"That's another fight: Big data as a commons"

Activist, writer and policy strategist, David Bollier argues that cities can benefit from co-operatively owning and controlling resources and applying the principles of commons ownership to big data

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For David Bollier, cities are at a crossroads. As smart city initiatives and data collection increases, it's essential that citizens use the ideas of the commons to retain control of the services that matter to them, and to ensure these work for the people of the city, not just for business or bureaucracy, he argues.

Over the last fifteen years, Bollier has advocated for the commons as a versatile paradigm for sharing wealth. He is co-founder of the Commons Strategies Group and author of several books on the commons.

We asked him about how the commons works, and why it is important for smart cities and how we protect citizens' interests in the age of big data.

What is the commons?

The commons is a broad framework for talking about a lot of things because it's more of a perspective. It's simultaneously a discourse, an ethic, a world view, as well as specific realms from digital commons to natural resource commons to the city as a commons.

It's essentially a social system for managing even shared wealth. And it's different from either the market or the state. The presumption is that both the state and the market are the only significant sources of governance or power, whereas the commons as self-governed, bottom up collectives in a variety of forms are entirely sustainable and effective. Value created as opposed to the conventional economic notion of the commons as a resource that if it's shared, it's going to be ruined; the

tragedy of the commons. Which I think is empirically false.

How do these self-organising communities and the sharing of knowledge apply to the development of sustainable, smart cities?

The city as a commons is a relative newcomer to other types of commons, such as the natural resource-based commons, which is sort of the more classic version. But then the power and durability of digital commons has broadened the awareness of it. Especially as digital technology becomes ubiquitous, a lot of cities are beginning to realise that we need to leverage this for the benefit of people.

Some people say it should be the smart city, this technocratic vision of managing a city. Others say it should be a so-called sharing city, which is not really a sharing economy, it's a micro-rental economy, a marketisation of things that previously were genuinely shared. The commons brings an overlapping set of principles. It uses network infrastructure and digital technology, but it does so so that ordinary people can control, own and manage those resources.

Which projects can we learn from?

Bologna, Italy, has pioneered a system for the care and regulation of the commons. It's kind of a post-bureaucratic model of the city government, inviting neighbourhoods and citizen groups to propose their own projects for taking care of city space and parks or elderly care or converting abandoned buildings, and the city will help them technically, legally, sometimes giving them financial support and giving them genuine authority, contractually as well as entitlements.

So it's trying to move in a different direction to empower people rather than the command and control city bureaucratic approach, to a more public-commons partnership, a public-social partnership rather than the public-private partnership which are often a way of simply subsidizing private players at a public expense.

The Bologna model has been emulated by a handful of Italian cities, and Amsterdam is a city that is also very keen on the idea of the city as a commons. So there's experimentation going on, and that's maybe the bottom line on the city as a commons, a lot of experimentation and engagement would be ideal.

Read more at: http://www.remourban.eu/News--Events/News/ThatS-Another-Fight-Big-Data-As-A-Commons.kl ↗

Palabras clave

big data, David Bollier, smart cities, common ownership, commons, citizen, engagement

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Spain, Italy, Netherlands

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REMOURBAN

REgeneration MOdel for accelerating the smart URBAN transformation

6 Septiembre 2023

PROYECTO

Última actualización: 3 Enero 2017

Permalink: https://cordis.europa.eu/article/id/131176-thats-another-fight-big-data-as-a-commons/es

European Union, 2025