223
Number of worker-owned cooperatives in the United States

29K
Total number of US cooperatives, excluding housing

856K
Number of jobs currently produced by cooperatives

$653B
Total revenue generated by cooperatives

—Molly Stier

"The vast majority of people living in the U.S., despite living in a 'democratic society' don't have the experience of participating in face-to-face democracy."

Perez de Alejo, Cooperation Texas

An Internet of Our Own

The real sharing economy is now being built.

COMMENT

In late August, British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn—the United Kingdom's counterpart to Bernie Sanders, except more victorious—announced that he had a plan for the Internet. His "Digital Democracy Manifesto" included planks like an "open knowledge library" and the protection of "digital liberty rights." One of its more surprising proposals is the call for "platform cooperatives." As Corbyn's document explains: "We will foster the cooperative ownership of digital platforms for distributing labour and selling services"—for example, an Uber owned by its drivers, or a Facebook truly accountable to those who entrust it with their data.

Platform cooperatives weren't something one could even call for until December 2014, when New School professor Trebor Scholz posted an online essay about "platform cooperativism," putting the term on the map. A year later, he and I organized a packed conference on the subject in New York City. We're about to publish *Ours to Hack and to Own*, a collective manifesto with contributions from more than 60 authors that Scholz and I edited. The authors include leading tech critics like Yochai Benkler, Douglas Rushkoff, and Astra Taylor, as well as entrepreneurs, labor organizers, workers, and others. The theory and practice of platform cooperativism are spreading.

It's been pretty clear for a while now that the corporate Internet behemoths that claim to be involved in "sharing" and "democratizing" are doing little of either—not where it really matters. The venture capital that inflates them, and the IPOs that hand them over to Wall Street, result in an imperative to sell their users' personal data, labor, and relationships to the highest bidder. It's a business model based on surveillance and precarity. Many people on the front lines of the digital economy have realized that the ownership designs of the Internet's dominant companies need to change. A few have started to figure out how.

Platform co-ops began to appear even before we knew what to call them. By her early 20s, for instance, Brianna Wettlaufer was an executive at iStock, a major platform for stock photos and multimedia owned by Getty Images. But at meeting after meeting, Wettlaufer noticed how the company's business imperatives were in conflict with the interests of the independent artists it claimed to represent. The same restless frustration with bad systems that powered Wettlaufer's climb up the corporate ladder finally compelled her to leave iStock and, with others, start her own company. Stocksy United went online in 2013 as a cooperative, owned and governed by its employees and hundreds of photographers. Rather than seeking growth at all costs, Stocksy United has concentrated on fair pay for photographers, doubling its revenue last year to $7.9 million. Now, as CEO, Wettlaufer has little difficulty prioritizing artistic quality and fair treatment for photographers at company meetings: The photographers are her bosses.

In Denver, meanwhile, a very different company is being formed, but with a similar ownership design. About 800 taxi and app-based drivers in the city—largely African immigrants—have put up a $2,000 investment to become co-owners of Green Taxi Cooperative, which is poised to become the largest taxi company in the state of Colorado. Green Taxi intends to compete not only with other taxi companies but, using an app of its own, with the "ride-sharing" apps now funneling a huge chunk of drivers' and riders' money to Silicon Valley.

With the support of the Communications Workers of America, Green Taxi represents a turn among labor unions back to the cooperative business models that buttressed their collective bargaining a century ago. A group of Bay Area nurses, with the support of SEIU–United Healthcare Workers West, has formed a co-op that reaches clients directly through its app, Nurses Can. These workers and organizers have recognized that we need not cede the emerging online economy—with all its promise and disruption—to Silicon Valley investors. By creating online platforms accountable to the people who rely on them, we can craft disruptions of our own.

Workers and organizers have now recognized that we need not cede the online economy to Silicon Valley investors.

New platform co-ops are proliferating throughout the online economy. Fairmondo is an Amazon-like marketplace in Germany, owned by its users and committed to fair trade; a UK franchise is under way. Loconomics, now getting its start in the Bay Area, is a platform for short-term service gigs co-owned by the workers. Resonate is an effort to create a music-streaming platform owned by musicians, labels, and fans alike. MIDATA.coop, in Switzerland, is developing an online cooperative for medical data, granting users more clarity and control over how their data get monetized and who gains access to them. But such projects are not merely clones of existing platforms; through shared ownership, as Wettlaufer discovered, they can work in ways that investor-owned companies can't.

In the mid-1930s, the US government provided affordable loans for the creation of electric-utility co-ops to provide power in regions where privately owned utilities wouldn't invest. Before long, as much as 75 percent of the country's landmass had service through these locally owned and governed co-ops. The Internet today is what electricity was then, and its benefits are far from equally distributed. Platform cooperatives are a promising step forward—but don't expect a more cooperative Internet to emerge naturally from the market forces now careening in the opposite direction. The online economy needs new protagonists to meet that challenge.   NATHAN SCHNEIDER