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EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

TAPAS

There Are Platforms as AlternativeS

Platform companies,
sharing platforms and
digital commons

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Tapas Report

executive summary

According to some observers, the uberisation of the economy, due to its ability to increase the commodification of the world, is fostering a counter-movement to protect society.

This counter-movement is driving social and technical innovations and produces « *real utopias aimed at extending cooperation through new digital tools* » (DURAND FOLCO, 2016¹).

As a result, the offer of digital platforms is not limited to the proposals of large capitalistic platforms alone. On the ground, in different places around the world, new platforms are emerging which are quite distinct from the centralised and extractive functioning of oligopo-listic platforms, and from the dynamics of the disintegration of labour and social protection that the latter often set in motion.

On markets where network effects tend to produce « *winner-take-all* » phenomena, the emergence of alternatives, most often without sufficient financial investment, is a delicate matter. Faced with adversity, alternative platforms experiment with positionings and operating modalities by drawing on several currents: **the digital commons and open source software**, or **the cooperative and/or associative tradition**.

The report proposes **an in-depth study of these experiments**, the prototypes of alternative platforms, **in the French context**.

On one hand, the report analyses the dynamic of the emergence of alternative platforms. On the other, it studies their practices in terms of governance and work organisation, as well as their economic and technological models during their start-up phase.

1. The empirical study

The report is based on a field study whose sample was compiled together with its partner, the association La Coop des Communs. The sample comprises seven platforms from different sectors of activity, with an in-depth study being conducted on each platform. A monograph was written after each case study, analysing the platforms' institutional and promotional documents, the user's experience on the platforms, observations and semi-directive interviews. The research team conducted 109 interviews using interview guides that were established to match the different categories of interviewees (managers, employees, volunteers, users).

1 Durand Folco, J. (2016). Polanyi contre Uber. Le Devoir, URL: <https://www.ledevoir.com/societe/le-devoir-de-philo-histoire/464126/le-devoir-de-philo-polanyi-contre-uber>.

2 The integral versions of the monographs are available online in the TAPAS collection on the HAL portal : https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/PROGRAMME_TAPAS/page/index.

Échantillon de l'étude

Sector	Platform – Service offer
Tourism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Les oiseaux de passage: accommodation and travel guides for the discovery of a region (heritage, social history) proposed by professionals and/or individuals gathered in local.
Transport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobicoop: service for shared, ecological and solidarity-based mobility.
Delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CoopCycle: a federation of logistics cooperatives specialised in “last mile” bike deliveries.
Agri-food	
Software Publishing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open Food France/CoopCircuits: creation of a market dedicated to independent producers (similar to AMAP).
Event organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SoTicket: an open solution for online box-offices managed by the users.
Fintech	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • France Barter: an inter-company bartering platform.
Software publishing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Framasoft: proposes a range of services, designed as prototypes, showing the possibility of operating without the GAFAM.
Popular education (on digital issues)	Creation of a network of local and ethical hosting companies (the CHATONS charter) to disseminate free prototypes developed by the association and identify other free solutions.

2. Main study findings

The platforms studied represent an offensive reaction to the expansion of the phenomenon of commodification, each in their own sector of activity.

Their projects give rise to practical experiments with original models that are not simply ethical copy-pastes of the dominant capitalist platforms but lead to a real shift in the service offers in the sectors involved.

The strategy of the studied platforms is not so much aimed at adapting dominant models by limiting their negative externalities, but rather inventing new forms that belong – by design – to models of social and environmental transitions.

One of the key features of these platforms is their ability to federate. They sometimes unite with other platforms or, in other cases, directly bring together producers of goods and services as well as users.

In the initiatives studied, the platform does not simply aim to increase intermediation activities, and transactions. It endeavours to create, tool and/or link up communities (of workers, users, volunteers, etc.) who will contribute to defining the need to be met, each from their own position.

We qualify the platforms studied as « substantive », in line with the view of the economy developed by Karl Polanyi (1977)³.

The substantive view focuses on relations between individuals and with the natural environments on which they depend for their livelihood. It integrates these interdependencies, this anchoring, as constituting economic activity, which embraces a relational perspective and aims to create social ties as much as goods.

The study shows that the communities that form or unite around the platform's activity are for the most part local communities rooted in the territory on which they operate and whose members are united by the values they seek to embody.

For these communities, the platform itself is a technical device, most often designed as a digital common that they help to manage and which they use.

The technical device in the form of platform is linked to value systems and deliberative spaces enabling a connection between the activity pursued and goals of general or collective interest. This may involve : the mission to encourage a cultural shift to ride-sharing and a broader change in an individual's practices in view of the environmental transition ; developing short food supply chains for ecological, social justice and/or health reasons; protecting heritage and promoting communities of inhabitants ; the fight against the precarious work conditions of delivery workers and the demand that they be protected on a par with the acquis of salaried workers, etc. The projects of the platforms studied go beyond the sole offer of services and aim for a broader social and/or environmental transformation.

The platforms studied mobilize **a plurality of resources** (market, non-market, non-monetary) that lead to **a variety of economic models**, and this is one of the salient features of substantive platforms.

The variety observed revolves around three main types: the **Market model**, the **Out-of market model** and the **Within-market model**. This latter model is the one that is adaptable to the greatest number of variants and, doubtless, the one that is set to become the reference model for the substantive digital economy. Unlike the "Market" model, which is characterised by the fact that its valorisation depends entirely on the market, the Within-market model uses the market as only one means of valorisation that cohabits and coexists with other means.

This model is **« hybrid »** in the sense that, within it, **plural forms of creation and distribution of values coexist and interlink**. These include principles such as gift and counter-gift, reciprocity and/or redistribution.

The observed variety of economic models counter-intuitively indicates that the models supporting substantive platforms are not necessarily determined by the dominant form of competition in the sectors concerned.

In fact, the key to understanding this lies elsewhere. It is rather found in **the capacity of substantive platforms to take a « sidestep »** and produce off-kilter models and values able to elude the dominant forms of competition thanks to their strong environmental and social component.

³ Polanyi, K. ; Chavance, B. (2011) (1977). (Pearson H. W. ed.) *The Livelihood of Man*. Academic Press, New York, San Francisco, London. (*The place of the economy in society*).

This capacity to design offers with a strong environmental and social component is what should enable them to attract, build and retain communities of users willing to validate – in one way or another (membership fees, donations, transactions, etc.) – the additional value created.

In terms of governance, substantive platforms stand at the intersection between the democratic model of shared ownership inherited from the cooperative tradition and the logic of an open sharing of resources that stems from the digital commons. However, these platforms help to surpass the two above approaches.

As a result, the platforms studied do not necessarily reject the institution of property but rather attempt to reinvent it in forms likely to ensure inclusiveness and the creation-reproduction of commons. The initiatives studied belong to a perspective of opening up the resource (the digital platform) to a large number of stakeholders (individuals and/or communities), whilst also reflecting on the way of making the use of the platform conditional on the dynamics of reciprocity and deliberation.

Substantive platforms thus advocate that their governance be opened up to all of the stakeholders (and not just to platform workers). They experiment with governance arrangements that can bring together, around a project, actors as different as employees, self-employed workers, volunteers, beneficiaries, users, financiers, partners and supporters, be they individuals or organisations.

As the activities of the platforms studied are generally grounded on bringing together often diverse actors, this means that **multi-stakeholder governance** has to be implemented. On-the-ground observations show that this leads to the platforms to adopt statutes similar to those of the community interest cooperative society (SCIC – *société coopérative d'intérêt collectif*).

Substantive platforms seek to consider labour from an emancipatory perspective links the protection of workers with worker participation in the construction of a shared meaning.

They are trying to combat uberisation by promoting **the longevity and professionalisation** of their business, particularly within the structures that they federate. They also seek to integrate a work organisation needed for their development within **deliberative working relationships**.

For their growth, the platforms studied make use of a number of contributory activities that fall outside the scope of employment. As a result, their main challenge is to successfully link up varied productive contributions in a satisfactory manner: salaried work, independent work and work outside of employment. Articulating these different forms of contribution is a complex matter mainly because it is difficult to have productive contributions outside of employment recognised, both symbolically and materially. The question of institutional mechanisms that could promote this recognition is thus a critical one for substantive platforms; these partly confirm the need to de « (...) *re-open this question : what are the collective rights of those who work on contributing to the meaning of what they do ?* » (SUPIOT, 2018)⁴.

It is in this context that « work outside of employment » arises, such as we were able to observe in our sample. Without calling into question the social solidarity institutions that form the cornerstones of social protection – the main one being salaried employment – the platforms studied are exploring deliberative working relationships that relate to the purpose of their business and its organisation. This **perspective of an alliance between protection and emancipation** is the lynchpin of the counter-movement that these platforms are seeking to embody and which partly found their substantive dimension.

We were able to observe that when it came to consolidating the organisation's professional functions, the platforms studied mobilise the social framework of common-law employment. At times, some platforms depart from this framework and use fixed-term contracts during the start-up phases.

⁴ Musso P. & Supiot A. dir. (2018). *Qu'est-ce qu'un régime de travail réellement humain*. Hermann.

The self-employed status is occasionally used, sometimes through business and employment cooperatives (CAEs – *coopératives d'activité et d'emploi*), but this only involves specific jobs and profiles (particularly, developers) and organisations with smaller team structures. The other platforms mobilise employment status to set up teams in support of a sustainable business structure and for some, this choice is an explicit political statement. Occasionally or for specific jobs, a kind of wage management solution can be found through the CAEs, mainly in the case of gradual transitions between volunteering and acquiring employee status. However, it seems that support – financial and engineering mainly – for operations during the start-up phases could be decisive for facilitating transitions such as professionalisation.

On the technological side, the platforms studied have the particularity of integrating **a different relationship to digital technologies into their very design**. They operate on the basis of technological reciprocity by choosing open access software and reciprocity licences. They make little use – and some no use at all – of algorithms to organise interactions among their users, instead preferring human intermediation. Where the rule of law finds it hard to « compensate » *a posteriori* for the negative effects induced by « algorithmic governmentality », the substantive platforms choose to shun or limit the use of algorithms.

Regarding data privacy, the platforms studied are aligned with the main principles of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) since their models do not rely on the commodification of data or their disclosure to third parties. In fact, they have little need to profile their users in order to function.

As a result, they can structurally implement the protection principles defined by the GDPR, such as « data minimization », i.e. collecting as few user data as possible, by limiting collection to what is strictly necessary for the purposes of delivering the service involved. Most of the time, substantive platforms manage to do so, as they aim to constitute **spaces of multi-stakeholder deliberation on the use of technology** and enable the collectives to question reflexively the uses of technology with respect to the challenges of their own project, be it social or societal.

This can translate into proposals that may seem at odds with technological developments, as for example, LowTech or « undigitalising » (limiting digital technologies in the platform's activities), but which reflect the will to be aware of and anticipate the platform's impact on the real world.

While regulation of the technologies implemented by the dominant platforms is still needed, there might also be a case for the public authorities to support actors capable of promoting a different relationship to technology through collective deliberations that reframe the question in terms of democracy.

Substantive platforms, like all other platforms, are in practice faced with the need to grow in size. This is the rationale underlying digital platforms that promote economies of scale and the network effect. For the platforms studied, **the search for a critical size does not necessarily mean having to centralise and increase resources**. Most often, they develop inter-organisation cooperation strategies. They aim to enable communities or coalitions of local actors, rooted in their territories and sharing the same values, to self-coordinate at a higher level in order to achieve the critical size together.

These federated models for scaling up aim to preserve the ties with a territory and maintain a local scale, which is often the level where reciprocal dynamics happen.

3. Perspectives

The initiatives studied are still economically fragile projects in which the volumes of ex-changes remain relatively low for the moment, although they are steadily increasing. They often have an experimental function and stand as pioneers in a cultural, economic and technical environment that is still unfavourable to their growth.

In addition, these platforms must not be viewed as the variations of totally mature alternative model. The report nonetheless leads us to consider these platforms as prototypes which, thanks to new technologies and the reasonable use these platforms make of them, can contribute to opening the path of the transition required by the environmental and social crises. On this count, it seems to us that these substantive platforms must receive support.

In the launch phase, it is worth noting the role that having a cooperative status can play – particularly the SCIC with its multi-membership – as an tool for raising funds to complement (or substitute) the more classical methods (crowdfunding or bank loans). In all cases, we note the need for « patient » capital that preserves the autonomy of the entity (cooperative, association) spearheading the platform.

When it comes to growing the business, if the fragile conditions now characteristic of the model of the platforms studied are to be “unlocked”, we need to ask ourselves specifically how the off-kilter or « disruptive » character of substantive platforms can be recognised, along with the value that they create – a value that has not been exclusively designed with the market and its requirements in mind.

One promising avenue could reside in the emergence of «third-party contributors» notably through «public-substantive platform» partnerships. Whether these target shared and solidarity-based mobility, the protection of heritage or logistical support for short supply chains, the action of substantive platforms can help to co-build – new – categories of public action.

Municipalities or local and regional authorities can doubtless take these questions on board and, within or outside dedicated SCICs, play the expected role of «third-party contributors ».

In this perspective, the findings of the report could be mobilised to support a collective re-flection involving the elected officials and technicians of regional and local authorities. The findings could also encourage and steer the setting-up of a common framework defining innovation. This framework could be established at European level and integrate social innovations supported by multi-stakeholder forms of governance and hybrid economic models, based on criteria that can be taken into account for public procurement

The existence of adapted institutional mechanism and « third-party contributors» able to recognise and validate the value created by substantive platforms seems to be a key prerequisite to prevent these initiatives from falling victim to the predatory operations of market operators, or from being forced to sacrifice their autonomy to the large foundations of phil-anthropic capitalism. Equally important is the need to prevent volunteering, which is an enabling element in the governance of substantive platforms, from becoming an indispensable substitute.