

Chapter 5

Why Are We Still Using Facebook? The Platform Paradox in Collaborative Community Initiatives

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5.1 Introduction

Over the past fourteen years, Facebook has grown from a social network site for elite college students in the United States, to its current position as a dominant global hub for online sociality; a platform for an ever-increasing range of daily activities, and a staple in efforts to arrange and coordinate local civic initiatives (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Crivellaro *et al.*, 2014; Berns *et al.*, 2019). Civic and people-led initiatives sometimes express opposition to the values that Facebook is perceived to represent, or explicitly seek out alternatives to the platform. Yet, the lack of dedicated budgets, together with initiatives' concern to gain visibility, often result in the adoption of Facebook – and arguably other

social media platforms – to mobilize resources, plan collective actions and coordinate them, or to manage both internal and external communication (Tayebi, 2013; Costanza-Chock, 2020).

Facebook arouses mixed emotions. The company is known to engage in unscrupulous advertising practices and shows both a reluctance to distance itself from distasteful political causes (Gillespie, 2018) and ambivalence about data use; in common with other social media, it is criticized for destroying democracies and communities (e.g. Zuboff, 2019). However, alongside the squeamishness about using a global neoliberal platform that resists all attempts to rein in its uglier aspects, Facebook has also become a major platform for community solidarity and care work across Europe. While it might be ironic that one of the prime agents credited with undermining democracy is also a major provider of tools for accomplishing resilience and support, this is just one of many tensions in how Facebook is received, which belies its overall contribution.

In this chapter, we examine how five different, community, bottom-up initiatives across Europe use Facebook, the reasons for choosing this platform, and what kind of challenges arise from adopting it. Rejecting polarizing narratives – of social media as the sole instrument of social change, on the one hand, and pessimistic views of surveillance and mistrust, on the other – we draw attention to how these narratives do, or do not, play into use in practice. In doing so, we focus on the tensions that stem from using Facebook as a platform for community initiatives, not at the theoretical level of media studies, but by analysing the situated use of the platform on the ground.

We do this through five empirical case studies: a network for self-organizing co-working days in homes in Sweden (*Hoffice*), migrant solidarity grassroots groups (*Migration Aid*) in Hungary, short-let accommodation for foreign volunteers in Greece (*Athens Volunteers' Accommodation and Ride-sharing*), a neighborhood-centered community group in England (*Egg Club*), and a cycling promotion group in Portugal (*Cicloficina do Porto*). With a strong emphasis on practices of care among those involved – both for oneself and others – the cases provide alternative visions to what have become mainstream examples of platforms, and platform use, in the collaborative economy. Rather than adopting bespoke digital technologies to advance their causes, all five cases rely primarily on Facebook.

Through a meta-analysis of previous, qualitative investigations that were independently carried out, we explore empirical examples that illustrate what a European caring economy might (and already does) look like, particularly in terms of how community initiatives self-organize using a global platform as a central, digital infrastructure. Our analysis unpacks what we regard as the *platform paradox*. While all five initiatives rely on Facebook to organize and infrastructure their actions, the values of these networks are hardly aligned with a global corporation like Facebook.

As the chapter illustrates, all the cases are participatory in nature and feature an ethos of solidarity, rather than focusing on enabling exchange or matching people together for the purposes of transacting. This, we argue, leads to a set of tensions that are not easily resolved through design. Illustrating both the ups and downs resulting from the initiatives' choice to use Facebook to support their activities, we explore the nature of this compromise that can be seen as 'dining with the devil'.

5.2 Methodology and Case Studies

While different in nature and scope, the five cases are all instances of local initiatives that use a global platform like Facebook to promote community practices that embody caring. Despite their different domains and approaches, each initiative aims at fostering the non-monetary co-creation of more meaningful and sustainable lives, from collectively managing work arrangements to responding to refugee crises, from nurturing small scale business to promoting bike use in urban areas.

Below, we briefly introduce the five initiatives that the authors of this chapter have previously engaged with and developed as individual case studies (Bryman, 2012). The cases have all been qualitative in their methodological approaches and featured, in varying constellations, participant observations both on- and off-line, interviews, focus groups and co-design workshops. We invite readers of this chapter to turn to our previous publications (Rossitto and Lampinen, 2018; Lampinen *et al.*, 2019; Diogo and Rosa, 2018; Light and Briggs, 2017) for the methodological details of each case study.

Specifically to address the themes of this chapter, we held online meetings from January to June 2020 to inductively analyze each of the collaborative initiatives' use of Facebook and the specific relationships to the social networking site. This has entailed, for instance, comparing examples of situated practices, along with the specific pros and cons that each of the collaborative initiatives experiences in using the platform. Driven by reflections on the many commonalities, the final meta-analysis outlines the reasons why these initiatives still use Facebook, despite the concerns they have with the proprietary digital platform.

5.2.1 *Hoffice*: Self-organizing Co-working Events in Stockholm, Sweden

A merger between the words home and office, *Hoffice* is a self-organizing, volunteer-driven network that brings together people who wish to co-create temporary workplaces (Rossitto and Lampinen, 2018; Lampinen *et al.*, 2019). The network was founded in Stockholm, Sweden, at the beginning of 2014, with the main

intention to facilitate the collective use of private homes as shared offices. Core to the Hoffice network is the idea that resources, like private homes, can be collectively used as coworking spaces open to friends, acquaintances, or even strangers. The Hoffice concept entails a co-working methodology, and a set of practices inherent in opening up one's home as a temporary, shared workplace. The Hoffice network in Stockholm uses a Facebook group¹ as a hub for advertising and organizing coworking events. This is done by using the Facebook event function, which any member of the group is allowed to create. Here information is usually provided about the date and address, the number of attendees allowed and any infrastructure available at the hosting home – from wi-fi to lunch facilities. Hoffice is an interesting example of a local, collaborative economy initiative that aspires to co-create an alternative social model – encouraging trust, self-actualization, and openness – by relying on a commonly available digital platform to coordinate efforts to manage flexible work arrangements. As we write this chapter, the current Facebook group is still in use, although the intensity of activities varies over time.

5.2.2 *Migration Aid: Refugee Solidarity Grassroots Groups in Hungary*

Refugee/migrant solidarity grassroots groups are volunteer-run collectives that emerged in some major Hungarian cities, during the summer of 2015, as a response to the refugee crises (Bernát *et al.*, 2016). While official care providers, such as public institutions, were reluctant to respond to the unmet needs of migrants and refugees, local civilians self-organized to express solidarity, to provide aid and immediate relief and to contest the government anti-immigration policy. The aid groups all used Facebook as the central platform for sharing information, developing contacts, organizing activities, collecting and distributing donations during the entire crisis.

Migration Aid (MA), the largest and most influential of the refugee solidarity groups, organized and promoted its work via a hierarchical structure with a core open Facebook page² (44k followers) for raising awareness about the migration crisis and activities contending with it. Other Facebook groups were also created; a closed group,³ with a national scope, targeting potential volunteers and providing them with specific information on how to become involved; a number of local closed groups, restricted to active volunteers, for the daily operation of aid activities.

1. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/240395772788705>

2. Migration Aid open page: <https://www.facebook.com/migrationaid.org>

3. Migration Aid national closed group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1602563053360018>

Besides some smaller groups in other cities, in Budapest three groups operated their own Facebook groups linked to the travel hubs of the refugees: Keleti,⁴ MA Nyugati,⁵ MA Déli/Déli Csillagszálló.⁶ While the level of activities within each group has significantly decreased, due to the lower flux of migrants, the core Facebook page and the group pages have remained active and concerned with migration and politics on a broader scale.

5.2.3 *Athens Volunteers Accommodation & Ride-sharing: Short-let Accommodation in Athens, Greece*

As a response to the refugee crisis going on in Greece since 2015, a solidarity network of non-profit organisations and self-organised groups has emerged in Athens to support refugees and migrants, and the large number of volunteers relocating to Athens to manage the emergency (see [Travlou, 2020](#)). In response to the lack of appropriate accommodation for volunteers, a number of groups appeared on Facebook to provide necessary information and guidance to find accommodations and provide flat/rooms-to-let listings. These groups can be seen as alternatives to local newspapers and websites, oftentimes written in Greek only and generally used to find long-term accommodation, and platforms – e.g., Airbnb or Booking.com – more commonly associated with tourism and short-term rental. The case study focuses on a Facebook group called “Athens Volunteers’ Accommodation & Ride-sharing⁷” that was created in April 2016 to coordinate accommodation and transport for, mostly, foreign volunteers in Athens. The group is still being used by landlords and tenants, and by foreign volunteers looking for accommodation, or for people to share a flat with. The group page administrators are foreign volunteers who are familiar with the rental market in the city.

5.2.4 *The Egg Club: Collaborative Buying in Brighton, UK*

The Egg Club grew out of an initiative (The Roundhill Community Noticeboard⁸) that used the Facebook “community” function for groups to set up pages and which became an active hyperlocal site for part of Brighton in southern England.

Roundhill is a compact area bounded by major roads. It has approximately 700 properties, a society that conducts matters of common interest like planning

4. Migration Aid Keleti: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/835984696454826>

5. MA Nyugati: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/490046001145489>

6. MA Déli/Déli Csillagszálló <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1612866438993255>

7. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/236125173408995>

8. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1278271078868009>

permission disputes, and a public noticeboard that is barely used. About three years ago, one of the residents added a community group on Facebook, which now has more than 450 members. This has led to a number of initiatives that supply the neighbourhood and have a material existence independent of the community group page but which could not have existed without it – for instance, a micro-baker and a sustainability-focused dress agency have been launched. In this chapter, we detail how an egg run to fetch organic eggs from a local farm, developed into the Egg Club in response to conversations on the community site and how it became tied in with general area improvement.

5.2.5 Promoting Bicycle Self-repair: *Cicloficina do Porto*, Portugal

*Cicloficina do Porto*⁹ is a bike kitchen, that is an informal cycling group, related to DIY cultures, that promotes the development of skills to self-repair cycles and encourages the use of this vehicle in urban contexts. Concretely, such groups gather together to repair cycles, share tools, space and knowledge. *Cicloficina do Porto* was founded in 2006, and bike repair activities take place in several parts of the city – for free or at a symbolic price – in properties occupied, or owned, by other collectives. This organization has been shaped by a fluctuating group of volunteers, with some of the founding members still active. Their organization's first website was created in 2008, but in 2012 it changed to a blog and then to a Facebook page, which is now the central online platform. The Facebook page is used for public communication: for instance, to disseminate *Cicloficina's* activities, share photos of the repairs that are done on different open days, provide some information about bicycle mechanics, and also to promote activist campaigns and related cycling journeys. Facebook Messenger is also used for queries about bike repairs; *Cicloficina's* typical answer is an invitation for people to attend in person: "Come by on the open day and we'll see". For interaction among volunteers other forms of communication are used, such as a mailing list and telephone contacts.

5.3 Findings

Facebook's size and popularity, and the underlying logic of network effects that is central to platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017) makes it a pragmatic choice for community initiatives. As noted elsewhere (Costanza-Chock, 2020), although an entire ecosystem of dedicated activist Constituent Relationship Management

9. <https://www.facebook.com/CicloficinaDoPorto>

systems (CRMs) exists, such platforms remain niche services. Despite having built-in features, interface elements, and capabilities that match the core processes that community organizers and political campaigners seek, adopting them tends to cost money, while using them oftentimes requires a significant investment of time and energy to learn their functions and convince people to use unfamiliar systems. Instead, like in the cases we focus on in this chapter, it is common to turn to the most popular corporate social networking site, which many people are already using, and find ways to work within its affordances and limitations.

While Facebook provides support for the initial organizing – and arguably success – of local sharing initiatives, relying on it can require compromises and result in practical struggles. All of the five initiatives considered in this chapter use Facebook to organize and infrastructure their actions. Notably, however, the values of these collectives – each aiming at fostering reciprocally caring relationships in their own way – are not aligned with a global corporation like Facebook. As previously noted, we refer to this overarching tension as the *Platform Paradox*, which we articulate with the help of our findings. In the analysis that follows, we first discuss the various reasons the different initiatives have for using Facebook to support their activities. We then turn to consider both the design and the broader political tensions that stem from these initiatives' use of the platform.

5.3.1 Reasons for Using Facebook

Across our five cases, Facebook comes up as a medium that allows community initiatives to come together, attract new participants, experiment with ideas for community practices, mobilize widespread collaboration, organize events and collective action. This utility matters for different reasons in each of our cases, and different aspects of it can be manifested in different stages of each initiative's evolution. In the following sections, we discuss gaining visibility and organizing action, even amid emergencies, as two core concerns that make Facebook a pragmatic resource to turn to.

5.3.1.1 Gaining visibility

The five collectives discussed can be regarded as “*go online to act offline*” communities: the respective Facebook pages and groups are mainly hubs for announcing events, possibly making people interested in participating or even committed to attend. The low entry threshold to using Facebook in general, and the open groups and pages more specifically, makes it easy for grassroots initiatives to gain visibility and easily attract audiences/participants: having access to a Facebook account might be the only requirement for participating in such initiatives, and even this aspect becomes less important if people get involved in offline activities first. The different

cases illustrate various ways in which visibility comes to matter and is enabled by the platform.

In the **Hoffice** case, Facebook played an important role in the initial success of the network by allowing early Hoffice enthusiasts to coordinate their activities and promote the network – and the Hoffice concept – broadly and across various groups of people. Starting on Facebook was a pragmatic success for Hoffice in that it allowed the network to get started quickly and without any specific funds to support it. Despite the shared sentiment that the platform constitutes a challenge to the continuance of the community's activities (this point is further addressed in the section "Design tensions"), key participants are hesitant to migrate to another platform to organize co-working days. As they see it, the wide-spread use of the platform makes it easy for newcomers to join the network, organize and participate in events. As expressed in the words of an active participant: "*Facebook is where everyone is*".

In the case of the **Egg Club**, the initiative owes its existence to Facebook, if obliquely. The platform for the Egg Club is the community noticeboard. The noticeboard enables encounters between attention-paying, socio-ecologically-minded, hyper-local members who use the member-only page for sharing news, organising local support, seeking lost cats, redistributing unwanted household goods and so on. The Egg Club was born when someone shared a Facebook post that brought attention to the fact that a local, organic egg farm had lost its contract with a major supermarket and faced closure and the rehoming of hundreds of chickens (June 2019¹⁰). Jane,¹¹ a retired social worker who had already established, and administered, the group as the community noticeboard, then suggested that she might offer a regular fortnightly service bringing eggs to Roundhill and making them available for collection. She tested this out, the initiative was popular and, at time of writing, she has made it work for a year and a half, including right through the British lockdown in summer 2020. She brings about 400 eggs into Roundhill each time and people collect their order from the side of her house during the same afternoon (Figure 5.1a). She provides fresh eggs at near bulk price, taking a small contribution for petrol and another levy for community improvements (such as the flowers to be seen in the planter in Figure 5.1b). In this way, not only does the neighbourhood support enlightened farming practices (the farm has been able to continue, based on this and other local supply lines), but participants benefit from the provision of cheaper healthy food, while the small fee is put into other forms of local wellbeing.

Despite its birth on Facebook, much of the day-to-day running is now organized through email. Jane has a list of regulars and checks with a message every fortnight

10. <https://www.facebook.com/themacsfarmsussex/>

11. Jane has given consent to use her real name.



Figure 5.1. a/b: The eggs for collection, and flowers in a communal planter in Roundhill, bought with money from the Egg Club.

if anyone wants to change their order, announcing which hours she will be available on that occasion for collection. Very few people have been found unreliable, but the club does not seek new participants: Jane believes her initiative is ill-equipped for unlimited growth (Rossitto *et al.*, 2020) and that it could not be scaled much more without causing her additional inconvenience.

The **Hungarian refugee solidarity** groups show how using Facebook can make visible alternatives to mainstream, governmental politics. These collectives were born and operated in a strong political headwind determined by comprehensive anti-immigration state policy. While using Facebook was instrumental to infrastructure these groups' activities, it also contributed to making visible a number of solidarity initiatives, driven by humanitarian concerns, that were sometimes considered at the very edge of legality by formal political groups. As noted elsewhere (Bernát, 2019; Berns *et al.*, 2019), during the crisis, the Hungarian government amended laws to discourage (and even criminalise) civilian support of asylum seekers. Activities concerned with providing information for onward travels or refugee rights were regarded as means to traffick and support illegal flows of people. In this hostile context, Facebook was perceived as a platform independent of national, structural politics, which enabled the organization of activities contesting the governmental approach to the refugee crisis.

5.3.1.2 Organizing action

For all five initiatives, online activity organized via Facebook has seemed the most effective way not only to promote, but also to plan and coordinate offline activities. And, while dealing with unexpected circumstances is not the only reason to adopt an existing digital platform, both the Hungarian and Greek cases illustrate that using Facebook was central to generating and infrastructuring quick responses to socio-political emergencies.

For the refugee solidarity groups in **Hungary**, the Facebook groups served as centers for the volunteers working with refugees offline to organize core aid activities, such as the collection and distribution of in-kind donation (e.g. food, clothes, medicines), or providing refugees with legal and practical information. Closed groups for the volunteers were established for the management and the most active members to organize daily operations at a street level and to coordinate with other grassroots all over the country. Additionally, open groups for wider activist communities were established to allocate donations and enroll volunteers.

As noted above, for the **Athens Volunteers Accommodation & Ride-sharing group** Facebook provided a space to share information about available flats, property rental regulations, advice on how to avoid bogus landlords, tips on where to purchase cheap furniture and offers for transport/ride-sharing. Transactions between prospective tenants and landlords were generally easy, straightforward and fast. In most cases, there were posts about available accommodation with photos of rooms and/or the whole flat, the type of tenancy (i.e. single or multiple occupancy), and information about amenities, neighbourhoods, and vacancy duration. Prospective tenants could respond directly via comments and then arrange to discuss the vacancy with property owners (or subletters) via Messenger. There were also posts from volunteers looking for accommodation in Athens prior to their arrival, describing their budget, preferred areas and duration of their stay in the city.

Facebook facilitates the organization of **Hoffice** days for any member who has joined the group. The platform makes it easy to reach potential members and provides the basic tools for coordinating the organization of co-working days. In particular, members use Facebook events to issue invites to Hoffice days, coordinate participation, and communicate details necessary for coming together face-to-face. However, the continued use of Facebook for the same purposes, as the network has grown rapidly, has caused challenges (explored below as design tensions). Moreover, the use of the platform raises issues of peripheral versus more active forms of participation. While a click is all it takes to join the online network, more “active” participation, such as organizing or attending physical events, requires a level of connection to the community that membership in the initiative on the platform alone does not provide.

Both in the Egg Club and Cicloficina cases, Facebook was not the only platform adopted and its use is combined with other digital channels. In the case of the **Egg Club**, the Facebook community pages provided the means to identify local needs and organize the initial response to the chicken farm crisis. However, after the community was formed, action was often coordinated through other means.

In contrast with the previous initiatives, in **Cicloficina**, Facebook appears around six years after the group's constitution. Since then it has become central to Cicloficina for public communication, but the collective is not fully reliant on it, and other channels – e.g. mailing lists, Messenger and telephone contacts – are used by active participants for internal communication, to plan and schedule meetings and events, or discuss and make decisions about materials and tools needed. The later development of the Facebook page indicates that this group had a previous existing practice of organization and collaboration.

5.3.2 Design Tensions

Despite the many reasons for turning to Facebook, there are also a number of pragmatic design tensions that complicate the initiatives' relationships to it. A key issue is that, in relying on Facebook, community organizers experience a practical powerlessness: they cannot adapt the platform to fit the needs of their initiative and they have no guarantees that a feature they depend upon will remain available and continue to function in the same way. Rather, they are left to adapt to unexpected changes that may either help or hinder their activities. This makes sustained community governance and everyday organizing more difficult. In this section, we consider three common design tensions: difficulties in managing growth, clashes between platform culture and community norms, and challenges in broadcasting that stem from algorithmic filtering.

5.3.2.1 Managing growth

As noted above, one of the aspects that makes Facebook attractive for local initiatives, at least initially, is that the platform offers an opportunity to foster broad participation and broadcast messages to a quickly growing network. When community organizers are just getting started, being able to get the word out and bring people together quickly is valuable. However, a different effort may be needed when the goal is to establish deeper community ties and develop continuous and systematic collective action, not only online but also offline. The story of Hoffice illustrates this point well. While starting on Facebook was a pragmatic success for the network, relying on the platform has had a role in stalling the activities of the community in Stockholm. While rapid growth in the number of participants would constitute a success for many initiatives on Facebook, and can be thought to align well

with Facebook's incentives, for an initiative like Hoffice it has significant downsides. As the network's main purpose is to facilitate in-person events, a rapid influx of new members makes it hard to coordinate participation and establish sufficient continuity for network members to get to know, and trust one another, to the degree that they desire. As one of the founders of the network put it in a meeting: "*Facebook is killing Hoffice.*" This statement sums up how, over time, the tensions between what the community aims for and what the platform is geared to facilitate have become more apparent.

Similarly, the migrant solidarity grassroots groups in Hungary experienced a discrepancy between the growth of online membership and the offline activities of the community: while Facebook features were good enough to mobilize resources, including volunteers, they did not support the articulation work needed for the workings of these groups. This was an unexpected challenge for both the leaders and ordinary members of these groups as it made the coordination of offline activities more difficult, especially when it came to allocating tasks. In other words, the low entry threshold to joining the groups often resulted in an oversupply of volunteers.

As another example of challenges in managing growth, the Athens' Volunteers Accommodation & Ride-sharing group struggled with unwarranted members' expectations about what the group could do and what Facebook is suited to support. In particular, there were hopes that the group could facilitate renting properties by supporting negotiations between owners and prospective tenants. The problems stemmed from using a Facebook group to organize a two-sided marketplace, bringing into contact landlords and tenants who have not met before and who are left to deal with possible problems on their own. The Facebook group administrator(s) neither had the means to facilitate these interactions in a structured way, nor did they have the resources to help resolve eventual conflicts. There was little they could do to vet the participants to ensure good intentions. As a work-around, the administrators drafted a series of guidelines for prospective tenants to make them aware of possible pitfalls and disagreements with property owners: "*be aware that there can be unscrupulous people out there ready to take advantage, therefore please make sure to stay safe and check things out before agreeing to rent/stay somewhere. if something doesn't feel right, then it probably isn't.*" Moreover, as rent price was often not provided, the administrators started to request that the monthly rent price should be included on the post, otherwise they would be deleted.

5.3.2.2 Reconciling platform culture and community norms

There is a tension between Facebook platform culture and many of the community norms in play with these five initiatives. This can be seen in how Facebook templates participation in ways that often does not match the culture and needs of

local initiatives. Again, it is worth emphasizing that community initiatives have no power over how the platform defines page and group outlines and structure contents over time. For instance Facebook's style of RSVP'ing to event invitations, can clash with community norms. While "Maybe attending" and agreeing to attend but failing to show up are relatively regular instances on the platform, they may hurt a local initiative's efforts. The mismatch of online and offline community norms leads to tensions in some cases. In the Hungarian solidarity groups, participants sometimes committed – for instance, volunteering for a daily shift – by answering to Facebook posts, but did not follow up. This posed challenges to the running of activities on the ground, or was a source of frustration for those who would have liked to apply for the shift, but could not as the list was already full.

For Hoffice, no-shows led both to frustration for those organizing co-working days, as they were left with a smaller than expected number of guests (which could undermine the event), and to disappointments for those who would have liked to participate but could not find a free slot. Overall, these types of trouble can push newcomers and active members alike to disengage from the network, deeming efforts to participate as "not worth it" and seeking other means to find the sociality that made Hoffice attractive in the first place – e.g. by advertising events to close contacts rather than making them public on Facebook. In the case of Cicloficina, situations when people RSVP that they will attend an event, but did not show up was never considered as problematic: such incidents do not disrupt activities because the members who did show up always had something to fix on their own bikes and also enjoyed each other's company.

As another example of how platform culture can expose participants to adverse outcomes is that while Facebook's design is geared to encourage information sharing, this can be very risky. For organizers of the migrant solidarity grassroots groups in Hungary, it was clear that Facebook should not be used for sharing sensitive data, including personal and contact information of either the fleeing asylum seekers and helping volunteers, or monetary information regarding either the collected or spent donations. They considered this to be the case even in closed groups. This lack of a trusted, private communication channel made effective operation more difficult and there was constantly the risk that someone might share sensitive information without having thought through the implications of posting it on Facebook. It also triggered the use of alternative communication tools (secured channels or email, chat, phone) in order to manage cases that involved any sensitive information.

5.3.2.3 Maintaining awareness amidst algorithmic filtering

A third concern is that maintaining awareness of network activities can become difficult when done via a platform that filters contents algorithmically as a strategy to personalize what is shown to individual users, cater for their interests and

maximize their engagement. Depending on how Facebook is configured to work at any particular point in time, both community members and other audiences may be more or less likely to see information about upcoming events when they browse the platform. The algorithmic filtering to produce the personalized news feed that Facebook is famous for makes it hard to know who sees what and when, thus adding a level of troublesome ambiguity to all community communications. This tension came up particularly in the case of Cicloficina. Here Facebook's structure for broadcasting – i.e. sharing photos, information or feedback on events – was constraining, particularly in giving visibility to present-moment posts. It worked better for more stable, general information and documentation about the initiative, for which the fixed layout was a more comfortable match. The practical troubles with broadcasting are part of the reason why the Cicloficina organizers have kept using a blog, which is preferred among the more active members, given the higher level of autonomy that it allows.

Clearly, winding through these design tensions are also the politics of control. If the mechanisms were set up and maintained at local level, as Light and Miskelly argue in their analysis of supporting neighbourhood caring and sharing (2019), it would be possible for organisers to configure these problems away. Militating against this is the challenge of staying technically competent and keeping the site functional, overheads that have caused small organisations to reduce the degree to which their networks and services rely on digital components (see Light, 2019).

5.3.3 Political Tensions

Beyond the design tensions covered above, there are further political tensions that may be less discernible in the day-to-day functioning of local initiatives, but that are more fundamentally ironic. Drawing on different groups' principles, values, ideological orientations, and their experiences of using Facebook, we now reflect on political and ethical reasons for resistance to and/or discomfort with using the platform. We argue that Facebook has become a form of institutionalization for collaborative initiatives channeling, and sometimes fueling, the conflictuality that "is no longer contained" by the institutions "or happens in areas that can not be easily institutionalized" (Fernandes, 1993, p. 796). Political tensions come to light in these groups' dynamics while they use Facebook and in how they use it; such conflictualities are sometimes generated by pre-existing local tensions that are reflected in online interactions, and other times motivated by the collectives' vision of the platform and its policies.

Talking about trust and the collaborative economy, Light (2019) augments Hawlitschek *et al.* (2016) proposal of the 3 Ps (peer, product and platform) as sites

of trust, with recognition that you can trust all three of these (i.e. be sure that the service will operate as intended), while still distrusting the company that provides the mechanism. The political tensions we discuss here reflect this distinction. Complementing the design tensions addressed above, they do not refer to design issues as such, but rather to people's perceptions of employing the *product* of a company that is not generally regarded as a good digital citizen – e.g. enabling fake news, polarising opinions. The tensions discussed manifest in the diffuse manner of late capitalism's conflictuality, not sufficient to force a change in the community's practices – i.e. to bring about the decision to stop using Facebook – yet nagging at users and influencing some of the relations that extend from it. As the cases chosen outline, this often happens once this platform is institutionalized as a means to an end, therefore it does not define the collective identities that use it. Given the tridimensional positioning/placement of trust – peer, product and platform (Hawlitschek *et al.*, 2016) – to use Facebook does not require trust in the company as an entity or in the way it runs its services (Light, 2019). As highlighted by the previous analysis, trust, and thus use, can simply be based on its utility to enlarge, maintain a network or make it visible to wide publics. These collectives use Facebook once they know their peers, their users, their members and followers are using it, and *trust them* to keep the initiatives alive.

In the Egg Club case, this is simply captured in Jane's comment that she does not like what Facebook gets up to, but it is convenient for a community group (and for supporting the egg run) because it is what a lot of people are already using. She is well aware of the political tensions and also that some of the neighbourhood will not use it because of what it represents. Nevertheless, Jane talks about what it enables: *"I want to live in a nice community. I like walking down a street and knowing that so and so lives here and so and so lives there. I like getting to know people. That can lead on to other things ... This strengthens community."*

Relatedly, in the Cicloficina case, a broad number of participants see Facebook as a company that has concentrated too much wealth and power within the social media sector. As a member put it, the fact that Facebook bought Whatsapp and Instagram further limits the possibilities of using social media with diverse ownership. The group is also critical of Facebook's lack of protection of users' rights in favour of its economic interests; here Facebook is considered the *"major instrument of personal data manipulation driven by financial goals"*. Given the group's anti-capitalist orientation, the platform's lack of concern for policies to handle personal data creates individual and collective tension. This conflictuality reflects mistrust in the economic system of which Facebook has become a telling example (Zuboff, 2019). The uneasiness that Facebook contradicts the group's core values has been discussed within the community. Suggestions were made to create profiles in other social media accounts (i.e. Twitter and Instagram), to be less dependent

on Facebook. Nevertheless, while open source alternatives to Gmail and Doodle have been adopted, Facebook has been more difficult to replace, especially given the challenge of reaching out to wide audiences. Even if alternatives to the platform were to be found, it would still require effort to advertise the change in the technological setup and migrate to another platform. In sum, despite the group's rejection of the political and economic values materialised in the platform, Facebook, as a tool, remains in use because it requires "minimum effort" to be managed while easily providing visibility to the collective.

5.4 Discussion and Conclusion

Facebook has worked to support communities over the years, introducing features to support both closed and open groups and community action. Meanwhile, the chapter has illustrated that Facebook's pervasiveness and broad use often makes it a convenient choice for the organizing of volunteer-run collaborative initiatives. Despite issues such as the lack of control over core features of the platform, and the tension that might emerge from mistrusting the corporation behind the platform, the cases illustrate how performing community through Facebook is still attractive because of other qualities. *This is the platform paradox*, with both core volunteers and more peripheral members being aware of trade-offs between the utility of the platform and the compromises stemming from using it.

Given the inseparability of social and economic activities in community initiatives, it is perhaps not surprising that a platform initially designed for social networking gets taken up as a medium for grassroots/community-centred initiatives. Demonstrating the persistence in "*dining with the devil*", the findings have illustrated the subtleties of how this occurs from addressing social crises to sourcing food or co-organizing supportive work contexts. All these examples manifest care for community, for the environment and local neighborhoods and for more vulnerable groups. In all of the initiatives discussed, informal structures of support and transfer of resources unfold offline, through face-to-face interactions rather than being transactions of the visible parts of the platform-driven collaborative economy.

Despite the very specific design features of a social networking site, the possibility to tailor the platform to different practices, contexts and situations, makes its use inherently open. While, as noted, customization and control over central design features are rather limited – and a source of problems for collectives like Hoffice, for instance – the platform lends itself to diverse contexts and the flexibility to infrastructure action. The openness and lack of control over what Facebook can be used for (paradoxically, including the spreading of fake news or other

anti-democratic values) is a reason for its success. Facebook, both as a platform and a corporation, does not seek to moderate local tensions. In fact, its ‘neutrality’ as a medium for, rather than a publisher of, information, means that it may look virtuous in the face of false viral messaging that undermines democracy. This can be observed, for instance, in the refugee solidarity groups in Hungary. As the initiatives grew and operated against the political headwind and the hostile public climate, Facebook closed groups provided political alternatives to the domestic, mainstream, public arena. In this context, Facebook’s lack of ethical concerns (e.g. Gillespie, 2018; Zuboff, 2019) was not regarded as negatively as the governmental policy and the actions of some extreme right anti-immigration groups. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the Athens volunteer accommodation Facebook group enabled transactions that can be perceived as being at the edge of legality – e.g. no formal lease means tax evasion – but not a single post ever questioned these transactions. Possible explanations for this may be the urgency to find accommodation, the volunteers’ lack of knowledge of the Greek tenancy regulations and property law, or the underlying support for a humanitarian aid cause. Finally, as we wrote this chapter, we learnt about a food-sharing community in Europe (the name and country are left anonymous to protect the identity of the people involved) that has decided to stop advertising events on Facebook after forming a partnership with a charity organization helping illegal refugees. Here, the lack of dedicated support for sensitive settings aspiring to more just futures (see Costanza-Chock, 2020) simply means not using the platform.

Although diverse in scope, the collectives described are embedded in new social movements that are said to be, on one hand, generated by the “contradictions of current capitalism” (Fernandes, 1993, p. 797), and on the other, based on moral, political and cultural values that do not necessarily question the institutionalized political system and the “market economy categories” (Fernandes, 1993, p. 811). However, in some cases, there were clashes between groups’ ideological messages and online interactions through Facebook. As a new institutionalized arena, the platform provides new fuel to local conflictualities that are intertwined with both the perceived problems with the platform – given its policies regarding human rights and political liberties – and with their clash with the mainstream economic and political systems.

The cases illustrate that, despite differences in motivation and structure, the members and volunteers of these organisations value the sociotechnical mechanisms enabled by the platform, but do not necessarily trust the company behind it. Facebook provides templates for actions (organizing events, sharing posts, creating community and groups pages) that are widely recognised by heterogeneous audiences. Again, these mechanisms are adopted and integrated, even if there is ambivalence about control and flexibility. This makes it challenging for volunteers

and more active members to envision alternative socio-technical setups or imagine how initiatives might migrate to them.

The collaborative initiatives discussed in this chapter show the ways much solidarity work takes place without bespoke technology. Moreover, while platforms like Facebook can provide basic support for collaboration and organizing action on the ground, supportive connections develop and unfold offline. Relatedly, previous work has shown that, in vulnerable settings, defining fixed roles and formally structuring matching mechanisms between “givers” and “those in need” might have unintended consequences, such as stigma and shame (Vyas *et al.*, 2015).

This questions mainstream design narratives that promote the platform model of sharing and the adoption of dedicated platforms for community initiatives. Given the constraints of limited budgets and dealing with emergencies, but also collectives’ concerns to make visible inequalities and more sustainable lives, using what is available and popular has its virtues. Our argument to trouble the idea of technological innovation is not technology-agnostic. What we regard as a main design challenge for the settings discussed is the creative exploration of socio-technical practices that illustrate the use of alternative – yet existing – digital technologies, and how their use can be combined both with Facebook, and other means (see, for instance, Bødker *et al.*, 2016; Rossitto *et al.*, 2014), to support the different aspects and moments of organizing collaborative community initiatives.

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