



AI, digital commons, and
sustainability:
anthropology and its
paradoxes

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Overview

1. Sustainability in Anthropology: Of Maintenance and Change
2. Commons & Sustainability
 - 2.1. Environmental Impact of Digital Infrastructures
 - 2.2. The Commons as Property Regimes: Processes of Commoning
1. 'Open', Digital Commons & Artificial Intelligence
2. Wikipedia and Artificial Intelligence: Connected by a Processual Paradox

Conclusion: Paradox – A Framework Forward?

What is sustainability?

1. Sustainability in Anthropology: Of Maintenance and Change

- [Thomas Hylland Eriksen \(2022\)](#): 19th century concern with order and equilibrium.
- 20th century UN *sustainable development* goals: return of hidden progressivist agenda.
- Rather: “a sustainable system is one which is capable of reproducing itself for an extended period without undermining its own conditions, absorbing incremental changes without collapsing” (Hylland Eriksen, 1).
- [Gregory Bateson](#); [Chris Hann and Keith Hart](#): muddling and tyding.
- “the process of facilitating conditions for change by building and supporting diversity” (Brightman & Lewis 2017, 12)

2. Commons & Sustainability

2.1 Environmental Impact of Digital Infrastructures

Further readings on:

- The inherent colonial nature of artificial intelligence (Madianou 2024; Couldry & Mejias 2024)
- The (global) division of labour and automation's increase of precarious labour (Pasquinelli 2023; Graham et al. 2024)
- MIT's study of environmental impacts of generative AI (Bashir et al. 2024)
- The joint statement on how to limit the environmental impact of artificial intelligence (Green Screen Coalition 2025)
- Extraction of data by tech-companies, how digital dwellers are expropriated and dispossessed by the enclosure of platforms (Jadowski 2020; Zuboff 2019)
- Techno-feudalism (Durand 2024; Varoufakis 2023).

Do we have digital commons today?

2.2. Commons as Property Regimes: Processes of Commoning

- From Stephen Gudeman to Katharina Bodirsky:
- from common resource to “resource that can be managed in principle through various *property regimes*” (Bodirsky 2018, 122).
- “Horizontalist and inclusive sharing relations” (Bodirsky, p.121) proposed as antidote to capitalism
 - However, common resources can easily be turned into free/cheap commodities and labour (Narotzky 2022; Chomsky 1998; Moore 1988).
- Instead, processes of *commoning* which takes us beyond a supposedly radical opposition to capitalist relations of property, to property regimes through which resources can be managed (open access, public, private or common).

3. 'Open', Digital Commons & Artificial Intelligence

- Way of holding knowledge in the form of data and information.
- The 'Paradox of Open' (Tarkowski & Keller 2021):
 - The Open-Movement: Wikipedia, Open Access Publishing, and Creative Commons Free Licensing.
 - Openness enabled rise of monopolistic platforms
 - “minimal governance structure” (Tarkowski & Warso 2023)
- Today, LLM and ML training on vast data sets
- New form of dispossession possible because of open source + enclosure of platforms
- But perhaps it is not the open-access to knowledge in itself that is the strength of the Open-movement... perhaps it is the process of fabricating that knowledge.

4. Wikipedia and Artificial Intelligence: Connected by a Processual Paradox

- Wikipedia: largest repository of freely licensed information and media (no copyright: Creative Commons Licensing)
 - ‘Knowledge’ not owned by the ‘creators’ of it.
 - One of the grandest feats of ‘democratisation of knowledge’!
 - ... yet it rested on the naive belief that access *itself* would ensure freedom and democracy in society.
 - ... and as we are currently seeing, it clearly has not (Thiel, Musk, Bezos, Altman)
 - ... yet the cues to sustainability lies in its process of fabrication!

4. Wikipedia and Artificial Intelligence: Connected by a Processual Paradox

- The “highly quarrelsome character of interaction is actually part of the governance system, relying on sustainable solidarity” (Jemielniak 2016, 362)
- Debate → consensus: no longer ownership or authorship over what has been produced, but rather there is ownership of decisions
- Not *the* solution, merely hinting towards a mode of finding solutions!
- One proposed: “Strong Commons” (Tarkowski & Keller 2023): layering of openness and closedness, horizontal sharing, vertical governance.
- “Scholarship remains locked into binary critiques” (Ebensgaard et al., 629) of horizontality and verticality: perhaps this can liberate our thought and imagine new ways of conceiving powers and counterpowers in transversal ways.

Conclusion: Paradox – A Framework Forward

- How to create the conditions for our ability to sustain what we value while changing that which we don't?
- The maintenance and sustenance of life for reasons we should be able to decide over and hold individually.
- Accept the processual making of opposites/contradictions: order & chaos; conservatism & progressivism.
- The ultimate paradox of sustainability: to be a fragile form of resilience and resistance in seeking to constantly reinvent itself, to be open to change in a sustained way

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