manual for people to share information and methods to repair broken things. It is a for-profit company that manages the website and sells tools and parts to repair common devices, such as iPhones. While it is for-profit, the iFixit platform is in many ways a commons, where the members write and share high-quality repair instructions.

## Strengthening Democracy

There have been many projects to strengthen democratic processes, particularly in the U.S. following the 2016 Presidential election. However, there are some older projects that have worked for several years to expand government transparency and open democratic deliberation. [Public.Resource.Org](https://public.resource.org/index.html)13 digitizes and makes accessible works of the United States Federal Government which are not available online. Major projects conducted by the organization include the digitizing and sharing of large numbers of court records, U.S. government-produced video, and laws. [Loomio](https://www.opendemocracy.net/digitaliberties/marco-deseriis-richard-bartlett/loomio-and-problem-of-deliberation)14 is used by hundreds of cooperatives and organizations worldwide, including within circles of Podemos in Spain. Essentially, it's a tool for collective deliberation and asynchronous decisionmaking. Loomio provides options for different types of voting, such as a poll, ranked choice, or saying yes or no to a given proposal.

An internet that is based on solidarity would not violate our human rights to the extent that our current internet does today. Organizations that inherently care about their workers, community members, and their impact on the world would have to build human rights protections into their services. This becomes much easier to do when you do not have to make constant trade-offs in the name of profit.

## Digital Commons and Human Rights

We have so much to do to fix the internet itself. However, much of it will also be impacted by extreme, foreseeable changes to our life here on Earth. As we forge ahead through the Anthropocene, it's critical that we use networked communication to share information and media that will help us face these future challenges. We don't have time to waste dealing with internet platforms that embolden powerful actors, censor the marginalized, and boost lies over truth.

The promise of a commons-based internet is to communicate and share information in the best possible way. When platforms and services are governed democratically, it helps us choose what works for our community and our individual needs. It's the same with food, water, air, or housing — we have to be able to talk through what works, what doesn't, and what needs to be done to protect ourselves and the shared resource. To commonify the internet is not an end in itself, but a stepping stone, making it easier for us to turn everything we need to survive and thrive on this planet into a commons.

The Bay Area has in many ways become a dystopian reality. It is one of the many grim truths of this global tech boom. But this must not become an accepted fact nor be discounted as an unavoidable negative externality of this business. Networked technologies do not need to plunge us into a world of growing detachment and indifference. Let's recognize that the most valuable kind of innovation is that which expands our ability to flourish as a species. We can be empathetic, trusting, and helpful to each other. The internet should help make us better people. If it's not going to bring out the best of humanity, what's the point?

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Policymakers, innovators, organizers, and everyone else can take part in bringing about the internet of solidarity. First of all, it needs to become much less appealing to start or operate for-profit businesses. Policymakers could stop generous tax breaks to for-profit tech companies and break up the platform monopolies using antitrust laws (as some officials are actively seeking to do). They could enact financial incentives for commons-based projects to get off the ground. This might take the form of public investment in platform cooperatives or generous tax breaks for business-to-coop conversions. With public support in place, it would make it people to take risks and try their hand at building new commons-based internet start-ups. We need the same kind of bold experimentation that occurs among for-profit tech start-ups to build organizations that could someday be viable not-for-profit alternatives to the exploitative services we use today.

This will all be a huge undertaking. None of this is possible if we go on believing that we are better off only serving our own self interests. But I am optimistic. I believe that humans have an incredible untapped capacity to empathize and work together with others, that we can choose to do that instead of putting all our energy and belief in unsustainable, wealth-seeking corporations. This is what it means to build up the commons. We need to work with each other, for each other, to build up shared public resources and infrastructure. It will take considerable shift in our thinking, but thankfully, we have leaders like those in this book who are showing us the way.