A Buzz between Rural Cooperation and the Online Swarm

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Abstract

This article introduces and explores connections between rural traditions and contemporary projects of voluntary cooperation within emergent online network practices. The key examples are mainly from Finland, the Baltic Sea region, and USA. Reflections are made on the emergence of such connections during a trans-disciplinary seminar organised by the author. The main body of the essay mixes social and network culture history, including rural village community support, known as “talkoot” in the Finnish language, its establishment within cooperative development during the 20th century, and the information communications and technology society of contemporary Finland. Discussions of collaborative web platforms such as wikis, the BitTorrent protocol, and “crowd-sourcing” open up questions considering their relation to older cultural traditions. The paper concludes with contemporary examples of where traditions of rural cooperation have conceptually assisted several Finnish entrepreneurial and activist projects. Throughout the paper “the swarm” is identified as a concept worth exploring further to illustrate where the expansive potential of network culture meets concentrated local action.

Introduction

I write reflecting upon connections which emerged from planning the Alternative Economy Cultures (Alt.Econ.Cult) programme of Pixelache Festival, during winter 2008-2009 and, in particular, the seminar event on April 3, 2009 in Helsinki. To give some contextual background to this event, Pixelache is both a cultural festival and an organized network.² It brings together people interested in topics such as: electronic arts; participatory cultures and subcultures, including the exploration of grassroots organizing and networks; politics and economics of media/technology; media literacy and engaging environmental issues. Social, intellectual, financial and institutional capital at Pixelache has gathered over the years since 2002, but it is still based mostly on volunteer or part time work.

As initiator and producer of the Alt.Econ.Cult programme, my intention, in the
spirit of open-minded research, was to create a “gathering-forum” to “see-hear-glean” intuitions, curiosities, overlaps, agendas, connections, and antagonisms in/between alternative economics, creative practice, activism, entrepreneurship and network cultures. Similar to that ambition, this paper sets out to foster and develop conversation between rural, network-culture, and cooperative studies researchers, organizers, activists, and cultural practitioners of different generations.

Peer nominations, encounters and connections

Not claiming to be an expert of “alternative economics,” I asked among my peers--Finnish natives and fellow immigrants, artists, academics and activists based in Helsinki and Tampere--for locally-specific nominations to the programme. In communications, and aspects of organizing, I was advised and assisted by Perpetuum Mobile (Marita Muukkonen and Ivor Stodolsky) and Roope Mokka of Demos Helsinki. My linguistic handicap of not reading or writing the Finnish-language well meant that searching and identifying related Finnish topics or information was challenging, although I was also operating in an international context. Speakers for the seminar emerged from a combination of direct personal invitations--most of the international speakers--and peer nominations solicited for native/local nominations from within my social networks and those of my associates. The Alt.Econ.Cult programme, introduced above, emerged on the basis of social connections and what Pierre Bordieu describes as “social capital.” I mean by this that it was built on the wealth of social relations which I had accumulated during my organizational practice over several years based in Helsinki, and travels elsewhere.

Andrea Botero, one of my doctoral student colleagues at Medialab, suggested to include in the seminar the Finnish tradition of talkoot, a rural voluntary cooperative tradition and ongoing contemporary practice. Indeed, this form of cooperation is also known among Finnish urban dwellers. Botero knew it also as minka or minga, the Andean tradition known in her native Colombia. After asking around several times to find an academic historian of this common practice, a sponsor of the seminar, Ruurik Holm, director of Vasemmistofoorumi (Left Forum) nominated Tapani Köppä. Professor Köppä is the research director of Cooperative Network Studies at Ruralia Institute, in the Mikkeli branch of Helsinki University. Köppä thankfully accepted the invitation.

Some of the highlights of the one-day seminar programme on April 3, were: keynote presentations made on peer-to-peer theories, participatory economics, and speakers sharing their practices or research on open-source software development and sustainability, pirate and remix economics, online collaboration, free and grassroots cultural production, green capitalism and peer-funding systems. Moreover, Köppä’s presentation, “Remarks on Rural...
Cooperation in Finland," was identified and promoted as a "local cultural heritage" keynote in the early-afternoon of the seminar.

This presentation, conducted in English, began to open up, for me at least, conceptually and textually the ability to engage with the Finnish tradition of talkoot (known among Swedish-speaking Finns as talko), and compelled me soon afterwards to seek it out in other cultures. I have been involved in many such cooperatively-focused volunteer activities, both formally and informally, both in Finland, and elsewhere, but I did not have a word for the practice and concept until then.

Inspired by this insightful seminar event, in the next passages I share some of the histories, anecdotes of, and references to the rural cooperative tradition with hopes that the reader will also have the chance to imagine the same. Later in the article, I set up this tradition's encounter with the information communication technology (ICT) society which is common in Northern Europe and particularly identified with contemporary Finland. Revealing the "buzz" in contemporary collaborative contexts for the tradition's online-offline network potential, in the final sections of the article I tentatively probe for trans-disciplinary connections which can be of interest to researchers of peer-to-peer theories, rural and cooperative studies, social capital and history, as well as cultural practitioners and activists promoting collaboration, social and environmental change. Throughout this text, I present my findings as emerging lines of flight for future research activity between different partners.

Rural cooperation

Tapani Köppä, in the presentation referred to above, identified all of the following characteristics of talkoot cooperation: "People getting together for joint work efforts, based on voluntary participation, and collective reward through hospitality and enjoying of the shared work performance." As neighbourly assistance, work is unpaid, and hospitality would normally mean food and drinks, maybe music, singing and dancing at the end, provided by the one who has called for the talkoot. Interestingly, the term is almost always referred to in plural form. "Temporary or occasional needs of united action," writes Köppä, is another characteristic, including regular seasonal events such as spring tidying of common yards, autumn harvests, or "assistance in constructing houses, roads, bridges, community festivals" and later also "material resources or fundraising campaigns." Supporting weaker neighbours or those in need, for example, "in case of burnt house, lost crop, illness or death of spouse [sic]," would also be a shared responsibility in the community.

Köppä calls these basic elements combining to form a "win-win" situation, including shared benefits which increase the prosperity of the community and its

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members, making participation socially, emotionally and economically rewarding. He argues that it makes cooperation “profitable in the long-run,” easy to learn, and flexible in application.\(^8\)

However, an individual’s reticence to engage in this common practice might prove to be costly for the individual and the community, which is why the talkoot also includes forms of peer-pressure to participate: “one’s honour and reputation may be severely damaged if one doesn’t show up, or proves to be a poor worker,” while being stingy in rewarding the work may “result in a person being persecuted for the rest of his or her life.”\(^9\) Whether this is true or not, when traditionally many rural families lived in isolated farms, many kilometres from the nearest village, the positive benefits of participating are easy to imagine, and likewise the negative consequences of not contributing one’s share.

In explaining the historical roots of talkoot, Köppä made reference to the combination of extreme climate in Finland—long winters, short summers—and tough agro-ecological conditions, which have encouraged cooperative energies in the country’s rural communities. Similar conditions prevail in other northern climates. Not surprisingly, then, if one looks to other cultures and languages of Northern and Eastern Europe, the Finnish word talkoot can be translated.\(^10\)

Latvians and Lithuanians use the word Talka, while in Estonian it is described as Talgud. The Belarusian word, Талока (Taloka), is said by some to be a linguistic borrowing of one of the Baltic languages, and possibly refers to the ancient word for the pagan spirit of harvest and fertility.\(^11\) Furthermore, there is a very similar word in Ukrainian, Толока (Toloka), and in Polish it is known as Tłoka.

For Russian speakers the word Толока has slightly different connotations of being close to “busyness,” with many people around. However, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia introduced the word Субботник (Subbotnik) and Lenin famously involved himself in promoting this mass voluntary cooperation in his communique of 1920: “From the First Subbotnik On The Moscow-Kazan Railway.”\(^12\)

Western Northern Europe also has similar words. In Norway, for example, the equivalent word is Dugnad, after the old Norse word for “help.” The root of the English term “bee” is similar. But this word should not be confused with that of the social insect. Instead, it refers to a circle of persons meeting in order to ease the boredom of a repetitive activity (as with spinning or husking grain).\(^13\) German-language speakers use the word Nachbarschaftshilfe, more clearly referring to whom the help is directed: neighbours. European settlers to North America in the 18th Century instead referred to what was often being done, for example, barn-raising.
Historical durability of mutual aid

Many of these words are in regular or semi-regular use still. All these words for voluntarily working together, adding efficiency though sharing with kin and village community structures, are synonymous with what Peter Kropotkin described as “mutual aid.” Kropotkin published a series of papers, collated under the title Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution, in 1902. Within them, he argued against then-current social Darwinist thinking, countering that mutual aid was just as important a factor in human evolution as self-assertion, common to people all over Europe and other parts of the world. It was his understanding that this practice had been knowingly suppressed in recent centuries by various state-based institutions. As Kropotkin wrote:

The village communities were bereft of their folkmotes, their courts and independent administration; their lands were confiscated. Political education, science, and law were rendered subservient to the idea of State centralization. It was taught in the Universities and from the pulpit that the institutions in which men formally used to embody their needs of mutual support could not be tolerated in a properly organized State; that the State alone could represent the bonds of union between its subjects; that federalism and “particularism” were the enemies of progress, and the State was the only proper initiator of further development.

Kropotkin was a firm believer in the durability of rural life-ways, “honeycombed with habits and customs of mutual aid and support; that important vestiges of the communal possession of soil are still retained.” He saw these social and mutually-beneficial ways of doing things being also reconstituted in the industrial societies. Writing as an anarchist-communist activist, in a period of emerging modern European nationalism and state capitalism, he was inspired and encouraged by the labour and counter-movement of his time, which included socialism, unionism, free association, and cooperativism. These were movements he heard of and witnessed in his day in Germany, Holland, Denmark, France, Switzerland and England. Beyond the labour movements, he also was inspired by a similar energy coursing through all aspects of people’s lives:

I ought perhaps to mention also the friendly societies, the unities of oddfellows, the village and town clubs organized for meeting the doctors’ bills, the dress and burial clubs, the small clubs very common among factory girls, to which they contribute a few pence every week, and afterwards draw by lot the sum of one pound, which can at least be used for some substantial purchase, and many others. A not inconsiderable amount of sociable or jovial

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spirit is alive in all such societies and clubs, though the “credit and debit” of each member are closely watched over. But there are so many associations based on the readiness to sacrifice time, health, and life if required, that we can produce numbers of illustrations of the best forms of mutual support.\(^{17}\)

Cooperative development in Finland

At the time when Kropotkin’s theories of mutual aid were being published, Finland, as a restless autonomous grand duchy of the Russian Empire, was still largely an agrarian country. Of a population of three million, four-fifths lived and worked in the forests and fields. It was also the time when the organized cooperative movement arrived in Finland. Following travels in Germany and Austria and inspired by the farm economics which they witnessed there, Hannes and Hedvig Gebhard decided to pioneer cooperatives in Finland. Formalised in 1899, they set up the “Pellervo Society.” As Markku Kuisma reminds the reader in the introductory chapter of The Pellervo Story: “Emerging industries, particularly the forest industry, depended on rural resources and labour.... The distress of the landless masses...was one of the most serious social problems of the age” \(^{17}\). The organized cooperative movement in Finland, based on social capital and its economics, was an attempt to tackle such issues and encourage a way of developing political consciousness among farmers.

Modern forms of talkoot developed during the Winter War (1939-40) and the Continuation War (1941-45) with the Soviet Union. Köppä writes that people of the “home front”—mostly women filling roles in productive work as farm-heads, industrial workers, and other professionals—became involved in less-traditional forms of volunteerism: gathering raw materials, scrap metal, foraged food, paper, rags and other energy forms, “keeping the infrastructure alive” both in the city, and in the countryside.\(^{18}\) Köppä describes how during the war period Suomen talkoot (Finland’s-bee) was established as an organization, and later, Suurtalkoot (Great-bee), a coalition of 58 national civil society associations. As a consequence, a great amount of economic activity was accomplished despite the hardships facing a country at war; in 1942, work made by talkoot volunteers, Köppä continues, was counted to exceed 3 million hours in ploughing and seeding (toukotyöt), and 12 million hours in harvesting.\(^{19}\)

The reconstruction period following the war strengthened and consolidated the talkoot cooperatives. They eventually formed into small financial institutions, supporting the mechanisation of farms and market providers of farm goods. For women, the war-time experience led to their advocacy for sustained presence within several new professions in the labour market. Finland also witnessed rapid industrialization and urbanization during the 1950s to the 1970s. Many families gave up farming, moving from the countryside to the southern cities of Helsinki,
Espoo, Vantaa, Tampere, and Turku, or emigrating to Sweden to look for new employment. In the 1970s, as explained by Köppä, rural development policies were decisively influenced by the local and national voluntary associations. Furthermore, the rural exodus and centralizing bureaucratic trends of the period encouraged those still active in the countryside to set up village committees. These committees expanded around the nation, also in part thanks to action research by groups of university students and researchers such as Köppä and his colleagues. At the same time, the village committees organized talkoot events, inviting local inhabitants to work together towards their common needs, such as fighting for the maintenance of threatened local services, repairing the village house, or introducing entrepreneurship projects to the village.

Social capital in the urban context

Research studies in social capital, inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, developed rapidly from the mid 1980s onwards, gathering momentum in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As noted in Laura Iisakka and Aku Alanen’s introduction to *Social Capital in Finland*, the concept of social capital “has its roots in the notion that a proper understanding of welfare and the economic situation of a society can only be achieved if the social dimension is also taken into account, i.e. society’s capacity for collective action and the networks that support collective action.”

The concept of social capital has also been applied to better understand workplace communities, health and well-being, regional economies, and communication media. Research on social capital also connects well with the concept of *talkoot* and its focus on voluntary and neighbourly help. Jouni Häkli and Claudio Minca, making case-studies of Finland and Italy in their most recent book, *Social Capital and Urban Networks of Trust*, acknowledge that both nations hold ample amounts of social capital. In the case of Finland, however, in some contrast with the Italian case, there are many highly formalized and institutionalized forms of social capital, both planned in the Nordic welfare-state model and promoted through membership in civil associations.

Despite this, in contemporary Finland, where just over 60% of the population live in urbanized areas, informal volunteering and support are still important factors in everyday life. According to Hannu Pääkkönen,

people [in Finland] spend almost one hour a day in social capital activities such as socialising, neighbourly help and volunteering; and almost one-third of the population engage in volunteering each month. Each month 60 per cent of the population offer neighbourly help.
Making international comparisons with fourteen other countries in Europe, Pääkkönen finds that “people in Germany, Finland and Poland as well as in France and Estonia spend the most amount of time on organisational activities and neighbourly help.”

In the following sections I show how this long tradition in voluntary cooperation encounters the information communication technology (ICT) society, which is well represented throughout Northern Europe and, in particular, in contemporary Finland.

The information society

From the late 1980s onwards, Finland’s contribution to the international telecommunications and information technology revolution has been significant for a small nation of between 4.9 to 5.3 million people. For example, Finnish computer science students and researchers have been pioneers in open-source software development. Most famously, Finns such as Linus Torvalds initiated the Linux operating system 1991, Michael “Monty” Widenius in 1994 co-developed the Swedish-Finnish MySQL server architecture, while Jarkko Oikarinen was key in developing peer-based online communications in the form of Internet Relay Chat (IRC) starting in 1988. In each of these cases the work of programming was never done alone and calls for support were made to develop them.

While the code-base for these software solutions remain open-source or the software is free to download, large for-profit enterprises have also built businesses around these software solutions by offering services based on them. And often, their initial developers encouraged this entrepreneurialism while reminding them of the software solutions’ collaborative roots. In an interview reflecting upon his original experience of developing MySQL, and in “forking” a new non-profit version of the architecture called MariaDB SQL, Widenius gave advice to new people starting out in open-source business: “Remember that if you are working in the open-source space, everything is about trust. You need to be as open as you can about everything you do and never betray the trust of your customers or users.”

Like in talkooot, there are social protocols to uphold and maintain when doing cooperative software work. Furthermore, much economic profit and technical benefit has been gained on the basis of the social efforts of the open-source movement, so stakes are high.

In other fields of technology innovation, Finnish corporations have also grown to be global leaders. Nokia Corporation, focused on mobile telephony and network hardware, and with its well-known slogan “Connecting People”, is nowadays the world’s largest manufacturer of handsets. Sulake Corporation’s Habbo is another recent example of a world-leading Finnish technology innovator, growing since 1999 a virtual and social networking environment for
teenagers. At the time of writing, they have 132 million avatars registered worldwide, and almost 12 million unique visits a month.27 The early image-sharing website IRC Galleria, initiated in 2000 by Tomi Lintelä, is also popular with Finnish teenagers and young adults, with 500,000 registered community members. Even if both platforms are used by different age-groups (Habbo attracts younger teens, and IRC Galleria older teens) and contain different forms of social capital—for example, collective action at one online site and a large aggregate number of community members totaling 850,000 users per week as of 2008—they are clearly producing something of much social value.28

Clues to how and why the above examples happened in Finland—beyond individual talent, determination, and tenacity—can be found in a higher education and research system with strong technical and engineering focuses. Moreover, when one wasn’t at work or studying in Finland, there was a generous support system in the Nordic welfare model which, informally-at-least, supported “free” home production time for developers.

In 1999, Finnish futurologists, technologists and social researchers gathered in a symposium called “Life Beyond the Information Society.” As a keynote speaker, the organizers invited Manual Castells, the Catalan sociologist who led the discourse at the end of the 20th century concerning the relationships between information technology, economy, society and culture. He was fascinated by Finland as a case-study, and wrote a few years later in a book called The Information Society and the Welfare State: The Finnish Model, co-authored with Finnish philosopher Pekka Himanen:

> Finland shows that a fully fledged welfare state is not incompatible with technological innovation, with the development of the information society, and with a dynamic, competitive new economy. It provides the human foundation for labour productivity necessary for the informational model of development, and it also brings institutional and social stability, which smooths the damage to the economy and to people during periods of sharp downturns.”

This contemporary context of the last 20 years has, not surprisingly, raised research questions about social capital. For example, Juha Nurmela has set up an inquiry entitled “Does the use of communication media add to social capital?” in the book Social Capital in Finland.30 He found that involvement in collective action, one of the main variables describing social capital, “also correlates with active use of information and communications technology” and that the “progress of the information society appears to be strengthening it.”31 In 2008, as many as 80% of the population of Finland between the ages 16 and 74 reported they used the Internet daily, or almost daily.32
Upon reflection, the connections between social capital and institutional and organizational support for ICT development are not surprising. National characteristics, such as strong engineering and computer science education, a Protestant work ethic which emphasises self-reliance, and state-welfare support are credited by Castells and Himanen with the strength of the information society in Finland, in addition to practices such as transborder hackerism. The networks in Finland and beyond its borders were—and still are—spreading wide and fast, separate from state control. What might be the implications of all this social capital growth? Who is benefiting from it? Is the growth actually cooperative, for mutual benefit and aid, or part of the continued commodification of the networked society?

Platforms

To consider these questions, it is necessary to shift attention to a place where social capital is being both stored and distributed. Since Castell and Himanen’s observations, Internet-centred technological innovation has continued to progress thanks to government promotion and support, as well as large amounts of venture or speculative for-profit capital investment. A key aggregator of both volunteer and corporate energy and investment, the entrepreneurial honey-pot of Silicon Valley, USA also had much to do with this growth, attracting both open-source and commercially driven software developers.

As part of this process, participatory online interfaces on the World Wide Web were re-branded by Tim O’Reilly as a “platform” and as “Web 2.0.” The often-sourced origin of this re-branding is O’Reilly’s 2005 news blog entry “What Is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software.” Media theorist Olga Goryunova has gone on to explain that the term Web 2.0 had been coined and trade-marked by O’Reilly’s partner organisation LiveMedia (now CMP) conference organizers, in late 2003 “to market the phenomena of online collaboration, sharing and communication with the interfaces of wikis, blogs, collaborative mapping or tagging platforms.” A diverse mix of free (but mostly corporate) services were subsequently designed “enabling Internet users to participate, exchange, link, map, upload, post, and comment—all in all, to create online within a certain social dimension.” Goryunova recognizes she was not alone in taking a skeptical eye to this supposed “programming upgrade” for the social and participatory aspects of sharing information, text, data and media online, referencing inventor of the HTTP protocol Tim Berners-Lee’s own opinion of the hype: What O’Reilly claimed was new in Web 2.0 was, for Berners-Lee, “what the Web was meant to be all along.”
It may be argued that the best case of continuity of the old (the talkoot?) in these so-called “new” Web 2.0 platforms is that of the “wiki,” originally conceived and initiated as WikiWikiWeb by Ward Cunningham in 1994. As a summary, WikiWikiWeb is still described on the front page of the site as “a composition system; its a discussion medium; it’s a repository; it’s a mail system; it’s a tool for collaboration. Really, we don’t know quite what it is, but it’s a fun way of communicating asynchronously across the network.” Dramatically opening up the ability to edit content—at first text, and in later versions of wiki software, multi-media content—and accessible through any Internet browser, WikiWikiWeb dispensed with the problem of logging in to servers to put or edit online. Emphasis of ease was reflected in the choice of name: wiki is the Polynesian Hawaiian word for “quick,” hence translated it means “QuickQuickWeb”.

WikiWikiWeb was shortened to Wiki in other developments of the software, and has over the years become a popular tool and platform for collaborative and accumulative information sharing. One of the main legacies of Cunningham’s initiative emerged from a clone of WikiWikiWeb, UseModWiki, which eventually became known to Larry Sanger and Jimmy Wales who then used this wiki-technology to technically support Wikipedia when it launched in 2001. Another offshoot project of UseModWiki, called MeatballWiki, founded by Sunir Shah, adopted the talkoot-like concept of “barn-raising” as its key metaphor for making the “impossible possible” and making friends. And arguably, with the focus on collaborative information gathering and building, both these things are exactly what Wikipedia has gone on to do.

The non-profit Wikimedia Foundation, based in San Francisco and founded by Jimmy Wales, emerged a few years later, in 2003. The foundation’s mission, as stated in its “Frequently Asked Questions” page, is “to empower and engage people around the world to collect and develop educational content under a free license or in the public domain, and to disseminate it effectively and globally.” The foundation relies on public donations and grants, operating essentially as a charity. To achieve its objectives, Wikimedia Foundation focuses on free, open content wiki-based internet projects, the most well-known being Wikipedia (encyclopedia), Wiktionary (dictionary), Wikimedia Commons (media repository), Wikispecies (directory of species), Wikinews (news), and Wikiversity (pedagogical materials), among others.

Wikimedia Foundation also provides the same wiki software platform for individuals or organizations to freely install on their own servers and use for their own purposes. As Erik Möller, Deputy Director of the foundation, posed at the Wikimania 2009 Conference: “Can Wikipedia become a 300 million people
movement by 2020?" On the matter of scaling up, Möller referred to the following statistics as an indication of the issues they would face to achieve this goal: While by the first half of 2009 the Wikimedia projects had garnered over 300 unique visitors, only about 90,000 of those visitors made 5 or more edit contributions, half that number made 10 or more, and only around 11,000 made more than 100 edits. In the presentation, Möller gave an indication of the factors which influence this disparity: complexity of correct syntax (also known as “wiki mark-up”), the increasing scrutinization of contributions by editing committees, and the hardening of contribution rules. In contrast, a people’s movement for Wikimedia, according to Möller, would be “to motivate every 10th reader to become an active participant.” He proposed steps of improvement towards better interfaces for contribution, new opportunities for collaboration, community governance (via notability and verifiability), and interestingly, dedication of physical spaces. The suggestion I would like to make here is that the Wikimedia Foundation is proposing organizing something resembling, as might be said in the Finnish language, a “maailman tietotalkoot” (an global info-bee)—a vast project of voluntary information sharing and knowledge construction on a global scale.

However, this global ambition, as the imagined dedication in the future to physical spaces suggests, really begins at a local level. In her article “Forms: On Platforms and Creativity,” Goryunova, in reflecting on her collaborative curatorial project runme.org and the process of designing an online space for software art, defines the term “platform” as follows:

A platform differentiates itself from other websites by the relations of creative, social, instrumental, educational and historical character it establishes and is involved in. A platform is aimed at supporting and stimulating creative initiatives and work, and it provides a possibility for continuous exhibition of the artefacts, often accompanied by reactions to them, various discussions. Sometimes there is also a set of instruments for particular kind of creative work available. A platform often also puts efforts into translating digital creative processes into offline and more official cultural scenes, establishing connections between cultural movements of different times and orders. Most platforms organize (ir)regular “real-life” gatherings such as festivals, concerts, workshops or those of a less formal nature.

When platforms such as Wikimedia software are set up on a server it first begins as a localized affair. Another self-constructed phrase in Finnish that attempts to conceptualize this platform situatedness might be: “Paikalliset tietotalkoot” (local info-bee). Such a tietotalkoot may be installed and “called” for many specialized purposes, including creative processes, as Goryunova’s paper’s title
suggests. Moreover, wiki platforms can, and often are, used to gather, organize, activate, and nourish offline activities.

An example tietotalkoot, called Keosto, is a network/collective of independent cultural workers and activists using Wikimedia software which anyone can edit. The project is a closely connected affinity grouping of persons, distributed between different towns and cities in Finland. The group’s logo is placed on the top-left corner of the site and resembles a stylized wasp motif, or possibly a flying ant. On the bottom right corner is a stamp-style logo, with the slogan “Mekin rakennamme Turusta alakulttuuripääkaupunkia 2011” (“We build a city of subculture in Turku 2011”). The reference alludes to an alternative festival of events that could take place in parallel to the official European City of Culture, to be held in Turku, south-west Finland and Tallinn across the Gulf of Finland in Estonia in 2011.

Keosto’s webpages specialize as an open information space for alternative culture in Finland (currently most text is in the Finnish language). Keosto is also a place to gather together representative bodies of information and a forum for discussion and debate on plans. In essence, it is a website that enables cooperation and project development between different cultural actors. Keosto’s affinity groups adopt an agricultural--or one could argue, rural cooperative--metaphor for bundling together information. Singular subjects on the site are known as “straws” (korsi). Those who are gathered together are conceived as being in a “haystack” (kekoja). On Keosto’s front page, under the title “how Keosto works,” is the declaration that Keosto’s content (including the manual) is 99% the responsibility of the users. Only the final 1%, it goes on to say, is the voluntary efforts of the work of public, scientific, and technical moderators.

**BitTorrents**

Emerging in the mid 2000s, another online computing development which appears relevant to introduce in the context of cooperative relationships and talkoot is the BitTorrent protocol, known as a solution for fast and efficient peer-to-peer (P2P) file-sharing of large amounts of data. This protocol has become synonymous in recent years with both legal and illegal downloads of music and video content.

American programmer Bram Cohen designed the protocol in 2001 after working for the MojoNation (now known as Mnet) project. This open-source software was further developed by a collective of hackers to allow distributed, peer-to-peer, file storage online (a virtual place where you can put files in, and from where you can get files). It worked by breaking up the data “load” into small chunks and distributing them around other computers which were running the same software. In “pure” peer-to-peer networks, peers act as equals, merging the
roles of clients and servers, with no central server managing the network, and no central router directing the traffic.

Cohen aimed to make an improvement on previous P2P file-sharing networks, for example Kazaa, which shared the file from one source, one peer, as one long download. The new decentralized approach Cohen designed for BitTorrent protocol was the one he was familiar with at the MojoNation project, and was programmed as a “forced” cooperative method for getting what you wish for. When one starts downloading the file one wishes, also by default—no choice in the matter—one is helping others, making bits of the file more available. In other words, similar to the peer-pressure of talkoot, there is a “hard-coded” social rule with BitTorrent networking: if you wish to receive bits of data freely, you also have to give bits away freely. What makes the protocol also different from other methods is that it gets the bits at random, based on a “rarest first” algorithm. This means that the more peers there are downloading, the more likely it will be that you will receive those rare bits faster. It could be understood as an online example of the “win-win” situation, which Tapani Köppä speaks of when describing voluntary rural cooperation.

The increasing efficiency with increasing numbers in P2P has created the terminological, visualization, and conceptual metaphor of the “swarm.” For example, one BitTorrent client program, Vuze (formerly Azureus), has a graphical visualization option when downloading. The peer using the software on his or her computer is situated in the middle of a network, sharing in the same ambition of gaining the same file as fellow peers that surround him or her. It is a shared purpose among individuals, even though the different peers are unlikely to ever meet in person, and most likely don’t live in the same village, city, country or even continent. As such, the peers are geographically dispersed but virtually connected, each one at the middle of his or her own swarm. Because of the reciprocal protocol, little bits move backwards and forwards between all peers. The more peers online, connected via the same torrent file loaded in their BitTorrent client software, the more chances that one will receive the complete seed file, multiplying the options for direct download. And the faster the little bits move, the sooner the work is completed. In essence, all these peers make up a virtual swarm.

According to IsoHunt, a torrent tracker-site interest forum and blog, the total amount of content shared through the internet in Autumn 2008 was 1.1 Petabytes (1000 x 1000 GB) of data. Due to the efficacy of the BitTorrent protocol, it has become very popular in recent years and one of the main transfer protocols for online data. Is this one of the Internet’s greatest “cooperative” successes? Perhaps.
Among this mass of data-flows and swarms of peers, there are several groups of facilitators, both “legal” and “illegal.” Early on, Cohen took steps to “legitimize” the legal transfer of media via the BitTorrent protocol, founding BitTorrent Inc. in 2002, a private company set up to deliver fast and efficient legal media distribution with the protocol. BitTorrent Inc. serves, for example, the Hollywood film industry, small-scale independent media companies, and individuals keen on sharing their creative productions.

On the other side of the legal line, gaining much infamy and publicity are those groups advocating “pro-copy” anti-copyright, as proposed by the term “Kopimi,” a Swedish neologism of “copyme.” Often self-identified and accused by the mainstream as pirates, those who are pro-copy find the intellectual property laws that create artificial scarcity of data/media/files completely inappropriate to the nature of the World Wide Web.

One such group in the pro-copy/anti-copyright camp, Piratbyrå (The Bureau of Piracy) from Sweden, has gained global exposure for initiating The Pirate Bay torrent tracker-site in 2003. This website has been accused of being one of largest facilitators of illegal downloading. The individuals who maintain the website were recently charged and jailed in Swedish court in April 2009, but already the case is up for appeal by the defendants, postponed until the autumn of 2010.\textsuperscript{52}

Piratbyrå would be best described as a creative collective of artists, theorists, activists and advocates, rather than an organization, although its members prefer to call it an “ongoing conversation”: “We are [reflecting] over questions regarding copying, information infrastructure and digital culture...in our daily encounters with other people. These conversations often bring about different kinds of activities.”\textsuperscript{53} Their communications work and participatory projects have gained growing recognition, especially within the media and network culture scene in Europe. For example, in 2009, they won the Prix Arts Electronica (Linz, Austria) for Digital Communities 2009, which is one of the most prestigious and respected juried awards internationally for electronic arts.

Piratbyrå’s most recent ambitious offline project began at the time of this writing. It was based on an invite to contribute to the first Internet Pavilion at one of the most established international “art world” events, La Biennale di Venezia (The Venice Biennial) in June 2009. Their simultaneous presence in Venice and on the Internet was called Embassy of Piracy and employed an interesting mix of online and offline participatory methods to gather support and publicity for the Kopimi/anti-copyright cause. Offline, they made a public presentation of the project and orchestrated a performative “pirate raid” on motor boat at one of the Biennale’s gala events. Online, they invited the

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Internet (and supporters of “piracy”) to download a cut-up paper pyramid and to colour, augment, and adjust it with personal features. These pyramids symbolised “embassies” of piracy around the Internet, and thus also ambassadors for the cause. The media documentations of the result were encouraged to be uploaded or syndicated to the Embassy of Piracy webpage.

As can be read in the Embassy of Piracy “About”: “[The] Internet today is not some virtual entity, but a network that can materialize in everything from court systems, parliaments and phone networks to memes, music and art systems. Internet is a methodology, not a place.” In their summary press-release, posted to their blog several days after the Biennial opened, Piratbyrå wrote:

We love the Internet and we share this love with a multitude of people around the world. With Embassy of Piracy, we want to make informal network connections stronger. By a set of simple copyable, reproducible, and remixable acts of sharing we want to start to open the gates to these stories and experiences and build connections between them.54

The Embassy of Piracy project claimed to “multiply the forces of Internet,” calling upon the social capital they had been gathering among “seeders,” “peers,” and “leechers.” This action raises the question: What happens when a network materializes and distributed peers act together to make something, to make a noise, to create music? Inviting the Internet (and the people who support The Pirate Bay) to take the role of being an ambassador for the symbolic Embassy of Piracy, the initiators of the project shared their media, files, and data. They not only shared raw materials but their product, too, in a similar way to the pioneers of open-source software.

In doing so, Piratbyrå also created a space for other peers to use, remix, upload and publish, call, communicate and develop. On their wiki webpages (using Wikimedia software),55 they give a list of things that Piratbyrå members needed: a place to stay in Venice, a place to host events. There was also a list of things that a peer (or “ambassador”) could, and can continue, to do: code, write/review/translate text, graphics work, communication, spread the word, make remixes of the “Pirates of the Internet” theme-tune. People could “Cutmi Pastemi Kopimi” (“Cut me, Paste me, Copy me”) paper-pyramid embassy models. Lastly, ways to extend the network were suggested to create a “buzz”: Join a Facebook group or via Twitter, SMS, IRC, etc.

Piratbyrå cleverly and efficiently employed and encouraged the use of all the social capital enhancing tools and social-networking platforms available, both open-source and commercial for-service tools. Like many other contemporary projects online, they used volunteer cooperation among affinity groups which
transcended local and national borders. Unlike Cohen who transformed his BitTorrent protocol to suit the established means of for-profit media distribution, the Embassy of Piracy “talkoot” for gathering resources and making temporary actions, was made to argue against the established mainstream practices. Infact, the project was highlighting new and organic practices of online collaboration, copying, and adaptation. Despite the negative court-case in Stockholm, for this generation of young people and adults distributed around the globe, The Pirate Bay and Piratbyrån have made their collective argument and statement: keep the infrastructure of open BitTorrent and unrestricted media sharing alive.

**Neo-traditional forms of talkoot**

The P2P theorist and researcher Michel Bauwens in his paper “The importance of neotraditional approaches in the reconstructive transmodern era,” located on the [Foundation for Peer-to-Peer Alternatives](http://www.foundationpeertopeer.com) wiki website (also using Wikimedia software installation), asks “Can the transmodern peer to peer ethos be mixed with neotraditional approaches”? In other-words, can the distributed computer networks, with *living labour* sitting behind them—as exemplified in peer-to-peer media-sharing, open-source software development, and peer-production of value seen in wiki platforms—share similar, if wider reaching, goals with pre-modern social networks of help and support?56

In Finland, where rural-based cooperative support is, for the majority of the population, only one or two generations removed, the connection between contemporary ICT-based and traditional forms of cooperation perhaps comes to mind easier than in other places. Certainly talkoot is a word which cuts across generations, managerial and political classes, and technological spheres.

To support this claim, it is appropriate for me to return to the [Alternative Economy Cultures](http://www.alternativeeconomycultures.com) seminar. As a chair of the afternoon session, Roppe Mokka of Demos Helsinki (an independent think-tank on progressive democracy), shared the following anecdote when introducing Tapani Köppä’s presentation:

> This morning we [Demos Helsinki] were presenting to the parliament futures committee, what the next phase of the information society will be. Yes, it is going to be based on sharing. Alot of these things that are peer-to-peer, are very difficult to understand, but as soon as we showed a picture of talkoot, Juha Mieto and other Finnish parliamentarians suddenly captured what this is about, and you could see smiles coming to their faces, and they started explaining how fantastic it is to take part in these activities.57

It was not the first time the connection had been made by members of Demos

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Helsinki: For example, they made the connection in conversations with the Bristol-based National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts (NESTA), who have a remit to explore and foster all aspects of innovation in the United Kingdom. Further, in late October 2008, one of Finland’s well-known technology bloggers, Tuija Aalto, researcher and journalist for YLE national broadcast corporation, wrote an entry titled “Crowdsourcing=Talkoot?” on her Tuija TV blog (now called Tuhat Sanaa). She qualified this by commenting that “Finns always knew how to get a big project done. Be it building a new sauna or an operating system: invite the whole community to do the job.” Aalto was particularly making the connection with a new business and organizational model called crowdsourcing, described by Brooklyn-based culture and technology journalist Jeff Howe as “the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call.”

To support her inquiry, Aalto further included a short interview with Finnish film entrepreneur Peter Vesterbacka, who was inspired by one of the first large online crowdsourcing projects in his sci-fi parody feature film series Star Wreck (1992-). Vesterbacka now also acts as marketing and PR person for such talkoot models via the Wreck-a-movie project, which facilitates collaborative feature film-making. In this case, open-source thinking and online networks are used to distribute and divvy up labour among many persons in different locations for the production of animation and feature-films. For Vesterbacka, the Finnish word talkoot is just waiting to expand beyond Finland, soon to enter into the world’s crowdsourcing vocabulary.

In principle, I agree with Vesterbacka’s claim. I have been suggesting several examples and associations of neo-traditional forms of talkoot throughout this article, such as its relation to wiki collaboration and the BitTorrent protocol. It is clear, however, that the word talkoot is already being used in contemporary Finland in a wider context than its usual rural and urban/domestic uses, and that new associations with online networks are already being made. Talkoot has in the last year or so, in Helsinki at least, entered other entrepreneurial and agenda-based contexts, such as for mobilising people and businesses.

Three major universities in Helsinki, the University of Technology, University of Art and Design, and Helsinki School of Economics, merged at the end of 2009, and the combination is now called Aalto University. Earlier in the year, a group of associated students decided to create an Aalto Entrepreneur Society. One of their first gatherings was called a “Start Up Talkoot,” held on 24th April 2009 in one of the new research lab/office spaces for Aalto University, called the Design Factory in the Otaniemi district of Espoo, the neighbouring city of Helsinki. On their webpages they wrote the following for the event:
As you might know, talkoot is the Finnish word for a group of people gathering to work together, for instance, to build or repair something. AES is gathering students, entrepreneurs, investors and other experts together to work on Aalto startups.61

They group goes on to write that the Aalto Entrepreneur Society “strives to create an entrepreneurial eco-system in Aalto University. Our goal is to catalyze 50 ambitious startups per year.” One of their goals is to adopt a positivist and accumulative philosophy where “success breeds success and activity.”

While the new adaptations of the talkoot concept are indeed full of collaborative promise for a new form of online and offline cooperativism for our times, these “new talkoots” do raise for me a critical question. When talkoot is referred to as a positive force today, who is benefiting? Private organizations or public bodies? If these are not open, and cooperative or voluntary forms of labour ventures, is it an appropriate use of the word?

Reflections and responsibilities

In advance of the seminar, Roope Mokka, my collaborator in the Alternative Economy Cultures events, used the term “Talkoot 2.0” in the Finnish-language press release.62 This term expressed my wish to bring traditions from outside Internet culture—in this case rural cooperation—to bear in a seminar within a festival of electronic/participatory arts and network culture. There was little, if any, press response. No newspapers or magazines picked up the lead, and beyond a few online syndications, the phrase did not spread. I think, in reflection, that it was a good thing it slipped quietly away.

Following the Alternative Economy Cultures programme of Pixelache 2009, with its long processes of production, promotion, and post-production, I reflected upon how we introduced the connection between older cooperative traditions and newer trends in cooperation in digital culture. I now believe, after the 2009 programme, that we do not need an “upgrade” or a “2.0” of something which has a long and living history such as talkoot. We do need, however, to reflect more upon what we are doing in these new digital and networked terrains, and whom is benefitting from them—individually and, especially, collectively.

I am thankful, as an immigrant to Finnish society, that their language has a specific word for “community effort” which is still in everyday use. In this process of research, I have also learned of other words in regional languages already mentioned. In some places and cultures, such as in Finland, older words are being resurrected when thinking about newer cooperative practices in newer networked spaces. Elsewhere, older forms of cooperation and mutual aid—and the words that name them—seem to have already been forgotten, or at least

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are not on the “tip of one’s own tongue.” In the land where modern (urban) cooperativism was founded, Scotland, and the roots of my own cultural heritage, what might the Scots’ word for talkoot be? I don’t know. Similar concepts were certainly not promoted while I was growing up in the 1980s, during the so-called “Thatcher years,” or even during the UK’s economic boom-time of the 1990s. I am surprised at my loss, given that I grew up in the central Scottish countryside, next to small-holdings and farms, and even helped in harvest activities as a boy. Moreover, much of my creative and cultural production activity as an adult has been based on voluntary collaborations with others. And still, I do not use a native Scots (or English) word for talkoot in my own vocabulary. Now, as a resident of Helsinki, Finland, in the Baltic Sea region, in Northeastern Europe, I am borrowing and asking help from others in order to know more about a concept for what I have been practicing for a long time.

Over some three months in 2009, I took up the task of translating the word talkoot, with the help of online translators and dictionaries. This process revealed to me the English word “bee.” And in an associative trick, all I can think about now is the swarm. Today, for me at least, the swarm has grown in relevance, thanks to the hyper-speed of contemporary telecommunications and networks. It seems to me that there is a real power to a potentially new vocabulary buzzing around, nourished and energized on social capital, inter-dependent among and on others. Ideologically, it exists for me as the “swarm of peers,” and it is, most likely, heading in your direction, if it is not already buzzing around your thoughts.

The highly networked society in the contemporary global North, dominated by information technology and communications, has been closely positioned in this text with older, traditional ones. There is an explicit ambition for viewing such patterns—to learn more and set up research and action-based platforms for making trans/inter-disciplinary, trans/inter-local, and trans/inter-generational weaves. We have to engage substantially, some say immediately and unconditionally, with our material, natural and social environment...our habitat. We have to take individual and collective responsibility for these environments, and encourage others to engage also. We should kindly remind ourselves and others to avoid spending imbalanced and excessive time alone in virtual environments and information sites. As I hope is tangible in the textual gatherings above, there are many good examples from historical and online contexts to map out ways in which we can come to rebalance our collective lives. Paikalliset tietotalkoot (local info-bee): Keep looking for connections.
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For more about Pixelache Festival and Network, see http://www.pixelache.ac.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

This more stigmatic aspect of the talkoot is is cited from the Wikipedia entry in English. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talkoot.

Curiously, the Finnish-language entry for talkoot in Wikipedia has a shorter description than the English language version. Other languages cross-referenced on Wikipedia include Estonian, Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, German, and Norwegian. Lithuanian and Latvian sites did not have entries for word talka.


Lenin, V.I. (1920/1965). From the first subbotnik on the Moscow-Kazan Railway to the All-Russia May Day subbotnik. In V.I. Lenin Collected Works, Volume 31, 4th English Edition (pp. 123-125). Moscow: Progress Publishers. To note, however, in my exploratory, informal discussion with people who lived within the Soviet Union, and especially those subordinated by it (for example Latvians), there is a clear ideological and semantic distinction between the activity advocated by Lenin and the pre-revolution tradition.


Ibid., p. 138-139.

Ibid., p. 159.

Ibid., p. 166.

Köppä.

For example, Torsti Hyyräläinen, also now a researcher at Ruralia Institute, made his PhD research on village cooperation, see: [http://www.helsinki.fi/ruralia/henkilo.asp?suunnimi=Hyyrl%E4inen](http://www.helsinki.fi/ruralia/henkilo.asp?suunnimi=Hyyrl%E4inen).


Ibid., p. 63.


York: Random House.


37 Ibid.


44 Ibid. For further statistical Wikimedia interaction data, see: http://stats.wikimedia.org/.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.


50 Following is a simplified version of how the BitTorrent protocol works: There is originally a large file which one person (sometimes called a “seeder”) wishes to make available to the network to share with others. This full, complete file is called the seed file. There is also a smaller file, called a torrent file, which

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contains metadata about the seed file that is available—for example, size, amount shared to whom, when started, and so on. There is also a computer called the tracker which coordinates the file distribution. When someone (sometimes called a “leecher”) wishes to download a particular file (such as a peer with the client software running on their computer) they must first get a copy of the torrent file, which will indicate where the seed file is located in the network, and if it is available to download at the time. If so, the peer starts to download the seed file. The tracker also keeps the downloader up-to-date about who else (i.e. other peers) is downloading the same file, and arranges that the peers share what bits they have of the file.


57 Transcribed quote from Roope Mokka’s introduction to Köppä’s keynote presentation. Juha Mieto is a former Olympic medalist cross-country skier of the 1970s and 1980s from the province of Western Finland, and at time of writing, a popular Centre Party parliamentarian.


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