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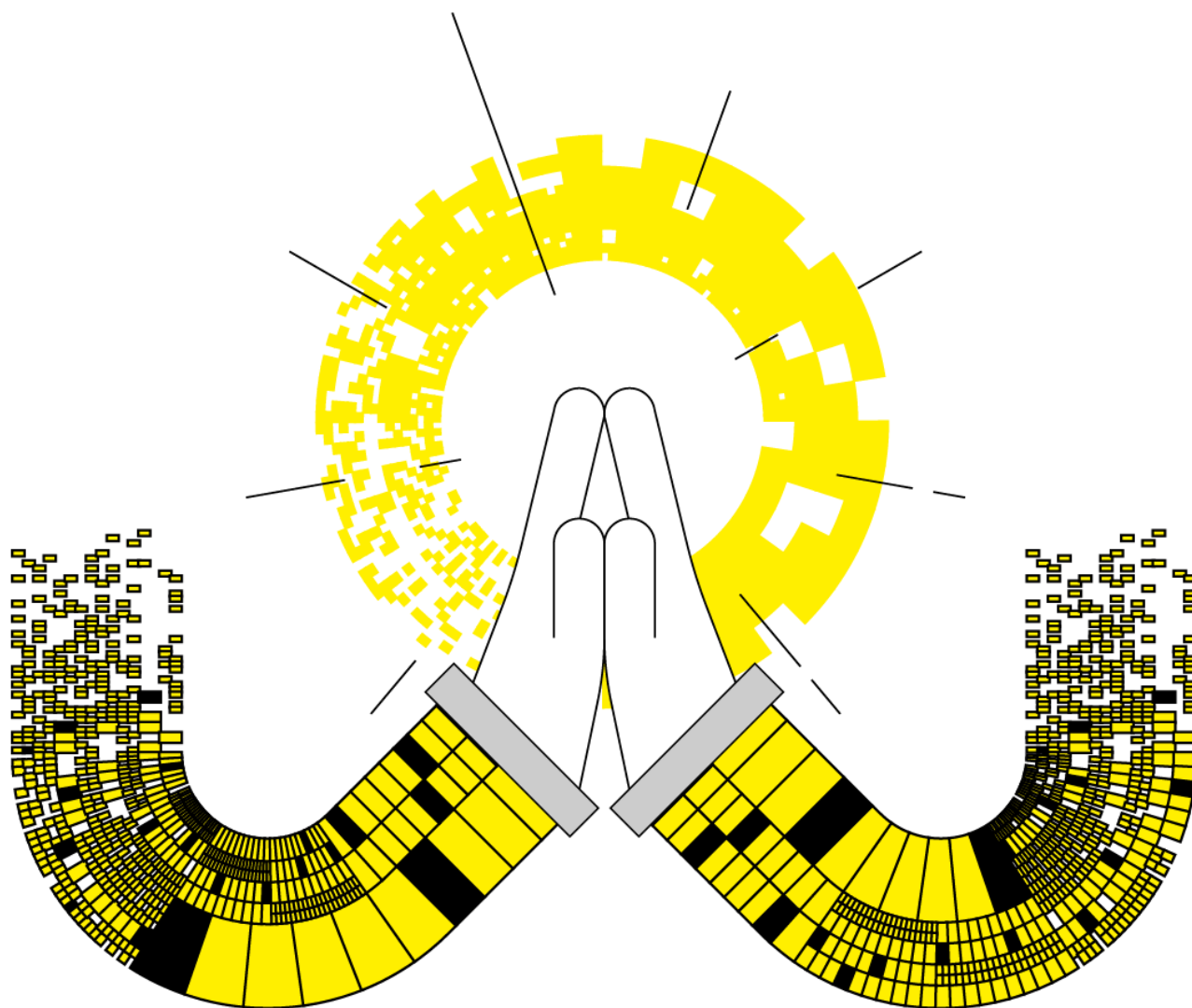
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_BEYOND THE FETISH OF OPEN

by Balázs Bodó



The future of the internet is not what it used to be. Again. With web3, it is now the third time the promise of an exciting, novel, maybe revolutionary social, political, economic, cultural experiment founded upon open, freely accessible, distributed, decentralized techno-social infrastructures degrades into a dystopian nightmare. Maybe it is time to abandon the idea that openness is both an achievable and desirable goal in itself, and the appropriate answer to the destructive dynamics which plague the various organizational logics of the digital society.

At the beginning of the digital revolution, the future was all about the emancipatory potential of technology.

Many who have witnessed that period have a rather grim view of what the internet turned out to be. Rightly or wrongly, we hoped, we believed that the particular social and technical configuration of early cyberspace was the key to it being a laboratory of revolutionary social, political, organizational, economic, cultural alternatives. It seemed like that the openness of the early internet, in terms of software, hardware, and community, was key to all the wonderful things it offered to its denizens: possibilities to experiment with values, rules, ideas, structures, possibilities to participate, in novel forms of social organization, with less friction, often strong communitarian ethos, open-ended, flexible, adaptable rules, based on sharing, generosity, solidarity, forgiveness.

This openness and the value communities which emerged in those open spaces were quickly overshadowed by the repeated waves of commercialization and the corresponding power struggles over the digital frontier. Economic, computational and political powers appeared from two directions. On the one hand, traditional stakeholders, states and corporations ultimately managed to establish themselves in the digital. On the other hand, power also started to consolidate and concentrate in the hands of a few digital native firms. Openness was challenged by powers old and new: familiar, state-centric, and/or capitalistic visions of social, political, economic organization and unknown threats posed by ubiquitous commercial surveillance, AI power, computational and infrastructure power imbalances, etc. In response to this pressure, the often haphazard, accidental rag-tag early internet subcultures were forced to coalesce into something more institutionalized, with clearly spelled out values, clear ideological vision^[1], visible leadership, political goals^[2], financial and non-financial resources, networks and fora for coordination, collaboration, and representation. The Creative Commons and open-source software movements offered a permanent form, a permanent moniker, a permanent point of reference for those who thrived in openness, for the Wikipedians, the users and the producers of open educational resources, for open access authors and publishers, for scholars, for activists in developing countries, for open-source software activists, and the like. What made the affiliation with the open movement so easy was that many of these groups carried some, if not all, elements of the early internet cultures (both from^[3] and beyond^[4] the Silicon Valley) in their own history, traditions, professional codes of conduct from the own domains of computer science^[5], hacking^{[6][7]}, art^{[8][9]}, science^{[10][11]}, or particular solidarity networks. The boom of the Creative Commons movement in the early 2000s was both part of and the main driver behind this process. It had openness as its rallying cry, and all those who still remembered the vision of the internet pioneers listened.

But if in the 1990s (and before) openness was the default, and if in the 2000s it transformed itself into the progressive organized alternative to the emerging surveillance capitalism^{[12][13]}, by the 2020s *the open* turned into a tired concept with little interest or energy around it. By then, the model of openness got sidelined, partly forgotten, partly rendered irrelevant by the few successful attempts to financially commercialize the internet: walled garden platforms, ad and surveillance financed ‘free’ digital services, hyper-financialized permissionless blockchains. It is hard to acknowledge, but the dominant strand of digital commons ideologies was also instrumental in creating the freely accessible, open digital resources that dominant platforms could appropriate and turn into knowledge, power, capital without having to contribute back anything for the use of these resources^[14].

Can the concept of the open be rethought? – ask Paul Keller and Alek Tarkowski in their Paradox of Open essay. Can we bring back *the Open* “as a normative basis for a movement that seeks to achieve social

progress”? Can it still provide “a more general vision of a more just and egalitarian digital society”?

Posited this way, the questions suggest that openness is a goal in and by itself.

Be it open-source software, open access commons, or whole open societies, the emphasis is on openness and its normative superiority both as a goal and as a value over all of the possible alternatives.

OPEN IS A TOOL, NOT A GOAL

What is open? What do we think of *the open*? Is it really an absolute, context-independent, indisputably desirable goal? Is it a goal in the first place? Can we reimagine it as a rather specific, and particular tool? A tool we use to achieve specific results in the appropriate contexts? What those results may be? What are the appropriate contexts? What does *the open* stand for? What is it that it enables?

Openness in the early days of the internet was a synonym for online social, cultural spaces with high degrees of freedom. Spaces that allowed for playful experimentation with few constraints and few risks. Spaces, where power structures were contestable, and were constantly challenged. Spaces that were self-governing. Spaces, where in the absence of clear rules and familiar structures, all participants had to pay constant attention to the world around them. Spaces, where solidarity was as important, and competition was limited to reputation, and where it was hard to get ahead by cheating. Spaces, where the value was inseparable from the community that created it, and therefore it was hard to extract it^[15].

These values may have coincided with the open social, legal, economic, and technical structures of the internet at the time, but did openness truly cause them? Is openness a necessary and sufficient condition to achieve any of these goals? *Is openness the best route to achieve any of these goals under the current conditions?*

Sadly, as the failed web3^[16] revolution suggests, openness, in itself, is not a panacea.

From the very moment of its inception, the web3 space seemed like an authentic heir to the early internet in terms of dreams, values^[17], technical architecture, and ambitions.^[18] Its developers inherited so much from the early internet: its libertarian ethos. Its strong belief that technology can create sovereign, independent spaces^[19], immune to the intervention of the “governments of the Industrial World, the weary giants of flesh and steel^[20].” Its desire to create technological infrastructures for alternative social, economic, political modes of organization^[21]. Its fascination with playful experimentation. The web3 socio-technical stack bears all the hallmarks of the early open internet: decentralized servers, open-source software; strong anonymity; flat, ad hoc organizations; meritocracy running on rough consensus; strong ethical values; pronounced political programs. Everything that made the early internet great, the Linux ecosystem, Wikipedia, and p2p file-sharing archives, is also in the DNA of the web3 community.

Yet, despite all the openness in terms of architecture, politics, and participation, the web3 experiment failed to live up to its promise, and degenerated into a dystopian mess of fraud, deception and exploitation quicker than

[22][23]

any other version of the open internet utopia . Understanding the reasons for this failure is key to understanding the limits of openness in achieving progressive online social goals.

One of the key problems of the open commons (aka web2.0) approach was that it was unable to police its own boundaries and, therefore, unable to prevent the predatory, parasitic appropriation of the value pooled together in the form of shared, freely available community resources^[24]. Though the digital commons movement loudly cited the work of Elinor Ostrom^[25], its definition of the commons was radically different from the commons she described. Traditional commons are made up of well-defined communities, which closely police who gets access to the resources the community pools, and depends upon. In contrast, the digital commons movement followed the open pasture model, laughing off the threat of the tragedy of the commons, saying that digital resources are inexhaustible.

Digital data and information may be infinitely copiable and thus inexhaustible in some sense, but still, different actors have radically different capacities (in terms of knowledge, expertise, computing power, financial resources, etc.) to make use of, and exploit those resources^[26]. Potential users may not need to compete over access to open access digital resources, but that doesn't mean that they are equally well-equipped to make use of those resources. While open resources may remove some hurdles in front of equity, they also fuel the reproduction of inequality by giving away immensely valuable resources for free to those who already have the most power to fully exploit such an opportunity in the first place. Creative commons licenses may have helped countless individual bloggers to find a nice, freely usable illustration for their blog posts, but that value, even in aggregate, dwarfs in comparison with the value Google and other big players, for example, gained by having free resources to train their proprietary AI models using the same resources^[27].

Digital resources may be inexhaustible, but the uneven distribution of the capacity to make use of that resource and turn it into even more power is a good enough reason to limit who gets to exploit, under what conditions, open access resources.

The web3 revolution proposed a solution to such problems plaguing the web 2.0 era. It was framed both as an antidote to the centralized platform power and as a solution to the aforementioned woes of the open access commons. Its network was designed to be radically decentralized. Its backbone, the distributed ledger, promised total and radical transparency. Cryptography was deployed at every level to maintain censorship resistance, anonymity, confidentiality, and information integrity. Its digitally scarce tokens offered a way to define community membership, voting, and value extraction rights. Its smart contract/DAO capacity offered ways to formalize governance structures. Multiple projects propose to measure and reward individual contributions to the community and to its shared resources, including labor, both visible and previously invisible; resources, such as bandwidth; and reputation, or good standing within the community. Its architecture was built on open-source software.

In short, the web3 proposal was to create an open, open source, open access techno-social infrastructure to implement a semi-automatized version of Ostrom's closed commons, where the community boundaries are clear; where governance can be formalized; where potentially destructive extraction rights can be limited; where

community participation and contributions can be measured and rewarded. But, instead of the communitarian utopia, on these foundations, a hyper-capitalist dystopia came to be. And the utopian hopes were shattered faster than in all the previous waves.

Why?

As the idea of decentralization moved up on the techno-social stack from distributed networks to distributed ledgers (blockchains), organizations (DAOs), and value media (tokens), much of the resources the web 2.0 movement deliberately or inadvertently left vague, and under-specified slowly turned into commodities. The web2 evangelists^{[28][29][30]} have been familiar with the work of cultural anthropologists^{[31][32][33][34]} who have been documenting how social structure and order are produced and maintained by the non-market-based, non-financialized circulation of artifacts and units of value. As Polanyi warned in the context of the industrial revolution, once the allocation of key community resources is organized by markets instead of social norms, the whole social order is subject to radical transformation^[35] Maybe these were the reasons why the web2 political program was so conscious of the fact that though all contributions to the commons need to be acknowledged, most need not be rewarded in financial terms.

The web 3.0 revolution, on the other hand, is based on the ability of the technology to turn loose and imprecise dimensions of membership, reputation, and community contributions into standardized and objectified measures, expressed in token-like instruments, both marketable and nontransferable^{[36][37][38]}. The ability to measure and represent previously unmeasured aspects of human communities and collaboration in the commons space had three radical effects on these communities. First, it outsourced the task of maintaining social cohesion within the community through equity and solidarity to an external, standardized, “objective,” impersonal, and rigid technical system of accounting. Second, by creating a tradeable token out of these community functions, it shifted the form of incentives for participation from intrinsic to extrinsic, from social to financial. Third, through the financialization of core community functions, such as resource contributions and community participation, the web3 logic turns these critical community resources into commodities traded on open marketplaces, subject to financial speculation, securitization, and a complete detachment from the communities they produce and require them in the first place. Taken together, these three forces turned the latest iteration of the decentralized web into a fraud-festered shitshow of exploitation, deception, and the general collapse of communities organized around tokenized resources.

The subsequent waves of web utopias from version 1.0 to the current 3.0 are all about the reiteration of the norms and expectations of the early internet in relation to the changing circumstances in terms of technical possibilities, market conditions, prevailing power relations, etc. One of the central tenets of each iteration has always been openness, which has been defined ever more elaborately and has been extended to an ever wider set of application domains.

By now, openness is a well-defined technological property, political goal, economic structure and normative expectation which permeates all these domains: technical architecture, social organization, epistemic frameworks, and market design. Yet, as the rapid fall of the web3 revolution should remind us, openness, in and by itself, may not be the magical solution to the problems of the

internet today.

Openness in technical architectures does not lead automatically to beneficial, progressive social, political and economic structures. Open (access) resources, without dedicated custodians, are prone to degradation or exploitation. Inviting open markets to address some of these issues brings about the problems of commodification. Absent of resilient, mission-, and community-specific governance systems, open social, economic, political networks and communities remain vulnerable to external interference, exploitation, or simple degradation. If openness means the free circulation of ideas, the porousness of community boundaries, the lack of ossified power relations, the fluidity of social, economic, cultural, political norms, structures, flows and processes, then this openness will always be under the threat of being appropriated and abused.

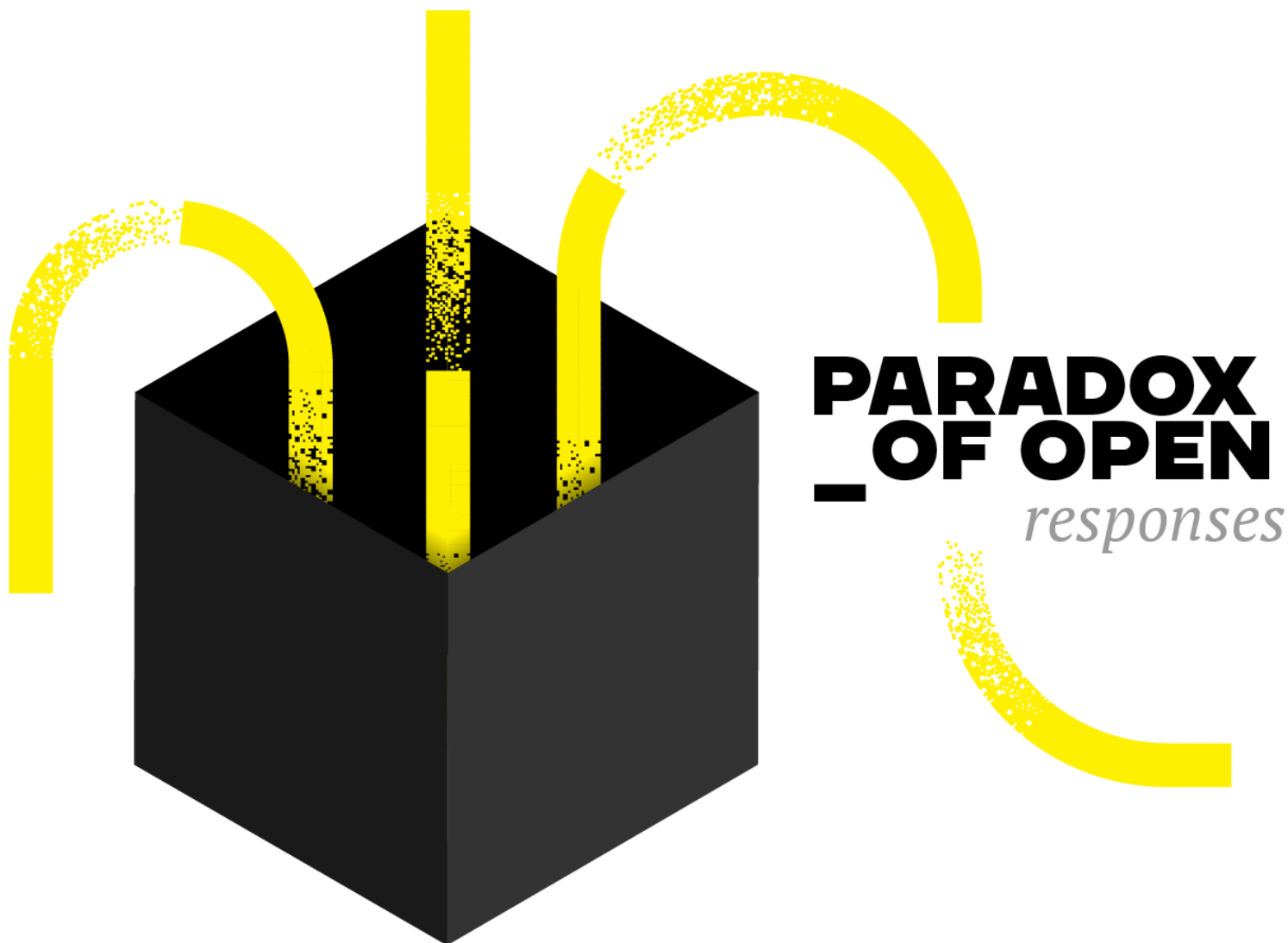
While openness has traditionally been framed as a source of resilience, it has become increasingly clear that open systems, societies and resources can also be extremely vulnerable. So, instead of focusing on openness as a magical solution that works equally well in all possible contexts, we may want to ask ourselves: what do we hope to achieve with openness? What may be the alternatives to openness which would allow us to achieve the same goals in that one specific context? And most importantly, what protections do we need to take to protect open resources from abuse?

Balázs Bodó is an Associate Professor, and socio-legal researcher at the Institute for Information Law (IViR) at the University of Amsterdam.

He was a Fulbright Visiting Researcher at Stanford University's Center for Internet and Society in 2006/7. In 2012/13 he was a Fulbright Fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University. In 2013 he moved to Amsterdam as a Marie Curie Fellow at the Institute for Information Law (IViR) at the University of Amsterdam.

In 2018 he received an ERC Starting Grant to study the legal and political implications of blockchain-based technologies and started the Blockchain & Society Policy Research Lab. He has been invited by the European Commission to serve as an expert for various blockchain-related projects. In 2019 he has been a senior visiting fellow at the Weizenbaum-Institut für die vernetzte Gesellschaft, Berlin. He is the founding (co)director of the University of Amsterdam's interdisciplinary research area on Trust in the digital society.

His academic interests include digital piracy, decentralized techno-social systems, shadow libraries, informal media economies, regulatory conflicts around new technological architectures, and trust.



We asked leaders and experts from the broad open movement what the Paradox of Open means to them and how to address the challenges that it poses. This essay is one of the responses.

[Read the other essays](#)
