



Dismantling Digital Dominance in Culture: Exploring Alternatives Models to Tech Giants



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A Volume from the Reset! Atlas

Haven't we all criticised MAGMA (Microsoft, Amazon, Google, Meta, and Apple) at some point? But how to get rid of it when it basically owns most of the technological field, and has such functional and accessible tools? Asking the question of alternative solutions is one of the concerns of independent cultural players, as a wish to maintain this independence even in the mobilisation of different technological and computer tools. Decentralised technologies and resources are essential to virtuous cultural practices. Stepping away from tech giants is the only way to regain control over our privacy, security, and personal data. Reset! wants to contribute to the debate, as well as to put the spotlight on independent cultural organisations that successfully have started to migrate away from MAGMA.

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Editorial

Reset! Network:
An Age of Alliances

Europe's cultural landscape has entered a phase of transition, the harbinger of a new era. This break with the past, which took a tangible hold around the time of the global pandemic, reflects not only the difficulty of leaving behind the codes and social fabric of the 'cultural world as we knew it,' but also the yearning to look ahead to a new horizon in a context marked by accelerating climate change, ultra-violent geopolitical upheavals, and the mounting sense of conflict, even within democratic societies.

A polarised and weakened common perspective

Culture has entered a period of **doubt**, of uncertainty, of feverish introspection about its meaning, its generational misunderstandings, its many tensions, and about the new forms of mistrust that it had previously overlooked.

The pressure weighing down on culture as a result of the paradigm shifts inherent in its day-to-day deployment is just as crippling: **radical transformation of our relationship with work**, new forms of mobility, reassessment of spaces and territories, the evolving role of mediation, upheavals linked to the rapid pace of technological development and the countless ethical questions it spawns.

Culture is confronted with the many issues that are on a head-on collision course with society, fuelling polarisation and the **growing radicalisation of interactions, leading to a breakdown of dialogue, of the shared perspective, and of the collective adventure**, complicating and eroding culture's primary mission, which is to open minds, nurture dialogue, create conditions conducive to listening and interacting with others.

The threat of authoritarianism, the threat of concentration

Culture is under pressure from its social context and from the sense of "permanent crisis" that pervades our age. But it is also, more than ever, intimidated by its economic and political environment. More than ever, culture and the media are victims of **full frontal attacks from authoritarian regimes that**

deny and sometimes flout their artistic, cultural, and editorial independence. More than ever, independent culture and media are struggling to survive in a hyper-concentrated competitive world, where the growing power of the web, publishing, media, or music industry giants means shrinking margins of manoeuvre for pluralism and diversity.

Independent cultural ecosystems are fragile and under threat in many parts of Europe. Yet they are essential to democratic and social vitality, in particular to equip up-and-coming generations for the transformations our world is screaming out for: capacity for action and transformation, social and environmental responsibility, the fight against discrimination, pluralism and diversity, safeguarding freedom of creation and expression, strengthening media education, inclusion, regeneration, equal access to culture and the media, but also access to their production.

Forging new alliances

Confronted with these challenges, the turmoil of our times, authoritarian regimes and the growing concentration of capital in the culture and media sectors, **a strategy of massive cooperation is held up as the only possible response.**

It has become not only strategic, but imperative, to connect the players, foster the sharing of resources, knowledge and tools, promote collective intelligence and the forms of governance that encourage it, **work in networks and join forces.**

The time has come to imagine new ways of forging alliances between cultural players and independent media, but also with **all those working in the general interest**, particularly in the public sector in the fields of education, youth, the media, and health: the public broadcasting service, universities, local authorities.

This is what the Reset! network is all about. It endeavours to adopt a Europe-wide, non-sectoral approach to bring together cultural structures and independent media, but also to bring on board general interest resource hubs (Consentis, Black Artist Database, Observatoire des politiques culturelles, ACT RIGHT, and others), as well as **local authorities willing to support** the movement and serve as testing grounds for new practices (City of Lyon, City of Brussels).

The Reset! network brings together cultural structures and independent media to give them a platform to get better acquainted, enter into dialogue, work, and act together.

Common atlas

The Reset! network is doing just that, working **from Budapest to Lisbon, from Kyiv to Prishtina, from Amsterdam to Naples**, to bring together cultural structures (concert halls, festivals, publishing houses, labels, etc.) and independent media to give them a platform to get better acquainted, enter into dialogue, work, and act together. To build their common approach to transformation, these 85 organisations first focused on their local area and local issues: for just over a year, dozens of workshops were organised across the continent to **take the pulse of independent European cultural**

ecosystems.

Today, the time has come for an initial pooling of this feedback. This is the purpose of this atlas and its volumes, built collectively around eight themes that emerged during the year's meetings: "Independent culture in times of adversity", "Ecological commitment in the independent sector", "Enlarging communities in culture: the need for common spaces rooting in independence", "Imbalances in territories representation: independent structures to counterbalance a hyper-centralised cultural and media field", "Connecting to the youth: maintaining intergenerational links, enhancing emergence", "Creating and preserving safe spaces: diversify, include and raise awareness", "Decentralising digital power in culture: let's talk about MAGMA alternatives", "The concentration or independence antithesis".

This material, which **captures the zeitgeist and the changes taking place in the cultural sector**, will serve as the foundations for our advocacy and transformation tools. A few months away from a high-risk European election, and in a context where it is in serious danger of disappearing from the programme priorities, the Reset! network and its members will take it upon themselves to highlight the essential role of culture, the media, their independent ecosystems, and their artistic and editorial integrity, in this period of essential social and democratic reconstruction that has only just begun.

February 2024

Editorial

Vincent Carry has been Managing Director of the Arty Farty association since 2002, supporting the development of the Nuits sonores festival in Lyon, the Sucre club, the Hôtel71 creative hub and the HEAT food court. In 2023, he was appointed chairman of the Gaîté Lyrique cultural institution in Paris, bringing together a consortium comprising ARTE, Singa, makesense and Actes Sud.

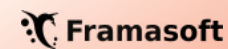
Under their opinion

In a digital landscape dominated by tech giants, a growing movement is reshaping the technological ecosystem. This column delves into the world of decentralised technologies and explores the alternatives emerging in response to the centralised control wielded by industry titans. This exploration aims to shed light on the transformative potential of decentralised systems. As we navigate an era marked by concerns about privacy, data ownership, and monopolistic practices, understanding and embracing these alternatives becomes crucial.

For an Empowering Digital World

Framasoft

is a French association for popular education founded in 2004, whose aim is to contribute to a socially just society in which digital technology empowers people, against the backdrop of surveillance capitalism.



In just under 30 years, digital technology has radically changed our relationship with the world, with reality, and with society. While a lot of the things we do every day that are beyond our own physical and cognitive capacities are made possible thanks to digital tools, there is nothing straightforward about them. A number of systems that imply technical, economic, legal, and social choices are hinged around digital technology. These choices can concentrate or distribute power, waste or save resources, reinforce or reduce inequalities, protect or threaten our freedoms. What worries us at Framasoft is that those who currently define these choices are the giants who concentrate a decisive share of resources, data, income, and power at hitherto unprecedented levels.

Why the web giants are highly toxic companies

GAFAM, NATU, BATX¹: these are the acronyms of the main companies that rule the digital universe. They are characterised primarily by their sheer size, but are also dubbed giants because they are ubiquitous, due to the incalculable amount of data they store, because everyone uses their services... and finally, as a result of their gargantuan revenues. While they may operate in different fields, their services pursue the same goal: to **expand their empire to generate even more capital**. These companies exercise a triple domination: economic, technical, and cultural. With the liberal policies of the United States smoothing their paths, these multinationals have gained from all the measures taken to liberalise and commoditise the Internet, and now form a powerful oligopoly that wields a decisive influence on the way the Internet operates and on its prospects for future development. Since the beginning of the 21st century, these web giants have gained a foothold throughout the digital value chain thanks to “offensive strategies.” As they have expanded, they have strengthened their market power and increased society’s dependence on their services and technologies. In the space of just a few years,

1. GAFAM : Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft / NATU : Netflix, Airbnb, Tesla, Uber / BATX : Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, Xiaomi

these companies have become the world's biggest market capitalisations, earning profits clocking in at several hundred billion dollars, giving them unprecedented resources to pursue their expansion. These sums, in the words of European Commissioner Margrethe Vestager, allow them to "kill innovation," by giving them the power to buy up any company on the planet. Accused of anti-competitive practices, they have become the target of lawsuits, investigations, and even sanctions by market regulators and governments in various countries. The overwhelming technical dominance of the web giants is another concern. They alone generate colossal amounts of web traffic and boast billions of users. By 2022, YouTube will account for more than 20% of global internet traffic and will be broadcasting more than a billion hours of video every day. The Meta group has 2.93 billion daily active users and 8.5 million searches are performed every day on Google. This centralisation of digital usage enables them to collect and exploit data on a massive scale, especially as their services are now designed to capture our attention. In line with their economic and technological expansion, these giants have extended their influence to the field of public action and nurture close links with political power by investing in the funding of electoral campaigns and through lobbying activities. Finally, these companies promote an

It is essential to acknowledge and accept that changing our digital "routines" calls for an effort.

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ideology spawned in Silicon Valley (the result of a cross between the libertarian demands of the hippies and the entrepreneurial spirit of economic liberalism) in which technology plays a decisive role and is seen as the (only) solution to most of the problems facing our societies. According to this ideology, the individual's quest for autonomy and freedom is the preserve of a 'deserving' part of society, while, in truth, it makes it possible to lend a positive sheen to egocentric and disproportionate initiatives (transhumanism, space colonisation, etc.) hatched by rich and all-powerful entrepreneurs.

Aligning our digital practices with our values

What would digital look like on our terms? Or rather, what kind of digital society do we want? From the point of view of general interest, solidarity, ecological transition, social justice, and power-sharing, it seems obvious that the digital technology imposed on us by the web giants should be banned. At Framasoft, we advocate for acceptable digital technology, one that is socially and ecologically sustainable, chosen rather than endured, non-alienating and that contributes to the emancipation of people, all people. And the good news is that this digital world already exists... and has for a long time.

That is why we believe that it is

essential that organisations that operate according to the values of social progress and environmental justice politicise their digital choices. Players in the cultural sector can also sign up for this mindset. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, here are a few ways in which you can live in the digital world that empowers you. The first step is to become aware of the impact of digital practices. Let's be honest: while most of us admit that the web giants are toxic, we continue to use their services, sometimes because we are forced to (by our professional environment, our communities, etc.), and often of our own free will. How can we gain insights into how our personal and collective use of these services actually feeds these digital ogres? Do we really know what the alternatives are? Are they satisfactory? Do we really want to direct our energy into deconstructing our digital habits? This is what it all comes down to. It is essential to acknowledge and accept that changing our digital "routines" calls for an effort. 40% of the actions we perform on a daily basis are habits rather than intentional decisions², and this also applies to our digital habits. We tend to get into a rut: our points of interest force us to return to the same place time and again to access information or perform a task. And if we constantly repeat this behaviour, it becomes practically automatic. So replacing a habit with a new one is one of the hardest things to do. By being aware of these mechanisms, it is possible to counter them... little by little.

Our second piece of advice when

it comes to digital transition: take all the time you need. The risk of doing a U-turn is much higher if you change all your digital practices in one fell swoop. Since some changes are easier than others (for example: using a free Internet browser, changing your default search engine, downloading your applications from F-Droid, using a secure cloud or creating encrypted email³), start with these, one change at a time. Once you get going, it becomes easier to create new habits using new tools. Finally, if you want to launch this approach within your organisation, before you start, make sure that everyone concerned understands the issues and accepts the impact of this transition. Communicate as much as possible about the whys and wherefores, involve them in the process (for example, by inviting them to be involved in picking the alternatives) and help them to get to grips with these new tools. More and more organisations are succeeding in aligning their digital tools with their values. Why shouldn't yours?

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2. Charles Duhigg, *The Power Of Habit : Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*, London, Random House, 2012.
3. The following platforms offer lists of alternatives to the various services provided by the digital giants: <https://alternativeto.net/> ; <https://www.chatons.org/> ; <https://degooglisons-internet.org/>

Under their light

We present a collection of articles highlighting inspiring examples of decentralised technologies and alternatives that have successfully partly liberated themselves from the clutches of industry behemoths. From highlighting the intrinsic problems of tech giants' tools to ingenious peer-to-peer platforms, these stories exemplify the power of alternatives in reshaping our digital landscape –particularly in the independent cultural sector. Additionally, we uncover these transformative narratives that illuminate the path toward a more diverse, open, and alternative digital future.

Unpacking Complexity

The Centralisation of Power in MAGMA: Unpacking Its Flaws

Benefits of digital technologies for cultural sectors

At the root of the development of the internet and of the World Wide Web was the belief that digital technologies could contribute to greater empowerment and emancipation of citizens by reducing the power of corporations over ordinary citizens in the offline world. Applied to the cultural and creative sectors, digital technologies do indeed have a number of advantages that could be consistent with such a levelling of the playing field.

First, it is becoming much easier, and cheaper to reach potential audiences. Physical barriers to the distribution of information seem to be less and less important. Content can also be quickly transferred from producers to consumers, especially if it is dematerialised, which is increasingly the case for video, audio, and text. Second, there is a democratisation of the means of production. For example, cheaper synthesizers make it possible to imitate most musical instruments. Computer-generated imagery makes it possible to create special effects that would have cost millions to produce a few decades ago.

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Finally, as technology makes it possible for everyone to be connected to everyone else –all you need is an Internet connection– this opens up opportunities for artists, even those in very obscure niches, to reach enough audience to make a living.

These three arguments are those developed by Chris Anderson in his book *The Long Tail* (Anderson, 2006). He argues that, as a result, the development of digital technologies should enable greater diversity through access to, and consumption of a much wider range of choices by citizens. In parallel, the early years of the internet were characterised by a greater disintermediation as traditional intermediaries lost ground. Major record labels were suffering from declining sales of compact disc; newspapers publishers were experiencing a steady decline in sales and consumption; blogs were enabling some comics creators to become famous without the support of a publisher, and so on. And it was believed –and arguably feared by these traditional intermediaries– that this would lead to a fairer distribution of power in the cultural and creative sectors, with creators having direct relationships with their audience.

Digital technologies and centralisation of powers

However, instead of disintermediation, the current landscape is one of greater reintermediation with new, even more powerful intermediaries, in particular the online platforms provided by MAGMA (Microsoft, Amazon, Google, Meta, and Apple).

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While MAGMA are from outside of the cultural sector, traditional players in the field have responded to the development of online platforms by providing their own platforms. This process is referred to by Mansell (2015) as platformisation, in which all sectors (including the cultural) become entangled with each other (Ranaivoson, 2019). Indeed, the development of MAGMA and other online platforms has led to even more concentrated markets than in the pre-internet era. For example, by 2022, Amazon had a 74% market share of e-books in the US, and YouTube had 1.7 billion unique monthly visitors.

This increased concentration is not an unfortunate accident. It lies in the economic nature of online platforms, which rely on cross-sided network effects. They act as intermediaries, facilitating interactions between different types of agents such as sellers and consumers, or advertisers, viewers and creators, in so-called multi-sided markets (Evans et al., 2005). Cross-sided network effects correspond to the fact that increasing the number of agents on one side attracts an increasing number of the other, complementary type of agents on the other side, and vice versa.

Developing online platforms that mediate between two or more categories of users is a difficult endeavour. This is particularly the case because each side needs the other(s) to come on board –a sort of a chicken-or-the-egg dilemma. This may require investment to attract users, for example by reducing access costs, and makes it difficult to break even –think of Spotify, which is still losing money despite being the largest music streaming service. However, once a platform becomes successful, network effects tend to reinforce its dominance and market power. And there is currently no regulation in place to curb this phenomenon.

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Online platforms: a threat to independents

MAGMA's platform-driven domination of cultural sectors is threatening. But some of the expectations of the early years of the internet and of Anderson's *Long Tail* are still valid today. Independent artists can make their work available on, for example, Google's YouTube or Meta's Instagram. Innovation is still taking place, fuelled in particular by competition between MAGMA and the regular emergence of new entrants, such as the video-sharing service TikTok in 2018.

The first problem with such platforms is their influence. These new intermediaries have even more power than traditional intermediaries in the cultural sector. And they are no longer connected to a specific cultural sector. Selling books was the key to Amazon's development, but today it is only a small part of its revenue. These platforms are making decisions that can have an enormous influence on the cultural sector, especially as they have become the main access point to cultural content, and even more so to information about cultural content. For example, on September 5th, 2023, Meta announced that Facebook would make news and journalistic content less prominent in users' feeds. This decision may make sense in terms of the company's strategy to increase user engagement, but it has

potentially dramatic consequences for news content providers. It also illustrates how Facebook and social media in general do create a dependence for cultural and media actors.

MAGMA players also have most of the bargaining power, or simply decide unilaterally on every strategic decision regarding their platforms. Apple's decision to keep 30% of all revenue generated through its App Store is a matter of course for app providers. In 2020, US video game publisher Epic Games confronted this practice by offering Fortnite users discounts if they bought directly from Epic rather than from Apple's App Store, and immediately faced retaliation from Apple. If it is difficult for a major company like Epic Games to negotiate with Apple, it is clear

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that independents are in a very unfavourable position vis-à-vis MAGMA platforms. Their opinions are rarely asked, they can only try to adapt their business models and strategies as best as they can, and eventually complain. Photographers and illustrators, for example, were hit in the summer of 2022 when Meta's Instagram made some changes to its algorithms that would promote video content over images. Conversely, independents are highly dependent on MAGMA platforms – and arguably increasingly so. As the Long Tail theory predicted, more and more independent cultural and media players can make their work available online, but through centralised nodes of power that decide on the actual framework of the activity.

Worse still, there is a complete lack of transparency. This is particularly the case with algorithmic systems. Online platforms rely heavily on recommender systems to help their users find what to consume next. But little information is provided about what makes some content more prominent than others. Creators and intermediaries develop strategies to game the algorithms, from increasing their publication frequency to shortening their works, but it is questionable whether their time would not be better spent developing and producing content and improving other skills.

A glimpse of possible solutions

On a more optimistic note, and in order to open reflection on possible solutions, regulation could be involved. Looking specifically at the situation in the EU, a number of texts have recently been adopted that will have a direct impact on online platforms, from the General Data Protection Regulation in 2016, to the revision of the Audiovisual

Media Services Directive in 2018, to the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act (DMA), both in 2022. The DMA, in particular, monitors and imposes additional behavioural obligations and restrictions on those designated as gatekeepers – such as MAGMA platforms –, but does not address the specificities of the cultural and creative sector. At the same time, there is a tendency to encourage the emergence of national or European champions, thus not reducing concentration but making it more EU-based.

Another solution – although not entirely unrelated, as there is scope for developing public support for it – is decentralised technologies. This is the subject of this volume of the Reset! atlas. This is an important contribution to improving the Internet: promoting and encouraging the use of more diverse, more transparent, and fairer technologies. It also aims to change citizens' awareness and use of digital technologies.

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3 questions to Lahmacun Radio

Budapest, Hungary

01. Can you introduce your structure to us?

Lahmacun radio is a non-profit organisation with mostly volunteer contributors. Lahmacun radio is a democratic organisation. The work is organised into working groups where each working group member has one equal vote. The only hierarchy we have is that a special working group called board coordinates the work of other working groups. Lahmacun radio declares a manifesto and a status document that all contributors must accept and adhere to. The former defines the mission and later the work structure of Lahmacun radio.

02. Why did you join the Reset! network?

Lahmacun radio is a Budapest-based community project, which means that it relies on the support

and contributions of a local scene. We joined the Reset! network so that we can be part of a bigger, international community. Through the network we believe to strengthen our position, relevance and diversity.

03. What is the greatest challenge for an independent cultural organisation when trying to use MAGMA alternatives/ reduce your use of MAGMA platforms?

The MAGMA dilemma is, on the one hand, that small, independent organisations risk invisibility, i.e., a lack of audience/ contributors reach, when opting not to rely on MAGMA, and, on the other hand, that they risk their integrity and credibility when supporting (and vice versa, get supported by) those companies who create

a major source of global technological dependence. Therefore, a complete boycott of their services doesn't seem viable. However, taking part in a constructive criticism and the application of innovative alternatives may be a good compromise. At Lahmacun radio, although we use Meta services (specifically Facebook and Instagram), we maintain our own website with a news section where we make sure to expose the most important updates about our projects. The concept here is not to publish highlight project news exclusively on Meta platforms. Regarding Google, although we do make use of certain services of the company (such as emailing or teamwork), our dependence is not fundamental (e.g., our web hosting provider is a local, non-MAGMA company) and, as one of our important mission statements, we're exploring independent alternatives to transfer to in due time.



Alternatives in Practices

Lahmacun Radio: A Web Radio's Free Software Spirit

Lahmacun radio, founded in 2018, is a Budapest-based web radio focusing on music, art, and other topics. As an independent community radio it is supported directly by the community, i.e., the people running the radio and its listeners. Although there are other supporters, such as the local municipality where the radio studio is located at the Gólya cultural centre in the 8th district of Budapest, their weight in the overall budget is small and irregular.

Radio stations that broadcast online only, without an analog frequency, need reliable and ergonomic software solutions. This applies to the broadcast platform, the interfaces (website etc.) through which they reach their audience, but also to their communication and promotion strategies –as opposed to radio stations with a frequency where listeners sitting in a car or spending time in the kitchen can naturally find stations by browsing through the available frequencies. There is also a cost factor for efficient, reliable software solutions and communication platforms often charge money for their services, which can be a burden for small independent organisations.

Peter Bokor
founder and active member of Lahmacun radio.

Hack yourself free

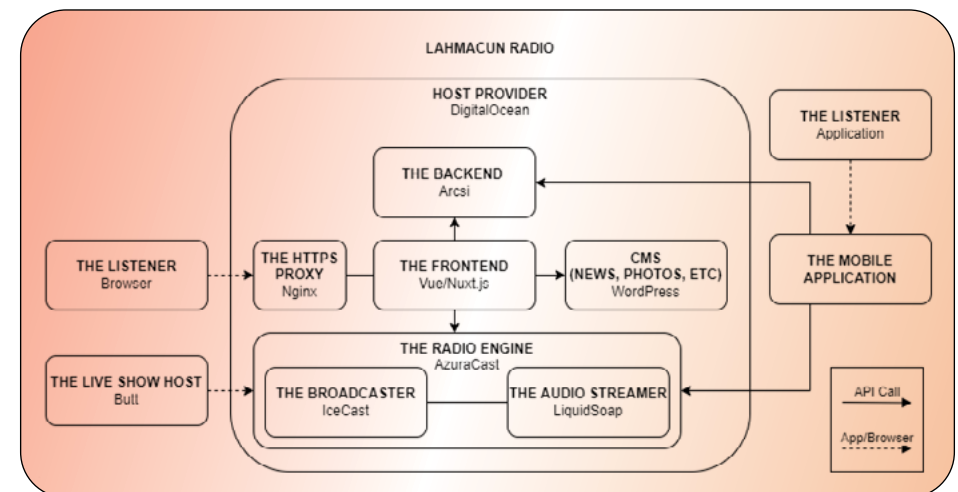
Since its launch in 2018, one of Lahmacun radio's main principles was to build an independent, self-controlled, and affordable software architecture. For example, our archiving solution is not based on proprietary platforms such as SoundCloud or Mixcloud who, as time passed, have gradually introduced limitations in free usage. Instead, we developed our own archiving solution, called arcsi, from scratch. Technically speaking, arcsi is a flexible combination of cloud storage and web application implemented in the Python programming language. As of today, we have archived over 2500 episodes of around 100 radio shows that are all available for playback via lahmacun.hu and our mobile app.

Another example of a software lab-like attitude at Lahmacun is how we implemented our "robot DJ." At the core of every modern radio station there is some sort of scheduling tool for streaming jingles, replays, fallbacks, and other content in a flexible and reliable way. For Lahmacun radio, it is essential that this scheduling service offers a very high level of automation in order to avoid the need of human intervention –the human resource, especially at high availability as in a 24/7 radio operation, is the number one scarcity in voluntary projects. A rather exotic, but widely used technology for highly-customisable audio stream scheduling is Liquidsoap. As the usage of Liquidsoap requires considerable IT expertise, it is often used as an internal module of end-user platforms. Such a platform is Airtime, a widely-used paid radio automation tool, often the solution of choice for smaller community radios. Lahmacun radio chose another way, we decided to base our solutions on Azuracast, a free and open-source tool also based (partly) on Liquidsoap. We ended up customising Liquidsoap inside Azuracast to accommodate it to our specific needs such as ordering playlists, fading tracks, or the relay of external streams (for collaborations with other radio stations).

Arcsi and Liquidsoap-based Lahmacun robot DJ are not the only custom software solutions at Lahmacun. Our entire software stack is stored at GitHub (see at <https://github.com/lahmacunradio>), a collaboration platform for software developers. According to the mission and ethics of Lahmacun radio, all software we develop is open-source and free. This means that anybody can freely use or modify our solutions, e.g., to set up arcsi for another radio, but also contribute additional code to our existing software base. This is exactly what happened in the case of Lahmacun radio's mobile application, where a fan of the radio and professional software programmer developed the app's code and provided it to us for free. Since then, the app code has been further developed and it is also part of our core software architecture

Conscious of MAGMA dependence

MAGMA is an acronym for the companies Meta, Amazon, Google, Microsoft, and Apple (not to be confused with the Meta Collective from Brussels, a superb music platform for events and more). The MAGMA portfolio, with its wide range of digital services for collaboration, social media, and more, have become ubiquitous. Arguably, the five companies own too much



power, especially if we look at them from a European perspective (all of them being American enterprises). Another issue is user privacy, which MAGMA companies will always deny to breach, but given the immense user data at their disposal it will always be hard not to speculate about possible (even accidental) misuse. As a result, it seems to be an emerging trend to grow awareness about the application of MAGMA services. For example, the Reset! network, a project supported by the EU for gathering and supporting independent cultural, media, and creative organisations, explicitly advocates the careful and conscious use of MAGMA technologies.

At Lahmacun radio, while we accept that completely ignoring MAGMA would cut us off from our listeners –which also has a regional background, e.g., Facebook is still the main platform for event advertising in Hungary while it is becoming less relevant in certain Western European countries–, we systematically develop measures to decrease the radio’s dependence on MAGMA services. One of our strategies consists of trying not to store radio data exclusively on platforms owned by MAGMA companies. For example, highlight news of radio are shared via the Lahmacun website (which is hosted outside the MAGMA infrastructure) or, while probably most Lahmacun volunteers still use Google Mail for emailing (as a client), the Lahmacun email addresses and inboxes

are not hosted by Google. Also we maintain an email newsletter to keep in touch with our show hosts –a communication channel that can be seen as a universal and vendor-independent form of communication.

The need to compromise

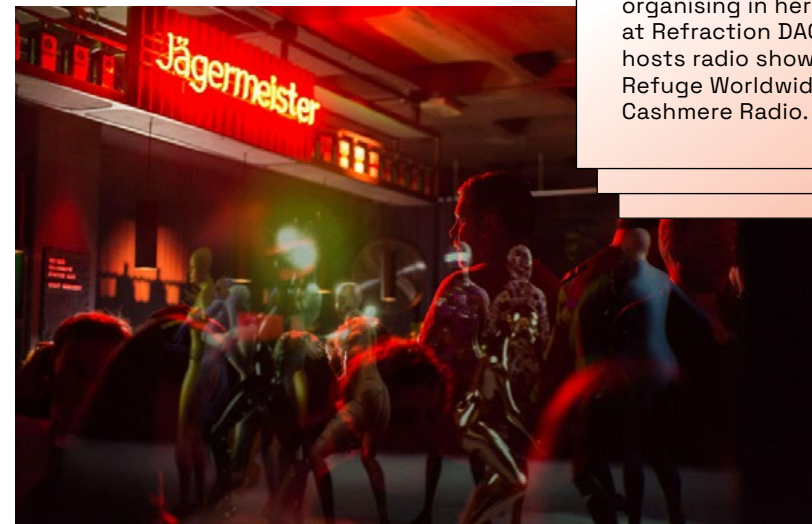
As Richard Stallman, the free software movement activist, put it in his appearance at radio x (Gallusfenster, October 2023), freedom may be inconvenient and it wasn’t free. Although he meant freedom in terms of privacy and not money, the dilemma is a similar one when using paid versus free-of-charge software services. Lahmacun is aiming at a compromise in both senses of freedom. A compromise because a radical application of these very important principles could easily mean the end of an independent community web radio project.

Decentralisation in Question

A Case for Distribution – Navigating the Reality of Creative Technologies

In and around the crypto “bull” market (read: high market values and trading velocity, low interest rates) of 2020 and 2021, decentralised autonomous organisations, or DAOs, came into fashion as a novel way to coordinate capital and people with similar motivations. Creative workers began to reimagine art institutions and the concept of ownership, with aims at decentralising the power and money flowing through them. Everyone read Radical Friends and went to an ETH conference.

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↑ Jägermeister Night Embassy, Berlin 2019. © Camille Blake

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alterna-

Now a few years later, these dreams aren't necessarily dead, but forced to confront reality. As Serpentine and MOMA lead the most innovative decentralised initiatives, and the US government intervenes in the Bored Apes Yacht Club, we must ask ourselves questions —if platforms and legacy institutions still provide value, capital, and tools to creative economies, is it wasted effort to decentralise away from them? Could we instead invest in practices which prioritise the distribution of decision making, while still acknowledging the power structures present under cultural capitalism?

Before seeking answers to these questions, it seems important to jump further back in time to discuss the conditions of online culture production and dissemination that have left culture workers disenfranchised in the early 21st century. Decentralised technologies are often conflated with the term “web 3.0”, which supposes a web 1.0 and 2.0 that have led to it. If web 1.0 saw terrestrial modes of consumption, including news media and consumer shopping, come online, web 2.0 was the platformisation and centralisation of that consumption.

When Spotify (or Uber, Google, Amazon, Facebook..) is not only the place where you discover and signal your cultural affiliations, but also the ground on which you consume, these increasingly centralised tech companies have unprecedented access to your habits, spending power, and you. Further, these

companies have complete control over the remuneration models, data collection, and user experience, making it near impossible to move off their platforms, or even imagine alternatives.

A new internet?

Enter web 3.0, blockchains, cryptocurrencies, social tokens, NFTs... These novel technologies proposed novel solutions to the conglomerated internet, and promised to centre the needs of creative people while building this new infrastructure. Unfortunately, most of these promises have failed to pass. Big tech hired (and made redundant) blockchain specialists, major record labels bought open metaverses, and decentralised autonomous organisations —which supposedly offered flat hierarchies, transparent voting mechanisms, and treasury control via blockchain tokens— started to look a lot like Silicon Valley start-ups.

I'll be the first to admit—I drank this kool-aid. I grew up at the same time as the internet, and came of age in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. I had spent my entire adult life watching the artists around me create value for huge companies, to see little of the return. I signed deals with brands to pay for the club nights I wanted to throw. The CEOs and CPOs I worked under made decisions about the products we stewarded with little regard to how their users actually wanted them to perform. An alternative to all of these warped economic and power dynamics felt long overdue.

Alternate realities and economies

The alternative is still where I stay fixated. Sam Bankman-Fried riding a jet ski in a Lisbon hotel pool was never subversive, nor were the hundreds of “profile pic” NFTs that appeared in the wake of the Bored Apes Yacht Club. Even the more interesting propositions, like Sound.xyz (which offers musicians a platform to release their music as NFTs outside of traditional streaming models), or Nouns DAO (which aims to proliferate the group's intellectual property with direct financial upside to the member holders), seem to ignore the fact that alternative models do not have to operate entirely outside of the economic and organisational infrastructures that already exist. In fact, communication and integration with these models could be the key to creating sustainable, mutually

Our desire for alternative modes of organising has complimented the alternative ideas, artists, and work that we aim to propagate.

beneficial futures. We don't need to reinvent the wheel, we just need to change its direction. And there are positive signs that the tides are already turning. In November 2023, Serpentine Galleries, hosted a “day-long gathering [inviting] attendees to explore and strategise how art and

tives



↑ FWB FEST, Idyllwild CA 2023. © Jasmine Safaeian

culture can play an active part in reconfiguring ownership”. If even the largest art institutions in the UK are questioning the implications of ownership on creative economies, and directing Arts Council funding towards this inquiry, it seems that collaboration with these entities, rather than attempts to navigate away from them completely, is beneficial to finding new solutions for artists and designers to create and distribute their work. In lending their cultural and financial capital to radical and grassroots ideas, these institutions create space for new organisational models and para-institutions to emerge.

Co-creating interdependence

My own vested interest in decentralised technology and organising came largely from seeing creative people and organisations I respected show interest. In 2021, I closely watched all of the people I followed on Twitter appear in the #introductions channel in Friends With Benefits’ Discord server. I received funding from Berlin’s Musicboard for an educational programme promoting the use of new technology in the music industry. I participated in Black Swan’s hackathon, investigating interdependent and sustainable economic structures for the art world, hosted at the KW Institute in Berlin. These interactions were important to me because of what they signalled about the future of creative collaboration, and because of who was sending the signs.

In the time since, I’ve co-created festivals, marketplaces, grant programmes, and zines alongside hundreds of people all over the world, with aims at distributing curatorial frameworks, decision making, and capital using decentralised technologies. Our desire for alternative modes of organising has complimented the alternative ideas, artists, and work that we aim to propagate. External companies and partners have taken notice, providing financial support for these activities. Whether or not this has allowed us to maintain independence as para-institutions, or has forced us to the same fate as our merged and acquired predecessors depends on how you define the terms.

We haven’t been perfect —power has congealed in hierarchical patterns, private group chats have spun out, we’ve bought Instagram ads to promote our events. But the acknowledgement and implementation of new ways of creating together feels like a step in the right direction. The wheel keeps on turning.

3 questions to Bands- with

Brussels, Belgium

01. **Can you introduce your structure to us?**

At Bandswith, our passion for music and technology ignited a journey that led to the creation of Bandswith.com, our digital livestream music platform for artists, labels, venues and festivals. Artists and bands can showcase their livestreams on our platform. They can livestream for free or monetize their livestreams for a small participation. We also offer a whole range of useful services included in our fees. We're more than just a platform; we're also a filming crew and podcasts producers. Bandswith bridges the gap between confirmed and emerging artists, celebrating the brilliance of our local music scene.

Our commitment lies in showcasing original creations, artist repertoires, and immersive backstage moments that redefine the essence of fun. At the core of Bandswith.com, we stand for fairness, transparency, and equitable profit distribution. Our goal is to empower artists, labels and venues that want to take back control of their content. Our technology serves us, not the other way around, ensuring a delicate balance between human touch and automation. We prioritise privacy, safeguarding member data, and are on a mission to achieve a carbon-neutral footprint. Music, in our belief, possesses the magical ability to unite us despite our differences. Bandswith.com aspires to build a thriving community

of music lovers, fans, and artists —an environment where self-expression and idea-sharing flourish in a respectful atmosphere.

02. **Why did you join the Reset! network?**

Joining the Reset! network was an opportunity to be part of a European network that aspires to give power to its members. Independent media have been struggling for years to be able to express themselves because competition is fierce. Most of the major outlets in one country whether it's print, TV, or web all belong only a few corporations. Even music festivals now belong to major financial groups. It is important for people to know that an

independent media works differently, that their business model is very different from the so-called free press. Europeans have to support their local independent media, it's paramount to have the choice and not be limited to social media as source of information.

Reset! has also given us the chance to connect with other media and cultural organizations we didn't know existed. We're slowly discovering a whole ecosystem of independent radios, music labels, venues and this is thanks to Reset!. Things in Europe have never stopped moving but we need more exposure to the greater audience because what we do take time, energy and patience.

Lastly, the way we work at Reset! is

participative, people join because their invested in a change. The energy is positive the exchanges with the whole Reset! team in Lyon are always kind and respectful. It's great to be part of growing network.

03. **What is the greatest challenge for an independent cultural organisation when trying to use MAGMA alternatives/ reduce your use of MAGMA platforms?**

We have found so many tools that allow use to bypass MAGMA platforms but we're not 100% Magma free. Our computers, softwares, and phones are Apple, we still use Google Meet or Teams

with some of our clients for conference calls, because it's more convenient for them. Let's face it, we'll never be 100% MAGMA free, but we are aware of the meaning of the choices and the implication it means to choose these tools. We do have however full control on our streaming platforms (music, movies), we can listen to indie radios or support our local record shops. These are easy decisions to make on a daily basis. In this case, no one is bound to a working or professional set of tools gathered in a specific ecosystem, it's up to you to choose this app or not.



Under their words

In this section, we engage in conversations with voices from diverse cultural and research sectors, each offering unique perspectives on forging new paths in the digital realm. From innovators in technology and cultural spheres to researchers pioneering alternative approaches, these interviews delve into the philosophies and practices that drive their commitment to digital alternatives.

With Maarten Walraven
from Symphony.live,
Wild Awake, MUSIC x,
and Water & Music
Academy



↑ Future Music Forum 2023, Community workshop.

Maarten, you've delved into the realm of decentralised technologies and their implications for cultural communities through various projects. Can you provide an overview of the current status and developments surrounding this issue?

This is a very broad question, but the simple answer is that if cultural communities don't consciously start to create their own lines of communication, they will perish the moment one of the big tech companies decides it's time for a change. This can be related to whether something like a private group or channel is still useful for the overall platform, or through a change in their API which suddenly provides less, or no, data. For years now, we've seen cultural communities set up private messaging groups, Discords, email lists, etc. I think the understanding that this is necessary is there, but the how is often difficult. Take the duo Wolf & Moon, they grew their email list by handing out their own phones during gigs to ask the audience to enter their email. That's a connection that's full of trust from both sides. It's also difficult to scale. At the same time, more and more tools are cropping up to help artists with this. There's a large variety, but the key advantage is that these tools give you access to data instead of hiding it from you. Decentralisation provides a different starting point, it's open and transparent and potentially persistent beyond our own lives. Consciously decentralising your cultural community means designing it in such a way that there's room for emerging

behaviour, participation and interaction, having a place to hang out and chat, and a strong support network. It also means the history of the community is always available. It's not just in a few physical folders with papers and scraps or in the brains of participants. Instead, it's there for all to see and peruse. This, in turn, makes it so much easier to build on what's already there instead of reinventing a wheel.

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to data.

con- nection

In the context of MAGMA (Microsoft, Amazon, Google, Meta, Apple) dominating the technological field, what challenges do independent cultural players face in maintaining their independence while using functional and accessible tools?

The biggest challenge is access to data. The big tech companies fully control the top of funnel for any community. It's a closed system that is designed for people to spend endless amounts of time there. Say you are a cultural community and most of your target audience is on Instagram. The full top of funnel is the whole of the one billion Instagram users. This will flow down towards those interested in the cultural expressions of the community. However, you will still only reach them by paying for ads. Then, once you have found a few of them, how do you migrate them away from the platform you're all beholden to? Instagram, like all the others, fosters these communities through channels and dms. However, that doesn't make the community yours. In other words, the question is not how do you maintain your independence, but first how do you wrangle free from the most obvious place to find your tribe?

This reminds me of the height of the 2021 crypto hype. I saw all these people saying that they had fully broken from Web2 and were now fulltime Web3. However, they posted this on Twitter, Instagram, or similar platform. Are you then fully broken away from Web2? My answer would be a resounding 'no'.

Yet, decentralisation provides very useful tools to establish independence as a community. It therefore becomes a necessity to think about your community tech stack. First, what are your values and principles? Then, what tools will aid you to live up to those? As I said before, it's hard work to make this happen. It's just easier to revert back to the big tech tools. It will take education of those who want to join the community, which means there's work to be done there, too.

Can you elaborate on the potential risks associated with relying heavily on MAGMA for technological and computer tools, particularly in terms of privacy, security, and control over personal data?

Basically, you have no control. This means that the risk is there for all this information to be taken into places where you don't want it to be used. Privacy, security, and control are all beholden to a centralised entity that optimises for profits on the back of exactly the information you provide. Relying on MAGMA tools means that you accept this premise. There are, of course, a lot of people who want to take that leap, because it provides an easy point of communication, or a simple way to connect. But, every time you post, share, like –it's another spin of the machine.

What alternative solutions or strategies do you see as viable for independent cultural organisations looking to distance themselves from the influence of tech giants like MAGMA?

The primary alternative is to establish a direct line of communication that you control. This can be an email list or a collection of phone numbers. However, if you care about distribution of power, transparency, and provenance there's a whole suit of blockchain-based technologies that can help you work along those values. Decentralisation in this sense focuses on a set of core considerations that appear at the start of a process. When you think about strategies, you think about why. From that why you can establish a goal or a number of goals. If those are clear, if you know why you're doing something, not only will you find resonance with others who are likeminded, you will also be able to choose the suite of tools needed to achieve your goals. In answer to the question, then, strategy is of the utmost importance. Exactly because it will determine the solutions you need to make it work.

Decentralised technologies are mentioned as essential for virtuous cultural practices. Could you explain how these technologies contribute to maintaining independence and control over digital resources in the cultural sector?

There's an interesting development happening when it comes to digital resources. Just a few years ago any digital resource was part of a database, and any database is a snapshot in time. There's no history when it comes to a database. Conversely, decentralised technologies showcase their entire history. A digital resource that lives within that technology carries its own history within it – visible and locatable. This radically changes the way we can look at and use those resources.

Full control might be more difficult, because the resource will exist on its own with all the interactions that it had etched within it. Independence, however, is total, because the resource exists independently with its own history.

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Perhaps the best we can ask for is to keep an open mind. To not push away when it comes to the core values of decentralisation: participation, transparency, and ownership.

What this does, is that it makes it much more normalised to build on what already exists. One way to look at this, then, is to see a 'virtuous cultural practice' as one that takes all its institutional knowledge and history into account whenever it evolves. Differently put, it will be much harder to repeat the same mistakes if the resources on offer carry those with them.

In your opinion, what role does awareness and education play in empowering independent cultural players to make informed decisions about their use of digital technologies, especially in moving away from dominant players like MAGMA?

This is the number one issue. Education and awareness should be top of the agenda for any cultural player looking to become more decentralised and use the tooling available to make that happen. The kind of education I'm talking about is, again, hard work. It usually involves one-on-one or one-to-few sessions to explain the concepts and tools to people you want to bring along for the ride. There is very little collective knowledge about emerging technologies in general, and this goes specifically for decentralised technologies.

Are there specific challenges or considerations that cultural organisations should keep in mind when exploring and adopting decentralised technologies as alternatives to those offered by MAGMA?

The first question should be whether it's necessary to actually move towards decentralisation. Who do you want to empower? Why do you want to cede responsibility and influence to a wider group? This is, of course, assuming that we're talking about a fairly centralised structure that aims to become more decentralised. If it's a new cultural organisation, they have more freedom to set their strategy and goals. Shifting them is harder. And going back to the previous question, it's paramount to begin educating those around you. Explain, explain, and explain again what the benefits are, why it matters, and how it will impact both the people involved and the mission of the cultural organisation.

How can the broader cultural community contribute to the ongoing debate about stepping away from tech giants and embracing more decentralised and independent technological solutions?

As I mentioned, I think decentralisation is far removed from the daily considerations in the broader cultural community. Perhaps the best we can ask for is to keep an open mind. To not push away when it comes to the core values of decentralisation: participation, transparency, and ownership.

Digital Courage

Digitalcourage works for a liveable world in the digital age. Since 1987, the organisation advocates for fundamental rights, privacy, and protecting personal data. They are a group of people from a variety of backgrounds who explore technology and politics with a critical mindset, and want to shape both with a focus on human dignity.

From large corporations to small businesses, IT systems, software, and social media have become indispensable for companies. They are dependent on digital services provided by only a few IT corporations, e. g., Google, Amazon, Meta (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp), Apple, or Microsoft (MAGMA). In Germany, companies and the State are highly dependent on imported digital services and expertise provided by very few IT corporations, who can discontinue or change the services at will. Companies should be aware that, when they outsource cloud computing, they relinquish sovereignty over their infrastructure. MAGMA services also have surveillance issues. Free or Libre open-source software (FLOSS) and platforms are sustainable alternatives, guaranteeing individuals, companies, and the public sector control over access to their information. Such FLOSS alternatives include Linux, JitsiMeet, BigBlueButton, Nextcloud, nuudel, and RocketChat.

DC stands for a living democracy. An important underlying theme is to encourage political engagement. By building a network of activists, organising campaigns, and interventions, it raises its voice for civil society and the common good.

► digitalcourage

With Station of Commons (Helsinki, FI - Geneva, CH)

Station of Commons is an ongoing collaborative Helsinki- and Geneva-based initiative on “digital commoning practices”. Can you start by defining what are “digital commoning practices”, as well as the meaning of “reappropriating technology within public space” which is one of the project's purposes?

Station of Commons' approach to digital commoning practices is informed, or even inspired, by Stravros Stavrides' work on the concept of the 'commons'. Stavrides is an architecture professor and activist based in Athens. In his book *Common Space*, he writes about collective practices and commoning practices in general in an urban context. From this urban framework, three main lines emerge that can be extended to technology. First, the question of finding forms of “commoning” within a contested (digital) space, which is the space of digital technologies. Second, the collective itself is open and welcoming to all kinds of practitioners: artists, designers, IT specialists, educators, curators, etc. And finally, for our own practice as well, commoning, as in the process of sharing resources, plays a crucial role. And as a common, our collective is always in the making. So, we prefer to use the term 'commoning' rather than 'commons' in relation to practices.

Station of Commons

is Juan Gomez, Grégoire Rousseau, Alain Ryckelynk, Minerva Juolahti, Constantinos Miltiades, Eddie Choo Wen Yi, and Essi Pellikka. Station of Commons is supported by KONE Foundation.



↑ Lumbung radio discussion on radical radio practices during Miss Read, the Berlin art book fair. With Firefly frequency, Station of Commons, Radio Cashmere and Radio Tropezio. © Station of Commons

We believe that technology defines a space in terms of means of production, distribution, and communication. At the moment, this space of technological development benefits only very narrow private interests and lacks real input from the larger public audience: the social texture of users. We believe that this necessary act of re-appropriation can only happen by performing within this space; open-source digital infrastructure, radio, and audio streams, cyber-feminist practices, workshops, open discussions, etc. Of course, we also actively collaborate through commoning with other collectives to materialise events, discussions, broadcasts, etc. I note that you use the term “project”; we don't think of Station of Commons as a “project” in the sense of the neoliberal paradigm in which we find ourselves. We don't have a specific goal to achieve within a certain budget or deadline. We are in the process, learning from working together, sharing knowledge, and making new friends.

Station of Commons also questions “centralised knowledge and data centres operated by major organisations”. What does that mean exactly?

This sentence has a double meaning, both abstract and concrete. Knowledge and data are formally located in these huge server farms. There is an incredible amount of personal data stored on hard drives, processed by private servers around the world. A few centres manage most of the Internet traffic, that is MAGMA activity.

Then most of the new technologies that are developed are too often locked away in opaque boxes, protected for years by private patents. We do not know what happens to the data and the processes involved when we use the service. Those who control the servers can always monitor everything.

In contrast, Station of Commons advocates and promotes open-source practices to both open up and share technology. This process operates a powerful act of re-appropriation of technology; learning from each other to develop new digital tools. As users transform technology, the new technology transforms users into more responsible and knowledgeable actors in society. This reflective and necessary gesture is much needed in a real democracy.

How do you see the current dominance of big platforms impacting online communities, and what motivated the creation of Station of Commons in response?

What's in formation for quite a while now, in the context of digital space, is a totalising landscape. We keep in mind that in 2010, Facebook's chief security officer left his job to go to work for N.S.A. Our motivation at SoC is to offer a radical, while humble, alternative, as technology, discourse, and practice, to the landscape we just described.

You also mention the “underlying social implications” of the current state of the platform dominance on our digital life. What are they?

Major social networks only reinforce the individualist development happening in society at large. We want to detach, or escape, from the model of the isolated passive consumer to produce collective situations of social empowerment. We favour horizontal peer-to-peer collaboration on the long term. Like everyone, we try to navigate our ship within, against, and beyond a capitalist horizon.

public

Can you share examples of successful decentralised projects or technologies that Station of Commons has embraced, and how have they contributed to a better (online) experience?

Among many collaborations, three mains come to mind each for specific reasons. The first one is Lumbung radio, the collaboration with the largest art book fair in Europe, and the partnership with Helsinki-based Pixelache festival.

Lumbung radio originated in 2022 at documenta fifteen, a major contemporary art exhibition held in Kassel, Germany, every 5 years. Lumbung radio is an inter-local community of around 25 radio stations coordinated by Station of Commons. Each radio station is a collective of musicians, journalists, and sound artists in the broadest sense. Each radio station has its own identity and modus operandi. Lumbung radio does not commission pieces of music from artists. We work with this idea of lumbung; each radio station shares what it already produces in its own context. In general, a radio station contributes one hour a week. The radio station broadcasts these programmes 24 hours a day, following a circular programming schedule. A programme is broadcast at least once a day, at different times, for a week. This gives each time zone the opportunity to listen to each programme at a reasonable time. It is important that the participating radio stations can listen to and follow each other.

In early 2023, Miss Read, the Berlin art book fair, contacted us to invite us to participate in this major international cultural publishing fair. It was this radical radio approach that we wanted to produce for this edition of Miss Read. Our proposal was to organise a week of events at the Miss Read team's workplace in Berlin, before the weekend of the fair. It was 5 days of discussions, workshops and audio performances in the evenings (we met there several times). And we organised big open-source dinners with all the day's participants. During the weekend we had our own radio room in the HKW museum. We interviewed, broadcast and recorded the many talks organised by Miss Read.

Regarding the local activities, we are collaborating on regular basis with Pixelache festival. That is an interesting case on how professional and personal relation can produce commoning practices.

At the moment, this space of technological development benefits only very narrow private interests and lacks real input from the larger public audience.

In terms of community governance, how are decisions made within your project to ensure a more democratic and decentralised decision-making process?

Lumbung Radio meets every week on Wednesday and Station of Commons meets every month. The regular meetings are collective situations to share both personal and professional information between participants. These moments together are key to the collective dynamic and the overall production. It is very important to have transparency in the decision-making process. We have three guiding principles: "everyone does their best and that is good enough", "no burnout" and "mistakes can happen". We recommend that when organising collective practices, you think of such grounding points; this can prevent unnecessary misunderstandings.

Solidarity and sharing are complex concepts to define in theory. In practice, it manifests itself in the dynamics of the collective and its output. The collective must always be open to new radio stations, have a wide diversity of practices and respect a clear and rigorous political approach. We really want to produce this common space of sound production without all the capitalist imperatives; we are responsible for our temporality without having to respond to discriminatory criteria of management, budget, or direct profitability. It's a radical politics of resource sharing, an echo of the anti-fascist militant in Mexico to the hacktivist pirate in Finland.

As the online landscape evolves, how do you envision the future of decentralised communities, and what steps is your community taking to actively shape and contribute to this future?

Station of Commons keeps the future open for collaborations. We always welcome collaborations from grassroots DJ collectives to institutional arts organisations. We are active in radio practices by coordinating lumbung radio and its radio community. We want to continue to work with local actors and develop an international network. We want to explore other artistic and perhaps cultural fields. We are interested in the forms that digital commoning practices can find in the "white cube" in visual arts, or in the "black box" in performative arts. Another interesting research would be to investigate the concept of "commons" in a museum framework and its relation to digital technologies. We understand the practice of decentralised communities, and especially radio art, as a research platform for radical forms of collective organisation in opposition to the post-democratic society as defined by the philosopher Jacques Rancière.

space

Under their reports

In this dedicated section, we provide insights gleaned from collaborative efforts in the independent cultural sphere, where participants actively engage with the profound questions surrounding decentralisation and alternative technologies. These reports capture the essence of diverse perspectives, strategies, and experiments that emerge from these decentralised workshops, shedding light on the collective endeavours aimed at reshaping the digital landscape.

Decentralised Resources

– by Sphere Radio,
Kollektiv WERT, Hitness
Club, and Tele Mutante

Leipzig, Germany
December 2022



Preliminary considerations

In preparation for the workshop, we focused on the question of which paths are followed by individual actors within Leipzig's local cultural scene in their collective work, where their paths unconsciously cross, which paths are taken twice, where individuals could help each other and how to boost the visibility of unseen actors. The emphasis was on experimentation and playful exchange, as well as personal experiences and practical examples, which we wanted to express and disseminate together after the workshop.

We, the organisers, i.e. a Leipzig-based group of collectives made up of Sphere Radio, Kollektiv WERT, Hitness Club and Tele Mutante, are ourselves part of the independent art scene in Leipzig and rely on a mutually-supporting network system. This networking works quite well, but there are still challenges to overcome.

Titel:offen is a follow-up project to the one-week ThinkTank "State, Structure & Future of Streaming" held in February 2022 and is designed to be a playful approach to the topic of "Decentralised Resources" in creative networks.

Game / Performance Development

Our intention was to reach out to people who, we believe, are concerned by this topic in our environment. For example, the initiative TrashGalore, who deals with circular economy, organisers of collective processes and artists who depend on these structures and have an interest in the topic. We chose the game format as the basis for our workshop and our own skills in order to give a simple impetus and introduction to the topic. For this purpose, we developed a design in which all actors were divided into fictitious collectives. Resources (e.g. material, technology, venues, etc.) were distributed unevenly on the boards. The objective was for each collective to bring its event to fruition as soon as they had all the necessary resources. In order to obtain the necessary resources, the participants had to consult the internet (MAGMA - Microsoft, Amazon, Google, Meta and Apple). Skills could be exchanged for time chips, while resources could be acquired with money chips. Through event cards, we could influence the course of the game, such as taking time away from the collectives or adding more resources. Our idea was that, at a certain point in time, the collectives would begin to communicate and act/cooperate with each other in a self-determined way in order to circumvent MAGMA.

Paths unconsciously cross. Paths are taken twice. Individuals could help each other. Boost the visibility of unseen actors.

Rollout of the workshop

We divided the day of the workshop into three phases: the game, a break and a group lunch, followed by an evaluation/discussion about the content of the game. The first phase, the game itself, was broken down again into different moments. First, before any introduction had taken place, we invited the participants one by one to explore the question of what a network is. The answers are documented in the appendix, in line with each point of view. One after the other, the participants gathered and entered the room we had prepared. Only then were they given a collective welcome and an introduction to the rules of the game by us, during which we slowly shifted into our antagonistic roles as MAGMA. Only at the end of the game did we announce that the distribution of resources had been chosen from the beginning in such a way that the game could have ended immediately after the start of the game if there had been sufficient communication between the participants. Without this piece of knowledge, however, the participants first began to carefully familiarise themselves with the rules of the game and to start thinking about how to proceed. We tried to answer questions as far as possible, but we also observed a great deal of independence among the collectives created for the game, some of whom were quickly able to identify with the problem and recognise challenges from their personal contexts. As the game progressed, it slowly became clear to everyone that our role as a centrally managed internet consisted in particular of making the flow of goods and information more difficult, or rather shaping it in our favour. We did this by withholding information or charging

for simple requests for help. As soon as the participants had identified us as “antagonists” and unveiled our subtle sabotage, they began to invent their own rules, to want to manage information in an open source way and to bypass our central exchange, or simply not to take it seriously any more. The game ended with two collectives helping each other to a joint victory, completely without our consent. The break was lively, everyone had got to know each other a bit better through the game, teamed up against us as organisers and manipulated the game in their favour, in short, empowered each other. After the second phase, in which we let things simmer down and had lunch together, we moved on to the third phase, a discussion round.

net-

do less by ourselves / feel less left alone and helplessly overwhelmed in the face of planning and funding smaller projects. There was some uncertainty regarding the necessity of new platforms, as there is already a wide range of existing platforms. This uncertainty or doubt was expressed as the question of how it might be in the hands of / or even the responsibility of independent agents as users to just “make good use” of already existing platforms / structures contrary to creating new platforms / structures, raising further questions about who should design such new platforms and how then to avoid problems already known from existing platforms, such as centralism vs open source, scope or range vs depth of information,

work

Overview of the topics discussed

What might the purpose of a newly created network be? Some ideas and needs seemed to be the creation of visibility for independent agents, a network as a platform, resource and interface / meeting point / space and place for exchange. We talked about the desire to reduce parallelism, or merge parallel paths, talk more about plans together, coordinate efforts (such as funding applications) / create nodes and

consumption vs creation and so on. Equally, there was uncertainty as to how low-threshold a new platform should be, regarding the access to information. What information is sensitive and should not be accessible or avoid being so by at the same time trying to avoid creating “in- and outsiders”, meaning the further cultivation of echo-chambers, bubbles, codes and inside those, a climate of unnecessarily high competition for seemingly few resources. Furthermore, we talked about communication of needs and requirements, also within the respective “bubbles”, in order to establish contact and

understanding between the actors, to enable support and distribution of material. Also, the point was made to gain the sympathy of political representatives, e.g. for low-threshold and faster and (in the face of AI written and thereby redundant funding applications) different funding processes. Maybe develop alternative event calendar as a network: could there be a calendar that enables networking, connects organizers with each other and with interested people, but also of events (several levels of information?), i.e. enables different perspectives on the same city? How about an interactive map with different and switchable layers to visualize events / organizers / creators / resources / needs / existing networks between those above, that offers an overview for both, those in need of help and those in positions of power? And last but not least, with all that talk about new digital possibilities, we reminded ourselves to not forget about physical, so to say "real" meetings. Maybe even experiment with different formats to update each other, clarify needs, enable visibility and inclusion / interactivity for those meetings, document, provide information, formulate a common self-image, open up organisational processes, reach out to more places, bring in isolated people, think along with others, share the process and transform the network (and thereby the world, accidentally).

Outlook

An outcome that emerged from the workshop was the express wish to keep titel:offen as a framework. A clear need was felt for more cooperation, mutual awareness, more direct paths, joint resource management and creative exchange. The digital networks we are familiar with and rely on as tools fulfil various aspects of these needs to varying degrees. Titel:offen can be a place to exchange, to override the deficits in existing networks and to develop

transformative reflection together. This means that the workshop itself is a possible answer to the questions raised by the workshop, should it succeed in prolonging titel:offen as a platform for future communication and cooperation.

Appendix

What is a network for you?

P1. Since we are probably talking about a human network here, a network for me is, to use Markus Gabriel's words, a field of meaning in which there are many people who are connected to each other.

P2. A network. Next to the internet, mycelium is the network that has impressed me the most. But first I think of fishing.

P3. Social mobility.

P4. Lots of people, lots of chaos, lots of nicer stuff.

P5. An amalgamation of different people and thoughts.

P6. Interesting personalities who can relate to each other and ask each other for advice and do things together, that's a network.

3 questions to Sphere Radio

Leipzig,
Germany

01. Can you introduce your structure to us?

Sphere Radio is a non-commercial, interdisciplinary and free radio platform from the east of Leipzig. The aim of our platform is to promote exchange in society as well as local and national networking. The different opinions, needs and interests of different communities are to be presented in a diverse program in which emancipatory perspectives on society, culture, music and politics are in the foreground. Radio as a voice.

02. Why did you join the Reset! network?

We joined Reset! because the idea was very much in line with some of our visions. Because our core mission at the time was to create an alternative networking platform

that would allow users to decide how much they wanted to share, to own their data, to be able to build the framework of the app to their own needs, etc. It really made sense to join. Especially since we were far from having the financial background to finance such a structure, it made perfect sense to join forces with many other initiatives with similar needs and try to make it happen through a common project.

03. What kind of digital alternatives do you use with Sphere?

For cloud, calendar, and as an alternative to Microsoft Office and Google Docs we use a tool called Nextcloud and an app called Only Office. We used to use G-Docs and one day decided that we no longer wanted to support it and also wanted to have full control of our

data without anyone making money from it. That was about 4 years ago and it works well enough to replace G-Docs. Sure, "Only Office" is a bit different from Word or Excel and it has some weird settings that are annoying, but after a while you get used to it and it serves as a very good replacement that meets all our needs. Good thing Nextcloud is based in Germany, meets all the "data protection" standards, and is open source and free. You use your own server and can set it up as you wish, with a wide range of applications for all kinds of needs. For project management, we haven't really found the perfect tool yet, but this year we started working with an app called "Coda". This tool is free for our use, but there is a paid version that offers more options. To be honest, I haven't delved too deeply into it, but I know that it offers many ways to create all sorts of

structures to suit your needs, if you have some basic IT skills. We currently use it for simple project coordination, shift plans, questionnaires, and hopefully soon for more advanced project and task coordination. I also know that Nextcloud has several project management tools that I would really like to try out as they are all on one site. For internal communication we use Discord and Telegram for quick and urgent things, and of course email. In terms of promotion, we haven't really found the "right thing" yet and still rely on Instagram. We use a newsletter and have a fairly extensive Telegram group with 1200 members, but to be honest I'm not sure how much impact we have there compared to Instagram.

04. What is the greatest challenge for an independent cultural

organisation when trying to use MAGMA alternatives/ reduce your use of MAGMA platforms?

You are always competing with them. It is currently almost impossible to get out of Instagram and social media when you have events, and the financial and other pressures that come with it. It's also so hard to convince people to use a new and additional tool that they don't know, not to mention the difficulty of getting a similar reach with this alternative tool. Since Instagram is the tool to use for a lot of projects, it obviously has the biggest impact and it is like a devil's wheel, to get out of it you have to convince many, many people. For smaller initiatives with a very personal network this might be an easier challenge, but once you are doing big events or want to reach a lot of people it becomes very, very difficult

and you have to use a lot of tools to really make that happen. We have thought for a long time about what is necessary to make this step successful, but to be honest it can only happen if there is enough money in the background to allow people to take enough time for this very big challenge. Which brings us to the main problem: who has these privileges? Very, very few. And this brings us to the reason why it is so important to first build stable, personal and very legitimate networks that bring together people with a similar mindset and a common mission, and secondly create a framework that represents the needs of their peers. If you have all these most important conditions, then you have the chance to make the step really successful. Of course, there are many small things that need to happen as well, but these are what I would call "game-changing must haves".



Decentralising Digital Power in Culture: Let's Stop Using MAGMA

– by Palanga Street Radio

Copenhagen, Denmark
October 2023



Context

The workshop was held during the ICRN's (Independent Community Radio Network) meet-up in Copenhagen October 17th–22nd, 2023, hosted by The Lake Radio. As part of an overarching theme of what it means to be independent and in an effort to become more autonomous from platforms and software that compromise privacy and/or security whilst centralising and commercialising the internet, this workshop specifically looked

into ways of running online community radio stations without being dependent on platforms/software from tech giants like Microsoft, Apple, Google, Meta and Amazon (abbr. MAGMA).

State of the situation

The participants all represent independent community radio stations in Northern Europe (Germany, Lithuania, Denmark, and Norway with Icelandic, Finnish, Estonian and Latvian ICRN-members

not present at this workshop), and there are many overlaps in the platforms and software that we use, which in many cases are radio/audio industry standards or just plain go-to-apps for office work and project management.

Workshop's discussions

• Unwitting use

As we initially mapped out the different platforms and software that we use for daily tasks and started putting company names behind each one, it became clear that far from all participants were aware of which conglomerates and corporations are behind the platforms they use daily (specifically Google's ownership of YouTube and Meta's ownership of Instagram and WhatsApp).

• (Why) is it problematic?

An initial discussion point was the question (that was raised by several participants): Why shouldn't we use MAGMA platforms/software? There was a consensus that especially Google and Meta represent a centralisation of internet-use that is basically a monopolisation within their areas, and that giving them this power over the internet is problematic. As their services are mostly free of charge, their business models must rely heavily on storing and using (or selling) personal data, which we find unethical. And if we believe that someone having a monopoly on something is bad, say, for innovation, we can easily end up with platforms and tools that don't improve (or get worse over time). So, by using MAGMA platforms, we are funding these tech corporations and enabling their unethical and unsustainable ways which have negative effects on the very ecosystem we try to exist in (the internet). We also identified platforms and software that aren't MAGMA, but are doing some of the same things to people's privacy and the internet in general.

• What are the alternatives?

The above-mentioned points are structural problems and not necessarily ones we can help solve. But we can stop being part of the problem by finding alternatives to the MAGMA platforms and software that we use. We do, however, face some challenges in doing so.

Workshop's challenges

• Migration and scale

If we were to move away from using for instance Google Drive for storage and Docs, Sheets, etc. for office work, it would involve converting and moving thousands of documents to a new platform, which could potentially go wrong and would at a minimum require an immense amount of time and resources.

• Money/resources

In addition to potentially costing money we don't have, alternatives to MAGMA platforms could also mean having to put more time and human resources into setting up or maintaining new infrastructural solutions. There are for instance alternatives to Google Docs and Microsoft 365 that you can run on a local server, but as short-staffed or completely voluntary independent radio stations, we don't have the IT personnel or equipment required for such operations.

• Convenience vs autonomy

Widely used platforms like Google Docs come with an ease-of-use that is key to us, as we don't have the time nor skills to maintain customised IT solutions or open-source software. And even if we somehow found the resources to make the shift away from Google Docs, we would lose our compatibility with the people who use that platform. The same goes for Instagram, which we all use to promote our radio stations and the content we produce –if we left the platform, we would be practically invisible to the outside world. It often becomes a choice

where independence comes with isolation, and autonomy comes with inconvenience. It's one at the expense of the other.

Needs of the participants

• Low costs

As radio stations, we're already spending a lot of money on audio equipment and hardware, so we need our software to be free of charge or very cheap. This either means open-source or cloud-based MAGMA solutions –and as mentioned above, convenience and compatibility has often made us choose the latter.

• Low requirements to technical skills

Many of us are musicians, artists, cultural workers, and radio producers who invest our free time in running these radio stations. We are small ad hoc organisations and do everything ourselves. We don't want to spend a disproportionate amount of time acquiring new skills or learning new software that takes away precious time from doing what we love: radio.

• Low maintenance

For the same reasons, we don't want for instance open-source software solutions that we need to set up, update, and maintain ourselves. We like cloud-based solutions as they maintain themselves which leaves us with more time and energy to make radio.

• Ethics

With a cynical mindset, we could just go about our business-as-usual without taking all the implications of the MAGMA ethos into account. But we are nonetheless people who care about ethics and sustainability, and so this puts us in a position where we need to get practical.

Workshop's proposals

• Low hanging fruits

We have identified a number of pragmatic solutions that we can turn to here and now without having to give something up or it costing us resources that we don't have.

• Change the small parts

The internet is filled with tons of free knowledge and resources on free and cheap alternatives to MAGMA and other popular software. In the areas where there is competition (and not monopoly), these alternatives are often good and easy to use. And switching one bearing in a huge machinery doesn't need to take more than a few hours for one or two people. Examples could be changing your web host, email supplier or similar to a more ethical, green and/or independent company.

• Resilience to monopolies

We can continue to be present on Meta platforms as long as the outside world expects us to, but at the same time make an effort to not rely on being there in the future.

ethics

We can for instance use Instagram to tell as many of our followers to subscribe to our newsletter; or try to slowly move our social media presence to an open-source (and more sustainable) platform like Mastodon. When Instagram one day ceases to exist (or dies from the same disease as Facebook), we can make sure that we don't lose our following by spreading our presence to and reaching our audience through alternative channels. We can make sure we don't put our content on platforms owned by MAGMA, but instead apply a so-called POSSE approach (Publish on Own Site, Syndicate Elsewhere) by linking/embedding/sharing/previewing content on the platforms, but having the actual content available on our own platform(s).

• Don't speak their language

We can stop measuring our success in the number of followers, likes, engagements (quantitative criteria) and instead focus on the kind of listeners we have and how they contribute to our communities (qualitative criteria).

• Organise

We can use our involvement in different networks to acquire skill sets that we need or even co-finance resources/learning that can help us to not rely on MAGMA products.

• Subversive use of MAGMA

We can use MAGMA platforms and software in ways that don't benefit MAGMA. If we for instance are worried about privacy when

using Google or Meta tools, we can use a common login for our work, so that no personal data is given (the organisation as a whole has no privacy to violate).

Resources to go further

• [alternativeto.net](#)

A crowdsourced database of alternatives to basically any piece of software or platform you can think of. Search for the tool you currently use and get alternatives with filters for pricing, licence, operating system, etc.

• [mastodon.social](#)

Open-source social medium that uses the ActivityPub protocol, so that it's basically compatible with anything from WordPress to the Instagram add-on Threads and thereby can be a way of communicating to/with followers cross-platform.

• [mailerlite.com](#)

A Lithuanian newsletter service that is GDPR compliant and doesn't store your data on American servers (as many newsletter services do).

• [greenhost.net](#)

Dutch hosting service that takes internet freedom and sustainability seriously and also doesn't store your data on American servers.

how

Decentralised Platforms

– by COSMOS
/ Le Guess Who?

Utrecht, The Netherlands
April 2023

The Workshop about Decentralised Technologies aims to reflect on how to avoid GAFAM (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Meta, Apple) by supporting and using ethical, non-proprietary digital tools and designing decentralised platforms that promote network development, collaboration opportunities, and engagement.

Historical and political context and state of the situation

The acronym GAFAM might not ring a bell with many people, but once its components are revealed, it is clear to all what it stands for. Composed by Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft, and initially known as ‘the lords of the air,’ GAFAM represents the big tech giants of Silicon Valley. Nowadays, GAFAM plays a dominant role in the digital ecosystem as it holds ownership and control of most used products and services, from browsers to social networking platforms, shopping, news, media, and devices. The extended reach of influence that GAFAM possesses, beyond its specific markets, becomes clear if we consider the role of advertisements investments and the datafication of users’ activity. Data is easily extracted, analysed, used to personalise searches, and sold to other companies interested in making profits. That explains the tailored advertisements on socials, suggestions on Google searches suspiciously too specific, and, eventually, the creation of an online bubble personalised on each user’s profile. Indeed, GAFAM has access to a massive amount

of data, and the consequences of it on users’ privacy become concerning, especially considering Big Tech’s lack of effort in empowering users to understand the consequences of their consent on personal data processing. This influence over individuals and their relationship with others is referred to as ‘relational power.’ It begins with GAFAM’s construction of a persuasive brand identity that subtly attracts people to use and stick with its services. Once logged in, an implicit coercive power is exercised on users through a code of conduct necessary to grow on the platform, access specific services, and interact and transact by the rules of their game. As it will emerge throughout the course of the present workshop, most of the concerns raised by participants focus on the violation of privacy and the effect of this fine coercion on their online and offline choices. Despite the awareness around users’ threatened privacy, only in Europe, Google Search tools still count over 332 million users, and Facebook has 255 million active accounts while more than 45 million are using Amazon and Apple Store. In other words, every day, millions of data are transferred to the five giants of Silicon Valley, where they are used to serve market-driven purposes. The evident popularity of these platforms, combined with the comfort that centralised accounts allow, strengthen GAFAM’s brand identity and their desirability, making their services the first choice for most users. As the logos and links on the ‘Contact’ page of many websites may suggest, it seems that a profile on GAFAM’s platforms mirrors each individual,

initiative, and project. The hyper-connectivity that characterised our society is also a cause, boost, and consequence of GAFAM’s popularity. Big Tech indeed makes it possible for people to connect easily with one another despite where they are in the world, make purchases and discover new things related to what they like.

(Almost) all the participants in today’s conversation are active users in the world of GAFAM and developed their independent initiatives and businesses thanks to its services. Also, every year, COSMOS, the workshop organiser, reaches artists and audiences from all over the globe using offline and online promotion services that belong to GAFAM. However, conscious of the consequences of their attachment to Big Tech, they joined the conversation to delve into the topic and discuss other potential options. Focusing on the topic of ‘Decentralised Technologies’ proposed by the Reset! network, the participants are invited to reflect on their presence online and its ethical and practical implications for them as independent actors. As the Reset! network, COSMOS also advocates for a new cultural and media landscape by supporting inclusivity, pluralism, diversity, and circular economy values. By inviting its partners to this conversation, COSMOS brings in diverse perspectives, enriching points of view, and opinions from other independent actors active both in the European and international cultural and artistic sectors. All these voices contribute to expanding the knowledge and the critical perspective on the topic and create the base to design alternatives.

Workshop’s discussions

In front of the intricate nature of this topic, it was not easy to reach solid conclusions or define prescriptions on desirable behaviours that we should adopt as users. From the first question onwards, the whole

It begins with GAFAM’s construction of a persuasive brand identity that subtly attracts people to use and stick with its services.

discussion circled the primordial, philosophical question regarding the reasons behind our presence, absence, criticism, or adherence to GAFAM and its services. At each round of conversation between the participants, the question slightly mutated, stressing different perspectives, bringing in new examples, and raising new questions, which eventually had a more significant impact than a set of final statements.

• Why do we feel the need to move to independent decentralised platforms?

‘I was trying to leave my Spotify account, but I realised that I can’t because it is linked to my Facebook account, which I cannot delete.’ Julian Brimmer, Partnership and Network Coordinator at COSMOS, opens the dances shedding light on the privileges and limitations of centralised accounts. From the other participants’ reactions, it was clear that we could all relate to this powerless feeling, which shows how GAFAM, like the most detrimental of the addiction, is hardly possible to avoid and break free from. It can take one log-in to be trapped in the system, which forces us to surrender to its conditions of existence or vanishment. Marina Rei, Coordinator and Curator of several art projects in Portugal, reminds us about Instagram’s unexpected crush in October 2022, expressing how the sudden inability to access the account felt scary and unsettling for her collective. ‘We did not have our website, so this fact opened the question about where and how we

should share ourselves. We realised that we just want to be ours,” she claims, voicing the answer to this first question. Facing the danger of becoming too reliant on GAFAM, decentralised platforms promise independence and total control over one’s presence online. Control stands as the second reason in favour of decentralised platforms. The same net that makes account management so easy is collecting and analysing users’ activity, defining their personality and needs as users, and tailoring their search to provide what best matches their profile. Consequently, users are offered a customised bubble of ads suited to their ‘consumer profile.’ “As a user, I want to feel in control and make sure that this big machine is not just using me to generate ads and sell more products,” remarks Seeryz Jalbout, COSMOS Producer. Besides opening the gate to questions about ethical issues and the exploitation and extortion of data, her statement reminds us of what makes us inherently human: our ability to choose.

However, what seems to be essentially human as well is the search for comfort and simplicity. Indeed, the tie to centralised platforms is two-folded: it is strengthened by the cunning and capitalist nature of these services as much as by human beings’ ‘lazy’ nature. Why should we make life so hard and create several accounts with usernames and passwords that we will eventually forget? Once undertaken, the path from GAFAM to independence is full of pitfalls. “Even when we began to use alternative services, somehow we always ended up using Google at some point,” says Marina, admitting to feeling hostage to the system. Once again, nodding heads suggest that we can all relate: it takes time and strong motivation to develop alternatives and commit to them.

What is also relevant to consider is that the accessible nature that traps users to GAFAM’s platforms is at the same time attracting and allowing more people to become members, expanding their network, and promoting more connections.

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Social media makes it possible to keep in touch with people from everywhere, discover and reach out to new realities, and expand our influence. Independent artists paradoxically need the reach and accessibility offered by these platforms to emerge and connect. It is a fast tool, friendly and efficient. Among all the disadvantages, GAFAM indeed boosted globalisation and its hyperconnectivity by making connections easier and collaborations possible. If we are all here today, our chairs on different continents, our eyes looking at each other, we owe it to these platforms.

• What are the reasons for the aversion to GAFAM? Ethical reasons or practical limitations?

From the thoughts shared in response to the opening question, it appears that the opportunities offered by GAFAM balance out the disadvantages, especially when considered from a pragmatic perspective. However, if the opposition towards GAFAM is as popular as we perceive, what are the reasons that feed it? Are our values and the respect towards our agency what leads to this criticism?

Or is there more to unpack? Luis Fernandez, Producer of COSMOS and Coordinator of the workshop brings the conversation further, dropping these questions to inquire the foundation of this shared aversion and questioning the roots of participants’ perspectives. Drawing on his experience with promoting and sharing a documentary he made, Julian tells us how the target communities interested in the documentary’s topic were mainly present on Facebook – a platform that he avoided privately, but heavily used for the promotion campaign of the film. He also used Instagram and Twitter, but found the most responsive crowd on Facebook and through the film’s newsletter community. Besides being surprising for him, especially “given the outdated reputation that Facebook gained,” this example becomes useful as it leads the conversation towards bitter but relatable realisations. Reflecting on the attitude that might move users’ decisions online, Julian said, “to perceive a sort of snobbery in the choice not to participate in the most used platforms. Snobbery is not the right word,” he clarifies, but the other participants’ reaction revealed that the feeling might be shared. One may call it snobbery, or desire to un-conform, or an anti-capitalistic statement. However, the decision to leave the crowded mainstream platform seems to be driven by personal values and ethics rather than by reaching the right people for a specific purpose. Certainly, the coherence of this attitude depends on the platform

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one is migrating to, as by leaving Facebook for TikTok, one would be playing the same game, just with a different joystick. However, the conversation has uncovered the need for users to feel that they are doing the right thing according to their values. If the decision to appear on or avoid the GAFAM platforms was purely practical, then Julian’s film would have reached a wider audience on Facebook. Are these values and ethics widespread, though? Or, blinded by the absolute validity of anti-capitalistic actions, are we cutting out other perspectives? Thankfully, Seeryz, raised in Syria, jumps into the conversation to remind us of this. After gathering the memories of her years in Syria, before and during the revolution of 2011, she tells us that it is not perceived as an issue if Facebook uses one’s data. Using Facebook in such warm zones is considered a privilege and a risk at the same time. It means that one has access to electricity to charge their devices. On the other hand, sharing one’s political stance on such a platform might be the reason for being put behind bars or even murdered if it does not serve the regime’s political agenda. The hierarchy of issues is different, and consequently, many other applications matter more. In Syria, during those years of control and censorship, there were several ‘illegal’ applications that the population was using to communicate, get information, and coordinate actions. Reflecting on the current use of certain GAFAM apps over others, Seeryz demonstrates that the choice of using a particular application reveals a demographic need of expression. “Facebook is the virtual space for sharing one’s thoughts, as the What do you think question is the first thing that pops up when logging into one’s account. Instagram, on the other hand, is for photos, hence appearances and keeping up to date with everyday life in the moments worth taking a photo of. To elaborate, in war zones or under hard circumstances, people tend to share their news, thoughts, or feeling in the form of written words in an attempt to gain their freedom

of speech or to take the control they lost to propaganda.” It seems that the popularity of one service over another reflects the needs of society: in some societies it is important to share a message. In others, it is important for that message to be seen. This perspective prompted Julian to recall a conversation he had with a friend: “This conclusion became clear to me when I was talking to a friend from Iran about my reasons for leaving Twitter,” Julian said. These platforms can mean very different things to people in other countries. “Do you have any idea what it means for us to have a space where we can share and see information freely?” his friend asked him. The sense of snobbery arises again, revealing its naive side as much as the privileged position where it comes from. “It is very different for us. It is easy to criticise a platform and decide to leave because we do not like the owner or the funds,” Julian concluded.

Moreover, in light of our previous workshop around the topic of diversity, which explored the approach towards diversity and the importance of giving voice to the unheard, it feels contradictory now to condemn a system that allows voices to emerge and connections to be made. Luis emphasises how, in many countries, platforms like Facebook are widely used to stimulate the economy by promoting small businesses and connecting locals and foreign partners. Additionally, as our participants’ experience may witness, many initiatives and artists do not have the luxury to give up on these platforms as they represent the main channel of freedom of expression and promotion within their context. These last examples remind us that freedom of speech, a pillar of European values, is so granted to European citizens that it is difficult to imagine being censored, imprisoned, and even condemned for expressing one’s opinion. The features offered by GAFAM are servants to this freedom, and despite all the controversies, it exports it to places where it is not quite granted.

• Assuming that GAFAM platforms allow freedom of speech and connection, is it worth continuing to use them? Or is the price still too high when we consider privacy and control?

Leading toward an agreed conclusion appeared more complex as the conversation twirls around new perspectives on the topic. Exposure to the different points of view that have arisen so far reminded us of how the dis/advantages are relative to the context. When confronted with the connections, freedom, and opportunities that GAFAM creates, how acceptable can control, ads, and dependence on these big five become? “For how silly it might sound, we need to consider, for each platform that we use, whether it does more good or bad in the world, and if it is possible to get the same results with alternatives or without using it,” suggests Julian. “Twitter is a good example, he continues, its impact is too powerful and empowering for many people. I do not want this site to be gone; I realised that my impulsive rejection of it could be led by selfish reasons.” The impact and importance of a platform vary according to the service one would need from it. “For our Radio show, the impact of a social media page is limited, says Andre, DJ record stasher & co-founder of East Side Radio, if you announce that you’re live online, probably only 1% of the audience will follow you there. Whereas, an archive, a Cloud is way more useful for us.” Julians’ viewpoint, and Andre’s example, invite us to think about the balance between personal values and practical needs, and demonstrate that binary thinking that condemns GAFAM altogether is not valuable neither to answer the above question nor to make an overall change.

• How can we advocate and find a balance between centralised and decentralised?

Each online service serves a different purpose, which comes with its pros and cons, and it falls on us, as users, to evaluate whether the service matches our goals and values, and choose accordingly.

The discussion suggests that in a society where our engagement with social media seems to determine our status, it may be difficult, even counterproductive, to reduce our use of its platforms rather than increase it. However, if control, independence, and privacy are strong parts of our values, then alternative options can be considered. Yet, embracing these options does take a shift in behaviour. Andre shares with us his approach, which begins with the question that drives the presence online of his Radio Station: “Do we really need it?” At East Side Radio, instead of Gmail, they adopted Zoo. They left Facebook and are aiming to minimise the use of Instagram to direct the audience to their website, and Telegram substituted WhatsApp. Google Drive has been replaced by their server; however, they do not suffer from Google Search, which they still use. As we said earlier, developing alternatives is demanding and might be limiting for the users, but as Andre explains, the options adopted are in line with their style, ethics, and desired reach. “These choices are the consequence of a change of mentality, he tells us, we are not oriented towards exponential growth and tight to the need of showing results and data about our activity.” At the core of their radio’s ethic is ensuring the independence of their DJs and producers. For this reason, they switched to MixCloud, which allows it more than other platforms. Andres’s example emphasises that it is possible to survive and thrive even outside of the GAFAM chain; still, it takes a different attitude and keen effort to seek what represents an individual/structure’s value cluster best and committed choices.

• Questions, agency, and creativity

Given the state of the situation, as described in the introduction of this workshop, to expect a change from GAFAM, the money machine of capitalism, is utopic. Therefore, we better focus on changing our own behaviour and awareness. As mentioned earlier in this report, the ‘blame’ for the dependent and addictive relationship with centralised, mainstream platforms

falls on users’ need to conform and eagerness for growth. On this need, we, as users, do hold agency. Hence, what can be empowering and impactful on the relationship with Big Tech is a more critical approach toward the urgency and frequency of our online presence and a deeper awareness of what influences us, leading our searches, purchases, and content.

Posts might have a greater reach when they serve the algorithm ‘rules’, but are we being authentic or indulging in it? Are we aware of the subtle impact of ads and tailored feeds on our ideas, opinions, and actions? Do we really need to be on Instagram?

As it begins, the conversation ends by questioning what are the values that guide our experience online. The choice to abandon GAFAM, wholly or partly, depends on the answers that users can give to themselves. Being coherent with our principles and shifting to independence is not impossible, but it takes time and effort. “We are spending more time strategising and planning how to get there. Still, when we act, it is very specific and efficient,” explains Andre. Deciding to keep operating on GAFAM more thoughtfully and sustainably is also possible and would maintain and refine the opportunities it offers. “If you need them, there are always ways to be creative with them,” concludes Marina. “With our collective, we are using Instagram to confuse people about what we are doing. We are generating interest not by showing, but by triggering questions in the crowd.” As many of the examples voiced during the workshop, the latter reminds us that we, as users, have the power to play it differently and use our creativity to operate through different discourses.

The notion of alter- natives

In the ever-expanding realm of digital dominance, the pervasive influence of MAGMA (Microsoft, Apple, Google, Meta, and Amazon) looms large, shaping the landscape of our technological interactions. It's an undeniable reality that these tech behemoths have become synonymous with convenience, functionality, and accessibility. However, the very convenience they offer often comes at the cost of dependence, raising crucial questions about the sustainability of such reliance, especially within the independent cultural and media sector.

Criticism of MAGMA is not new; it's a sentiment that echoes across various discussions about the concentration of power and control in the hands of a few tech giants. Yet, merely criticising without exploring alternatives or fostering dialogue is akin to shouting into the void. This is where engaging talks and debates come into play, serving as the crucible for ideas that can reshape our digital future. The independent cultural and media sector needs to take this matter into its hands, and be at the forefront of this conversation. As custodians of diverse voices and narratives, these entities play a pivotal role in shaping the cultural fabric of our society. To safeguard their autonomy and preserve the richness of cultural expression, it becomes imperative for these players to actively seek alternatives to the all-encompassing grasp of MAGMA.

Dependence on the digital infrastructure provided by MAGMA is not just a matter of convenience; it's a form of reliance that extends beyond mere tools and platforms. It involves entrusting critical aspects of communication, promotion, and engagement to a handful of corporations. This dependence is a double-edged sword, offering unparalleled convenience while simultaneously posing a threat to privacy, security, and the integrity of personal data.

In the pages of this volume, the question posed is not just about criticism, but about envisioning a way forward. How do we liberate ourselves from the clutches of MAGMA without compromising the efficiency and accessibility that these giants bring to the table? This question is not rhetorical; it's a call to action for independent cultural players to actively participate in the dialogue surrounding digital alternatives. The importance of these conversations is heightened by the techno-criticist narrative—a discerning and critical approach to technology. Blind adoption of digital tools without considering the implications is a perilous path. By engaging in debates, cultural organisations can not only challenge the status quo, but also contribute to the development of alternative solutions that align with their values of independence.

Decentralised technologies emerge as the linchpin of this discourse. They represent a shift away from the centralised control exercised by tech giants, offering a pathway to regain control over privacy, security, and personal data. The very essence of virtuous cultural practices lies in the ability to navigate this digital landscape with autonomy, integrity and creativity. By spotlighting independent cultural organisations that have successfully migrated away from MAGMA's full orbit, this volume showcases tangible examples of resilience and innovation. The significance of engaging talks and debates around digital alternatives cannot be overstated. Dependence on MAGMA is not an inevitability and the path to autonomy lies in exploring and embracing alternatives. The journey towards a decentralised and techno-critically informed future begins with these conversations—an odyssey that promises a reset in our digital engagement.

Manon Moulin is the editorial coordinator of all European projects for the non-profit organisation Arty Farty. She specifically works on the European network of independent cultural and media organisations Reset!, as well as media cross border collaboration project The Circle, and aggregation media *We are Europe*.

Reset! work- shops

2022, February

↘ Budapest, Hungary

Aurora – Resistant and Resilient: Perspectives for Independent Culture in Hungary

2022, September

↘ Tallin, Estonia

Palanga Street Radio – Sustainable Future(s) for Community Radio

2022, October

↘ Budapest, Hungary

Lahmacun Radio – Independent Music Journalism in Hungary

↘ Batumi, Georgia

Mutant Radio – Urban Cultural Physical Spaces in Batumi

↘ Barcelona, Spain

Whisper Not Agency – The Management of Artistic Independence

↘ Brussels, Belgium Arty Farty

Brussels – How to Support Artists with Disabilities

↘ Tromsø, Norway

Insomnia – New Audiences and Next Generation: How to Stay Connected to the Youth, Be Relevant, Become a Platform for New Generations and Support Emerging Talents and Artists

↘ Lisbon, Portugal

Canal 180 – History and Diversity: The Role of Independent Creative Actors in Post-Colonial Cultural Environments

↘ Tbilisi, Georgia

Mutant Radio – Independent Creative Platforms and Urban Changes in Tbilisi

↘ Porto, Portugal

Canal 180 – New Audiences and Next Generation: How to Stay Connected to the Youth, Be Relevant, Become a Platform for New Generations and Support Emerging Talents and Artists

↘ Berlin, Germany

Consentis – Diversity & Awareness

↘ Munich, Germany

Safe The Dance – Diversity & Inclusion

↘ Budapest, Hungary

Lazy Women – New Audiences and Next Generation: How to Stay Connected to the Youth, Be Relevant, Become a Platform for New Generations and Support Emerging Talents and Artists

2022, November

↘ Milan, Italy

Terraforma – The Relationship Between Independent Music Scene and Cultural Institutions

2022, December

↘ Leipzig, Germany

Sphere Radio – Decentralised Resources

↘ Skopje, North Macedonia

Skala – Audiences & New Generations

2023, January

↘ Istanbul, Turkiye

Garp Sessions – Intergenerational Cooperations: How to Share and Collaborate Between Independent Cultural Venues

↘ Malmö, Sweden

Inkonst / Intonal – Spaces for Emerging Culture

↘ Kirkenes, Norway

Insomnia – Cultural Collaborations in times of war and conflict

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Come Play With Me – Parents and Carers in the Music Industry

↘ Prishtina, Kosovo

Bijat – Prishtina Nightlife Behind the Scene

2023, February

↘ Brussels, Belgium

Arty Farty Brussels – Concentration in the Live Music Sector

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Pixelache – The Structures We Build: On Models and Practices Towards Sustainability of Independent Artistic Associations

↘ Vienna, Austria

Sounds Queer – Trouble in Paradise: The Current Struggles of Vienna's Independent Cultural Scene to Reach New Audiences and the Need for International Collaborations

↘ Krakow, Poland

Oramics – New audiences and next generation: How to Draw Them in?

↘ Podgorica, Montenegro

Nikola Delibasic – Building Relations between the Independent Scene in Montenegro and European Cooperations

↘ Krakow, Poland

Unsound – Sustainability in Organisation of Cultural Events

↘ Tbilisi, Georgia

Mutant Radio – The Decentralisation of the Independent Local Cultural Scene

↘ Kirkenes, Norway

Insomnia – International Cultural Cooperation in the Barents Region

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Mutant Radio – Northern Propaganda, Hybrid War, and a Role of the Independent Platforms in Georgia

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Terraforma – Current Italian Clubbing Scene

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Terraforma – Independent Media

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Drugstore – Belgrade Scene: Independent Cultural Players on the EU Periphery

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Palanga Street Radio – Solidarity Action and Support for Ukraine

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Radio Quantica – Portuguese Independent Venues Challenges

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De Structura – How Can Emerging Talents and Artists Be Supported and Nurtured?

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Ankali – Reaching across the Velvet Rope: The Disparities between Electronic Music Scenes of Eastern and Western Europe

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Sister midnight – Future Proofing London's Grassroots Music Culture: Ideas Towards a Blueprint for Sustainable Music Futures

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Hip Hip Library – The Culture Scene and the Next Generation

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Kosovo 2.0 – Tired Tropes and Reductionist Narratives: Kosovo, the Balkans, and the International Media

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COSMOS/The Guess Who? – How Can We Create a System to Directly Support Local Artists, Local Scenes, and Underrepresented Artists?

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2023, April

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Best Practices by Independent
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↳ Naples, Italy

Vinylbox – Generational Gap:
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↳ Warsaw, Poland

Girls* to the Front – Change:
Towards Accessible and Inclusive
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↳ Utrecht, Netherlands

COSMOS/The Guess Who? –
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Cooperation and Networking
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De Structura – Empowering
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Mutant Radio – Importance of The
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↳ Utrecht, Netherlands

COSMOS/The Guess Who? – New
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PIP – Solidarity and Hospitality

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Robida – Situated Publishing:
Possibilities and Challenges of
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Insomnia – Arabic-Speaking
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Culture in Oslo and Norway

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A Sustainable Model for
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↳ Paris, France

Réflexivité(s) – Remaining
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↳ Lisbon, Portugal

Nêga Filmes – Exploring Lisbon's
Independent Cultural Scene

↳ Tromsø, Norway

Insomnia – Safer Spaces: In the
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↳ Copenhagen, Denmark

Palanga Street Radio –
Decentralising Digital Power in
Culture: Let's Stop Using MAGMA

↳ Heraklion, Greece

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Introduction to Inclusion and
Accessibility in Culture

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