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## Commonswashing – A Political Communication Struggle

Melanie Dulong de Rosnay

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# Global Cooperation Research

*A Quarterly Magazine*



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## *'Modern money is not a neutral means of exchange'*

Legal scholar Isabel Feichtner critically observes distributive effects of the emerging political economy of extraction in the global commons.



## *'Arctic imaginaries reflect contested visions of order'*

Maren Hofius identifies an emerging discourse that cuts across previous paradigms and promises to provide common ground for all stakeholders in the Arctic: the 'Global Arctic'.



## *'Commonswashing constitutes a capture of the language'*

Mélanie Dulong de Rosnay introduces the concept of commons-washing and the semantic preemption of the concept of commons by private actors.



Bettina Mahlert pays tribute to Amartya Sen, scholar 'par excellence', p. 14.

'Urgency' and 'Responsibility': Report and 'Voices' from a remarkable conference, p. 17

New fellows and their projects at the Centre, presented on p. 24.

# Editorial

Dear Readers,

I hope that this issue of quarterly magazine finds you well and healthy, despite rising numbers of Covid infections. In this issue we focus on pressing problems of degradation and depletion of the global commons, understood as large resource domains that fall outside of the jurisdiction of any one country, and call for global cooperation to protect and maintain them for human mankind. Contributions in this issue cover re-valuating the commons in the field of deep seabed minerals (Feichtner), politics of redrawing boundaries in the Arctic's pristine ecosystem (Hofius) and the appropriation of the global cyberspace through commonswashing (Dulong de Rosnay).



ner), politics of redrawing boundaries in the Arctic's pristine ecosystem (Hofius) and the appropriation of the global cyberspace through commonswashing (Dulong de Rosnay).

You might also be interested in reading Mahlert's tribute in honour of Amartya Sen that highlights

his role as a contributor to global cooperation at the occasion of him being awarded the Peace Award of the German Book Trade. For those who could not attend we include a report on our international conference on 'Urgency and Responsibility in Global Cooperation – Covid-19 and Beyond', organized in cooperation with the School of Global Studies at the University of Gothenburg.

We also introduce you to the new cohort of fellows that is joining the Centre for the next academic year. Please feel free to contact them! Finally, I would like to draw your attention to forthcoming events (all in virtual format) which include Käte Hamburger Lectures on Cybercrime by Jonathan Lusthaus, the History of Business and Global Governance of the Environment by Glenda Sluga, and the Ebb and Flow of Global Governance by Alexandru Grigorescu, as well as a Dialogue on the Virtualization of Global Cooperation.

Have a nice autumn and stay healthy!

## Sigrid Quack

Managing Director

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# Commonswashing – A Political Communication Struggle

Mélanie Dulong de Rosnay

The enclosure and the commodification of the commons are identified processes. Commonswashing, the appropriation of the semantics and the message of the commons for commercial purposes without endorsing its values, constitutes an additional co-optation phenomenon. Conceptualized as an extension of the logic of greenwashing, commonswashing constitutes a capture of the language, but also potentially of the imaginary and the social benefits of the actual commons.

## Introduction

The concept of 'commonswashing' (similar to greenwashing) refers to the tendency of for-profit companies to seek mental association with or directly frame their activities under the umbrella of the commons or in order to benefit from public sympathy, advertising objectives of openness, participation or sharing with a community, with the objective to endorse values and ethics of commons-based sharing, but without actually respecting its fundamental principles, thus creating more fuzziness in public opinion on the actual definition, principles and values of genuine commons.

In this article, I introduce the concept of commonswashing and the semantic preemption of the concept of commons by private actors communicating around concepts of commons, openness and sharing without adopting their principles nor values. Examples in the digital and information commons realm of intangible resources produced and shared online will illustrate the pervasive effects of this conceptual appropriation of the commons, to which actors of the genuine commons must resist in order to preserve both the meaning of the concept and the commons themselves which might be threatened by this usurpation and message blurring.

Commonswashing differs from public domain or common pool resources depletion, commercial co-optation or appropriation by freeriding. The enclosure of commons by private actors, or the commercial appropriation of resources, is another identified phenomenon (for public domain knowledge or information, Boyle, 2010). The development of lucrative business models based on commons-based production such as free and open source software is also a well-known practice (Birkinbine 2020, Lund & Zukerfeld 2020). But models of 'profits from enclosures', such as the scientific publishing industry, and 'profits from openness', such as open source software (models names borrowed from Lund & Zukerfeld 2020) both differ from the concept

of 'commonswashing'. Within information and digital commons became noticeable a tendency to co-opt or claim elements of the language of openness and the ethics of sharing to designate for-profit initiatives that neither follow commons-based production models nor display any criteria for openness, besides being accessible online. Social networks such as Facebook also use a discourse which encourages users to 'share' information with a 'community', while the content is neither owned nor governed by the users, who are not provided with the affordances to organize as a community. This lexical field appropriation leads to freeriding on and benefiting from the sympathy capital which the public addresses to the movement of the actual digital commons which is becoming more mainstream since one or two decades thanks to initiatives such as Wikipedia or Open Access scientific publications.

Such a takeover may even lead to new forms of enclosure of commons resources, if private actors claiming to work for the commons and the common good by using its semantics may come to dominate the governance structures for the production of a good or the provision of a service as a commons, thus perverting the key characteristics and values of commons-based peer production.

This semantic appropriation can be seen as an extension of the logic of the concept of greenwashing (Kahle, Gurel-Atay 2014), around which is forged the term commonswashing. Greenwashing is 'a form of spin in which green PR or green marketing is deceptively used to promote the perception that an organization's products, objectives or policies are environmentally friendly' (greenwashing Wikipedia page, 2018), and a way for capitalist logic to colonize spaces that were still outside its field of action.

The commons are now recognized and valued in many sectors of society and, as a concept and a governance model, they retain a strong heterogeneity (Papadimitropoulos 2017, Broumas 2017), to the extent that

neo-liberal politicians and economists now feel that they are also talking about 'commons', claiming to apply 'openness' values to their projects, and pretending to care about the commons and the common good for PR reasons, while maintaining a neo-liberal extractive agenda (Capra and Mattei 2015) without keeping value within the community.

### Defining the commons and digital commons

In order to understand and flag initiatives which pretend to be a commons, but are not commons, it is necessary to provide a basic definition of the commons before showing examples of previous usage of commonswashing.

For Elinor Ostrom (1990) drawing on thousands of case studies, the elements characterizing commons are a shared resource, a community managing and curating it, and self-determining its governance rules. 'Digital commons are a subset of the commons, where the resources are data, information, culture and knowledge which are created and/or maintained online. The notion of the digital commons is an important concept for countering legal enclosure and fostering equitable access to these resources.' (Dulong de Rosnay and Stalder 2020). Wikipedia is the most famous example of a digital commons, produced and maintained by a decentralized community and accessible under a Creative Commons license allowing others to reuse and build upon articles only if they contribute back to the commons.

Analytical criteria can help identifying the different shades between actual digital commons, and user-generated content or crowdsourcing online platforms which may be practicing commonswashing. Detecting if a product or a service is a commons, or surfing on the tendency to get social kudos, can be achieved by considering design features such as the 'ownership of means of production, technical architecture/design, social organization/governance of work patterns, ownership of the peer-produced resource, and value of the output' (Dulong de Rosnay and Musiani 2016). Based on these five design features, a hint that a project is a digital labour platform rather than an actual commons can be the fact that the platform is owned by a for-profit corporation, as opposed to a cooperative or a community of volunteers. The control on the technical features or affordances (who is able to modify the settings, to exercise censorship, to delete a contribution) and the fact that governance decisions are centralized will also be indicators. And finally, if rights on the resource, the output of the users' participation and production, remain within the corporation and its stakeholders rather than shared within the community, it will not be a commons.

### Instances of commonswashing

While the concept of commonswashing has already been used by colleagues, mostly within the francophone actors of the commons, denouncing 'political

## Center for Internet and Society (CIS)

The Center for Internet and Society (CIS) is a CNRS research center, made up of the research unit 'Internet and Society' (UPR 2000), created in 2019, and the research group 'Internet, AI and Society' (GDR 2091), created in 2020.

At the intersection of disciplines such as sociology, law, history, economics, political science, information and communication sciences, informatics and engineering sciences, the CIS intends to build independent and interdisciplinary research and expertise. The CIS's research endeavors contribute to enlighten the major technical controversies and the definition of contemporary policies related to digital, to the internet, and more broadly to informatics.

<https://cis.cnrs.fr/>

marketing (...) rhetorics or the 'cynical', 'abusive' exploitation of a 'buzzword', there has not been any systematic attempt of an academic definition to my knowledge and after an exploration of search engines and academic databases. The audience of a panel at the 2018 conference of the International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC), where I first presented this paper, also confirmed the lack of prior usage of the concept in the academic field.

Previous examples of commonswashing, based on a search on Twitter of the term #commonswashing, can be found in two areas, information technology, and French politics and funding. Authors of the tweets are also noting a confusion between the commons and the common good, a concept closer to the public interest than to the commons. **Bitcoin analogy** with Wikipedia is not accurate, even if mining can be compared to volunteering one's IT capacity in order to make the system work, the value created is not shared with the community at large and remains in the drive of the individual miners.

Several French politicians<sup>2</sup> have been using expressions of commons and common good without relation with their actual meaning: the **2018 Summit for tech for good** was also piggybacking on the common good, with French president asking high tech world leaders to defend the common goods of education, labor law and social rights (a model qualified of '**industrial paternalism**' of the XIXth century) and pay a 3% tax (a project which has been abandoned in January 2020 after pressure by the US government) to fund so-called

1 Tweets with the hashtag #commonswashing by Lionel Maurel, Rémi Mathis, Régis Ursini, Lancelot Pecquet: <https://twitter.com/hashtag/commonswashing?src=hash>.

2 **Aurore Bergé, Aurélien Tache.**

common goods, **creating a confusion** with actual public infrastructure and public services .

A comparable tendency of semantic appropriation of a non-profit concept to serve the agenda of corporate branding is the concept of 'ethical AI', **where companies try to distract** and pretend to develop ethical AI while just bearing the name of ethical, misleading the public and the regulator. **AI Commons**, an initiative which participated to the Global Forum on AI for humanity in October 2019, gathers companies developing AI products for humanity and being a common knowledge hub without any relation with the commons or the knowledge commons, a well-identified research field where knowledge is co-created and shared (Frischmann, Madison, Sandburg 2014), or to **initiatives trying to develop the field of AI as a commons**.

### **An appropriation of the concept of the commons in the information and digital realm**

Cultural commons are often victim of enclosure. Even public cultural heritage and memory institutions with a mission of preservation such as museums and libraries exercised what is called copyfraud, the undue addition of a layer of copyright to digitized versions of public domain work (Dulong de Rosnay 2011). On the contrary, some museums and libraries are collaborating with Wikipedia to place their public domain works in the commons. So do volunteers who upload photographs of sites of natural beauty, such as Machu Picchu, and contribute them to the commons.

However, in 2019, Northface, a company selling sportswear, hacked Wikipedia, with the intention to get its products higher in the Google search results, after noticing that all trips start with a Google search and that Wikipedia often is the top result. A Northface employee replaced Wikipedia photos of touristic destinations with very similar photos showing their products in the shot and 'in some cases, outright photoshopped a North Face product into an existing photo of trekking popular tourist destinations'<sup>3</sup>. The company made a promotional video to present their strategy, pretending they were 'collaborating with Wikipedia'. Not only were they not 'collaborating' with the biggest actor of the digital commons, but they were violating its terms of use, which forbid commercial campaigning. Wikipedia editors quickly noticed the scam and removed the photos showing the Northface logo and the company received some criticisms among the community of the commons, taking advantage of free publicity caused by articles reporting the case.

In an activist scholarship perspective, how can we protect both the commons and the concept of commons? Resistance against enclosure, commodification and commonswashing may combine approaches of reframing political imaginaries and designing policy solutions protecting the commons.

<sup>3</sup> See the **photos**.

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