

A Lab Without Walls. A Proposal to Reshape a Policy for the Commons

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MediaLabPrado (Madrid) gathers a group of scholar and activists to study how to make visible and understandable the commons. For more than 2 years different approaches have been taken and the main criteria has been collaboration and openness. This approach emulates laboratory practices that is the reason for the name: Commons Lab (Laboratorio del Procomún).

It is often said that a family, a hospital, or a river are social laboratories, as they give rise to relations or conflicts that make it possible to understand all or part of the social environment of which they are a part, or which they help to create. Thus, by looking at a fragment of the world, it can be seen in its entirety, which is to say that several variables are sufficient (those that make it possible to plan, structure, and order) to gain a general understanding or a view of the global situation from a local perspective. Upon choosing the variables and adopting a protocol that makes it possible to carry out these simplifications without seeming capricious or arbitrary, several identifying characteristics become clear:

- Communitycentred: a collective understanding of the world or, in other words, working toward a world made by everyone, a shared world.
- Analogue: to simplify it so it fits on a map, an outline, a graph, or an image, or, in other words, to create an order that is accessible to everyone
- Experimental: to recognize the tentative, experimental, provisional nature of the process or, in other words, to recognize that it will have to be reviewed often by many people in order to make it reliable.

In sum, a laboratory serves to make hidden (or blurred) aspects of reality visible, as well as to bring together fragments scattered about the surroundings, which is why many anthropologists and sociologists affirm that in practice, a laboratory creates reality. That is why it is no surprising that reality can be seen as a laboratory or that a laboratory can be seen as a place for the production and reproduction of reality. That is, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish where the laboratory begins and ends, or where its borders are. That is so much the case that when one speaks of a laboratory without walls, it does not mean working toward something that does not exist or the latest “new thing”, but rather recognizing the difficulty in drawing the line separating what happens inside or outside.

Protocols

The key lies in those protocols that make data relevant or, in other words, shared. There are many types, given that they comprise a set of rules (or conventions) that are perfectly adapted to the object (matter, subject, problem, issue) in each case. However, they all share a common feature: they automate functions, which means they are not personalized (there is no protocol for the genius), but instead can be applied by anyone who has received the proper training (or discipline).

The protocol creates a community of people who use it, which fosters a common language, as well as tested and legitimated devices, and even standards for the use of space. That is why there are so many workshops that looks the same, as in the case of health centres, botanical gardens, law firms, and photo studios. That is, in addition to the regularity we see among oceans, mountains, and jungles, there is that of institutions that study them, or, to repeat what was said

above, where they are created.

If this reflection is correct, priority must be then given to the tasks of automating functions and building a space that reflects the nature of the activity we intend to develop, including protocols and practices. Speaking of protocols implies identifying the threshold of rigor and the commitments voluntarily agreed upon as a standard for behaviour which will serve as the shared world that constitutes us and that we help to constitute. A laboratory is a common space that creates a community out of those which use it.

Community

Community is a key notion, although it must not be linked to any organic, ideological, or belief connotations. There can be, and always have been, distributed communities or groups formed by strangers, created on the basis of a particular subject or a problem.

They are called affected or concerned groups, all the groups that become visible when a new technology (such as a test, an intervention, or a survey) separates them from the rest, assigning them a technoidentity (for example, people with asthma, false limbs, or motorized vehicles) that could be into question. In other words, a laboratory does not need to comprise people whose beliefs coincide.

It is essential, however, that it be connected to other nodes in a network configured on protocols that ensure the circulation of objects among nodes that do form part of a community: they share and create a common space in a network throughout which the objects that are constituted by (and constitute) them all (which are discussed and evaluated) move. In sum, there is no community without the rigour (respect for the agreed upon protocols) enabling the production of objects able to move among diverse cultural and spatial fields. And if they do not move, if there is no interoperability, the commons sustained by (and sustaining) the community cannot grow.

Commons

There are no commons without a community, and vice versa. But who do the members of the laboratory represent, reciprocally? Who feels represented by what is being done there?

The laboratory is not a coffee break conversation or an academic seminar. Its function is not to clarify concepts, nor is it to make friends or build a career. There is no question that it fulfils the function of forging connections among people and things, be they “col-LABORATORS” (co-laboratory), occasional users, concepts, spaces, or books. Its primary function is not that of the delegated spokesman of nature or the state, as the Moderns and those who supported the French Revolution said, respectively. However, its foremost objective is to make emerging communities of those concerned visible: give them a voice, give them time, give them experience, give them technology, give them means, and give them words.

The Laboratory is not to think about them, but instead to think through them. Furthermore, given that it does not imitate all its historical and anthropological characteristics, our laboratory is inclusive, not closed to the eyes and presence of the public, quite the opposite, as its aim is to involve them in the configuration of the world.

The commons is created and recreated, connected and reconnected: it is born from the interaction of those concerned who miss something that is being denied to them, which they took for granted, as an inalienable legacy. The commons is a state of emergence (as it is unpredictable and urgent), arising from the empowerment of those affected who claim rights that have been threatened or

destroyed. The commons erdeems the public from their condition as subjects/consumers and fragments society into communities that resist reality. There are no commons without a community: making it visible is the task of the laboratory.

Dynamics

These ideas can be used to transform the usual seminar format into a lab of ideas. Organizationally we address the need for an open and collaborative environment. Our primary objective is to create a structure where both research and production are processes permeable to user participation. To that end, MedialabPrado offers a permanent information, reception, and meeting space attended by cultural mediators. Also it makes open calls for the presentation of proposals and participation in the collaborative development of projects. Some current projects working with this model are:

- Audiovisual Periodicals Archive as part of the Commons, coordinated by Tíscar Lara. It reclaims the right to access to and use of the audiovisual archives of the media and promotes the search for ways to make them freely available, given that, to a certain extent, they are producers of our historical memory and collective psyche.

- Obsoletes, by Basurama. A project conceived of by the Basurama collective for the research, creation and dissemination of creative systems for transforming technological waste, which is understood as all types of electronic devices, storage formats, or hardware that have fallen into disuse or become impaired: computers, peripherals, magnetic tapes, motherboards, etc.

- Free Legal Ontology, coordinated by Javier de la Cueva. Proposal for building a free legal ontology to create a structured database that will comply with the principles set forth by the Open Government Working Group.

There are many other active projects currently underway at the Commons Lab which are listed in the appendix to this document.

Proposing an Ontology for the Commons as a Lab Task

One of the unsolved questions about the Commons is how to make a comprehensive picture, a inclusive map, of an issue so varied and manifold: the commons embraces practices old and new, from ICT inovations to environmental issues or the new laws on patenting and copyright. In our opinion that picture would be of great help in identifying, classifying and locating the aspects, elements and conflicts that comprise the commons.

Our proposal from the Commons Lab is to create a collaborative context to accomplish that theoretical task. To create a map or graphical description using three different coordinates: categories, elements and attributes.

We have considered 4 basic categories: body, nature, urban, digital. Each of them has three sub-classifications (elements): for instance the body comprehends parts, functions, and representations. Also there is another classification according to attributes: kind of good, kind of threat, kind of management, time scale, spatial scale and the nature of the good that each commons shows. Somehow we imagine a three dimensional way of locating particular commons. There is also another key element for this classification. We use the semantic web to classify automatically and

through the web the different commons. Using free software, using tags and metatags it is possible to use the digital commons to render the picture we are pursuing. Using the net means different important issues: first it empowers and broadens the depth of the task and, at the same time reclaims the Internet as another digital commons. Carrying out this project requires also collaboration of many different people, from scholars to activists, from theoreticians to practitioners.

Findings

* The development of the Commons Lab has evolved from a seminar format where members' unpublished working documents were discussed to an open laboratory format in which various specific projects are carried out with the participation of any collaborator who wishes to join in, including amateurs, academics and professionals. Projects are received through open calls, followed by calls for collaborators. The groups' work is carried out online (via mail lists and wikis) and mainly through periodic onsite activities and meetings.

*The recent start-up of the Mexican Commons Lab (Laboratorio del Procomún México) (<http://www.ccemx.org/procomun/>) is also a step ahead for the project, given that it offers a wider field of study, enables the sharing of common problematic issues, and contributes what is particular to each local context.

*Lastly, discovering a need to establish an overall theoretical framework for the commons has been identified as significant for the Lab, which has led to a proposal by one of the work groups to create an "ontology for the commons".

Challenges

*Broaden the network of collaborators interested in taking part in the creation of the Ontology for the Commons and also study to what extent the Lab can contribute to other similar initiatives.

*Include various approaches and perspectives in the creation of the Ontology, taking into account the broad, plural and elusive nature of the concept of the commons.

*Discuss and find the most suitable methodologies for the creation of this Ontology, which enable the inclusion of amateurs, academics, activists and professionals in the same forum.

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