Networked Roots of Talkoot, Cooperation, and Information Society in Finland

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Abstract

This article introduces and explores connections between rural traditions and contemporary projects of voluntary cooperation, within emergent online network practices. The key examples are mainly from Finland, situated in the Baltic Sea context, and internet developments based in USA. Reflections are made on the emergence of such connections during a trans-disciplinary seminar organised by the author. The main body of the essay mixes social and network culture history, including rural village community support, known as “talkoot” in the Finnish language, its establishment within cooperative development during the 20th century, and the information communications and technology society of contemporary Finland. Discussions of collaborative web platforms such as wikis and “crowd-sourcing”, open up questions considering their relation to older cultural traditions. The Finnish language phrase “tietotalkoot” is introduced to describe collaborative knowledge building. The paper shares contemporary examples of where traditions of rural cooperation have conceptually assisted several Finnish information, entrepreneurial and activist projects. The author concludes that with the expansive potential of network culture meeting concentrated local action, responsibilities and reflections on equal benefit are important.

Biography

Andrew Gryf Paterson is a Scottish artist-organiser, cultural producer and independent researcher, based, since 2003, in Helsinki, Finland. He works in different collaborative and cross-disciplinary processes, across the fields of media/ network/ environmental arts and activism, pursuing a participatory practice through workshops, performative events, and storytelling. He is currently a doctoral candidate at Medialab, Aalto University School of Art and Design in Helsinki, and a member of Piknik Frequency ry. association (organisers of *Pixelache Festival*). http://agryfp.info

Introduction

I write reflecting upon connections which emerged from planning the *Alternative Economy Cultures* (*Alt.Econ.Cult*) programme of *Pixelache Festival*, during winter 2008-2009 and, in particular, the seminar event on 3rd April 2009 in Helsinki. To give some contextual background to this event, *Pixelache* is both a cultural festival and an organized network [1]. It brings together people interested in topics such as electronic arts; participatory cultures and subcultures, including the exploration of grassroots organizing and networks; politics and economics of media/technology; media literacy and engaging environmental issues. Social, intellectual, financial and institutional capital at *Pixelache* has gathered over the years since 2002, but it is still based mostly on volunteer or underpaid work.

As initiator and producer of the *Alt.Econ.Cult* programme, my intention, in the spirit of open-minded research, was to create a “gathering-forum” to “See-hear-glean” intuitions, curiosities, overlaps, agendas, connections, and antagonisms in/between alternative economics, creative practice, activism, entrepreneurship and network cultures. Similar to that ambition, this paper sets out to foster and develop conversation between rural, network-culture, and cooperative-studies researchers, organizers, activists, and cultural practitioners of different generations.

Peer-nominations, encounters and connections

Not claiming to be an expert of "alternative economics", I asked among my peers—Finnish natives and fellow immigrants, artists, academics and activists based in Helsinki and Tampere—for locally-specific nominations to the programme. In communications, and aspects of organizing, I was advised and assisted by *Perpetuum Mobile* (Marita Muukkonen and Ivor Stodolsky) and Roope Mokka of *Demos Helsinki*. My linguistic handicap of not reading/writing Finnish-language well, meant that searching and identifying related Finnish topics or information was challenging, although I was also operating in an international context. Speakers for the seminar emerged from a combination of direct personal invitations—most of the international speakers—and peer nominations solicited for native/local nominations from within my social networks, and those of my associates. The *Alt.Econ.Cult* programme, introduced above, emerged on the basis of social connections and what Pierre Bordieu describes as "social capital" [2]. I mean by this that it was build on the wealth of social relations which I had accumulated during my organizational practice over several years based in Helsinki, and travels to elsewhere.

Andrea Botero, one of my doctoral student colleagues at Medialab, suggested to include in the seminar the Finnish tradition of *talkoot*, a rural voluntary cooperative tradition and ongoing contemporary practice. Indeed, this form of cooperation is also known among Finnish urban dwellers. Botero knew it also as *minka* or *minga*, the Andean tradition known in her native Colombia. After asking around several times to find an academic historian of this common practice, a sponsor of the seminar, Ruurik Holm, director of *Vasemmistofoorumi* (Left Forum) nominated Tapani Köppä. Professor Köppä is the research director of Cooperative Network Studies at *Ruralia Institute*, in the Mikkeli branch of Helsinki University. Köppä thankfully accepted the invitation.

Some of the highlights of the one-day seminar programme on April 3, were: keynote presentations were made on peer-to-peer theories and participatory economics; and speakers shared their practices or research on open-source software development and sustainability, pirate and remix economics, online collaboration, free and grassroots cultural production, green capitalism and peer-funding systems. Moreover, Köppä's presentation "Remarks on Rural Cooperation in Finland"—was identified and promoted as a "local cultural heritage" keynote in the early-afternoon of the seminar.

This presentation in English-language opened up, for me at least, conceptually and textually the ability to engage with the Finnish tradition of *talkoot* (known among Swedish-speaking Finns as *talko*), and compelled me soon afterwards to seek it out in other cultures. I have been involved in many such cooperatively-focused volunteer activities, both formally and informally, both in Finland, and elsewhere, but I did not have a word for the practice and concept until then. Inspired by this insightful seminar event, in the next passages I share some of the histories, anecdotes of, and references to the rural cooperative tradition with hope that the reader will also have the chance to imagine the same.

Later in the article, I set up this tradition's encounter with the information communication technology (ICT) society which is common in Northern Europe, and particularly identified with in contemporary Finland. Revealing the "buzz" in contemporary collaborative contexts for the tradition's online-offline network potential, finally I tentatively probe for trans-disciplinary connections which can be of interest to researchers of peer-to-peer theories, rural and cooperative studies, social capital and history; as well as cultural practitioners and activists promoting collaboration, social and environmental change. Throughout this text, I present my findings, as emerging lines of flight for future research activity between different partners.

Rural cooperation

Tapani Köppä, in his presentation referred to above, identifies all of the following characteristics of *talkoot* cooperation on his second slide: “People getting together for joint work efforts, based on voluntary participation, and collective reward through hospitality and enjoying of the shared work performance” [3]. As neighbourly assistance, work is unpaid, and hospitality would normally mean food and drinks, maybe music, singing and dancing at the end, provided by the one who has called for the *talkoot.* Interestingly, the term is almost always referred to in plural form. “Temporary or occasional needs of united action” [4], writes Köppä, is another characteristic, including regular seasonal events such as spring tidying of common yards, autumn harvests, or “assistance in constructing houses, roads, bridges, community festivals” [5] and later also “material resources or fundraising campaigns”. Supporting weaker neighbours or those in need, for example, “in case of burnt house, lost crop, illness or death of spouse” [6], would be a shared responsibility in the community.

Köppa calls these basic elements combining to form a “win-win” situation, including shared benefits which increase the prosperity of the community and its members, making participation rewarding socially, emotionally and economically. He argues that it makes co-operation “profitable in the long-run”, easy to learn and flexible in application [7].

However, individual deviance to this common practice might prove to be costly. Reference is made in the English-language *Wikipedia* entry for *talkoot*, of peer-pressure to participate: “one's honour and reputation may be severely damaged if one doesn't show up, or proves to be a poor worker” and being stingy in rewarding the work may “result in a person being persecuted for the rest of his or her life” [8]. Whether this is true or not, when traditionally many rural families lived in isolated farms, many kilometres from the nearest village, the positive benefits of participating are easy to imagine; and the negative consequences of not contributing one's share likewise.

In explaining the historical roots of *talkoot*, Köppä made reference to the combination of extreme climate in Finland—long winters, short summers—and tough agro-ecological conditions which have encouraged cooperative energies in the country's rural communities. Similar conditions prevail in other northern climates, and not surprisingly, if one looks to other cultures and languages of Northern and Eastern Europe, the Finnish word *Talkoot* can be translated [9]. A hyper-linked wander through different languages on *Wikipedia* yields the following:

Latvians and Lithuanians use the word *Talka,* while in Estonian it is described as *Talgud.* The Belarusian word, *Талока* (Taloka), is said by some to be a linguistic borrowing of one of the Baltic languages, and possibly refers to the ancient word for the pagan spirit of harvest and fertility [10]. Furthermore, there is a very similar word in Ukrainian, *Толока* (Toloka), and in Polish it is known as *Tłoka*

For Russian speakers the word *Толока* has slightly different connotations of being close to “busyness”, with many people around. However, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia introduced the word *Субботник* (Subbotnik), with Lenin famously involved himself in promoting this mass voluntary cooperation in his communique of 1920: “The First Subbotnik On The Moscow-Kazan Railway” [11]. To note, however, in my exploratory, informal discussion with people who lived within the Soviet Union, and especially those subordinated by it, for example Latvians, there is a clear ideological and semantic distinction between this activity, and the pre-Revolution tradition.

In the western part of Northern Europe, in Norway, the equivalent word is *Dugnad*, after the old Norse word for “help”. The root of the English term “Bee” is similar. But this word should not be

confused with that of the social insect. Instead, it refers to a circle of persons, meeting in order to ease the boredom of a repetitive activity (as with spinning or husking grain) [12]. In distinction, German-language speakers use the word *Nachbarschaftshilfe*, more clearly referring to whom the help is directed: neighbours. European settlers to North America in the 18th Century instead referred to what was often being done, for-example, *barn-raising*.

Historical durability of mutual aid

How many of these words are in regular or semi-regular use? All these words, for voluntarily working together, adding efficiency though sharing in kin and village community structures, are synonymous with what Peter Kropotkin described in the 1890s as "mutual aid" [13].

Kropotkin published a series of papers, collated under the title *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution,* in 1902. Within them, he argued against then-current social Darwinist thinking, countering that mutual aid was just as important a factor in human evolution as self-assertion, common to people all over Europe, and other parts of the world. It was his understanding that this practice had been knowingly suppressed in recent centuries by various State-based institutions. As Kropotkin wrote:

> The village communities were bereft of their folkmotes, their courts and independent administration; their lands were confiscated.. Political education, science, and law were rendered subservient to the idea of State centralization. It was taught in the Universities and from the pulpit that the institutions in which men formally used to embody their needs of mutual support could not be tolerated in a properly organized State; that the State alone could represent the bonds of union between its subjects; that federalism and 'particularism' were the enemies of progress, and the State was the only proper initiator of further development [14].

Kropotkin was a firm believer in the durability of rural life-ways, "honeycombed with habits and customs of mutual aid and support; that important vestiges of the communal possession of soil are still retained" [15]. He saw these social and mutually-beneficial ways of doing things, as being reconstituted also in the industrial societies. Writing as an anarchist-communist activist, in a period of emerging modern European nationalism and state capitalism, he was inspired and encouraged by the labour and counter-movement of his time, which included socialism, unionism, free association and cooperativism. These were movements he heard of and witnessed in the Germany, Holland, Denmark, France, Switzerland and England. Beyond the labour movements, he also was inspired by a similar energy among all different aspects of people's lives:

> I ought perhaps to mention also the friendly societies, the unities of oddfellows, the village and town clubs organized for meeting the doctors' bills, the dress and burial clubs, the small clubs very common among factory girls, to which they contribute a few pence every week, and afterwards draw by lot the sum of one pound, which can at least be used for some substantial purchase, and many others. A not inconsiderable amount of sociable or jovial spirit is alive in all such societies and clubs, though the 'credit and debit' of each member are closely watched over. But there are so many associations based on the readiness to sacrifice time, health, and life if required, that we can produce numbers of illustrations of the best forms of mutual support [16].

Co-operative development in Finland

At the time when Kropotkin's theory on mutual aid was being published, Finland, as a restless autonomous grand duchy of the Russian Empire, was still largely an agrarian country. Of a population of three million, four-fifths lived and worked in the forests and fields. However, it was also the time when the organized cooperative movement arrived in Finland. Following travels in Germany and Austria, Hannes and Hedvig Gebhard were inspired by the farm economics which they witnessed there, and decided to pioneer cooperatives in Finland. Formalised in 1899, they set up the 'Pellervo Society'. Markku Kuisma, writing in the introductory chapter of *The Pellervo Story*, reminds the reader: “Emerging industries, particularly the forest industry, depended on rural resources and labour.. The distress of the landless masses.. was one of the most serious social problems of the age” [17]. The organized cooperative movement, based on social capital and its economics, was an attempt to tackle such issues, and this form of enterprise was encouraged as a way of developing political consciousness among farmers.

Modern forms of *talkoot* developed during the Winter War (1939-40) and the Continuation War (1941-45) with the Soviet Union. Köppä writes that people of the “home front”—mostly women filling roles in productive work as farm-heads, industrial workers and other professionals—became involved in less-traditional forms of volunteerism: gathering raw materials, scrap metal, foraged food, paper, rags and other energy forms. In other words, they were “keeping the infrastructure alive” both in the city, and in the countryside [18]. Köppä describes how during the war period *Suomen talkoot* (Finland's-bee) was established as an organization, and later, *Suurtalkoot* (Great-bee), a coalition of 58 national civil society associations. As a consequence, a great amount was done despite the hardships facing a country at war. In 1942 work made by *talkoot* volunteers, Köppä continues, was counted to exceed 3 million hours in ploughing and seeding (*toukotyöt*), and 12 million hours in harvesting [19].

The reconstruction period following the war strengthened and consolidated the *talkoot* cooperatives. They eventually formed into small financial institutions, supporting the mechanisation of farms, and market providers of farm goods. For women, the war-time experience led to their advocacy for sustained presence within several new professions in the labour market. Finland also witnessed rapid industrialization and urbanization during the 1950-70s. Many families gave up farming, moving from the countryside to the Southern cities of Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa, Tampere, and Turku, or emigrating to Sweden, to gain new employment. In the 1970s, as explained by Köppä, rural development policies were decisively influenced by the local and national voluntary associations. The rural exodus and centralizing bureaucratic trends of the period, furthermore, encouraged those still active in the countryside to set up village committees. These committees duplicated around the nation, also in part thanks to action research by groups of university students and researchers, such as Köppä and his colleagues [20]. The village committees organized *talkoot* events, inviting local inhabitants to work together towards their common needs, such as fighting for the maintenance of threatened local services, repairing the village house, or introducing entrepreneurship projects to the village.

Social capital in the urban context

Research studies in social capital, inspired by the concepts proposed by Pierre Bourdieu's notion of “social capital” refered to above, developed rapidly from the mid-1980s onwards, gathering momentum in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As noted in Laura Iisakka and Aku Alanen's introduction to *Social Capital in Finland*, the concept of social capital “has its roots in the notion that a proper understanding of welfare and the economic situation of a society can only be achieved if the social dimension is also taken into account, i.e. society's capacity for collective action and the

networks that support collective action" [21].

Research on social capital connects well with reflections on *talkoot* (voluntary and neighbourly help). The concept of social capital has also been applied to understand better workplace communities, health and well-being, regional economies, and communication media. Jouni Häkli and Claudio Minca, making case-studies of Finland and Italy in their most current book, *Social Capital and Urban Networks of Trust,* acknowledged both nations hold ample amounts of social capital. However, in the case of Finland, in some contrast with the Italian case, there are many highly formalized and institutionalized forms of social capital, both planned in the Nordic welfare-state model and promoted through membership of civil associations [22].

Despite this, in contemporary Finland with just over 60% of the population living in urbanized areas [23], informal volunteering and support are still important factors in everyday life. According to Hannu Pääkkönen, in his article "Volunteering, neighbourly help and socializing", containing analysis of a statistical survey made between 1999-2000, "people spend almost 1 hour a day in social capital activities such as socialising, neighbourly help and volunteering; and almost one-third of the population engage in volunteering each month. Each month 60 per cent of the population offer neighbourly help" [24]. Making international comparisons with fourteen other countries in Europe, Pääkkönen finds that "people in Germany, Finland and Poland as well as in France and Estonia spend the most amount of time on organisational activities and neighbourly help" [25].

The information society

From the late 1980s onwards, Finland's contribution to the international telecommunications and information technology revolution has been significant for a small nation between 4.9 to 5.3 million people. For example, Finnish computer science students and researchers have been pioneers in open-source software development. Famously, the *Linux* operating system was initiated by Linus Torvalds in 1991, and maybe less so famous, the Swedish-Finnish-grown *MySQL* server architecture, which allows multi-user access to databases online, was co-developed by Michael 'Monty' Widenius beginning in 1994. Furthermore, peer-based online communications, in the form of *Internet Relay Chat* (IRC) was initiated by Jakko Oikarinen in 1988. In each of these cases the work (of programming) was never done alone, and calls for support were made to develop them.

While the code-base for these software solutions remain open-source, or the software is free to download, large for-profit enterprises have built businesses by offering services based on these softwares mentioned above. In an interview reflecting upon his original experience of developing *MySQL*, and in 'forking' a new non-profit version of the architecture called *MariaDB SQL*, Widenius gave advice to new people starting out in open-source business: "Remember that if you are working in the open-source space, everything is about trust. You need to be as open as you can about everything you do and *never* betray the trust of your customers or users" [26]. Like in *talkoot*, there are social protocols to uphold and maintain when doing cooperative software work. Furthermore, large economical profit and technical benefit has been gained on the basis of the social efforts of the open-source movement, so stakes are high.

In other fields of technology innovation, Finnish corporations have also grown to be global leaders. Nokia Corporation, focused on mobile telephony and network hardware, and with its well-known slogan "Connecting People", is nowadays the world's largest manufacturer of handsets. Sulake Corporation's *Habbo* is another recent example of a world-leading Finnish technology innovator, growing since 1999 a virtual and social networking environment for teenagers. At the time of writing, they have 132 million avatars registered worldwide, and almost 12 million unique visits a month [27]. The early social image-sharing website *IRC Galleria,* initiated in 2000 by Tomi

Lintelä, is also popular with Finnish teenagers and young adults, with 500,000 registered community members. Even if both platforms are used by different age-groups (*Habbo* attracts younger teens, and *IRC Galleria* older teens) and most likely contains different social capital, what they represent—collective action at one online site, an aggregate number of community members totaling 850,000 users per week as of 2 years ago—is clearly producing something of value [28].

Clues to how the above examples happened in Finland—beyond individual talent, determination and tenacity—can be found in a higher education and research system with strong technical, engineering focus. When one wasn't at work or studying, there was a generous support system in the Nordic welfare model, as it existed in the 1980-90s, which, informally-at-least, supported "free" home production time.

In 1999, Finnish futurologists, technologists and social researchers gathered in a symposium called "Life Beyond the Information Society" [29]. As a keynote speaker, the organizers invited Manual Castells, the Catalan sociologist who led the discourse at the end of the 20th century concerning the relationships between information technology, economy, society and culture. He was fascinated by Finland as a case-study, and wrote a few years later in a book called *The Information Society and the Welfare State: The Finnish Model*, co-authored with Finnish philosopher Pekka Himanen:

> Finland shows that a fully fledged welfare state is not incompatible with technological innovation, with the development of the information society, and with a dynamic, competitive new economy.. It provides the human foundation for labour productivity necessary for the informational model of development, and it also brings institutional and social stability, which smoothes the damage to the economy and to people during periods of sharp downturns" [30].

This contemporary context of the last 20 years, has, not surprisingly, raised research questions about social capital. For example, Juha Nurmela, has set up an inquiry entitled "Does the use of communication media add to social capital?" in the book *Social Capital in Finland* [31]. He found that involvement in collective action, one of the main variables describing social capital, "also correlates with active use of information and communications technology" and that the "progress of the information society appears to be strengthening it" [32]. In 2008, as many as 80% of the population of Finland, between the ages 16 and 74, reported they used the Internet daily, or almost daily [33].

Upon reflection, the connections between social capital and institutional, and organizational support for ICT development, are not surprising. National characteristics, such as strong engineering and computer science education, a Protestant work ethic which emphasises self-relience, and State welfare support are credited by Castells and Himanen with the strength of the information society in Finland, in addition to practices such as transborder hackerism [34]. The networks in Finland and its borders were, are still, spreading wide and fast separate from state control. What might be the implications of all this social capital growth? Who is benefiting from it? Is the growth actually cooperative, for mutual benefit and aid, or part of the continued commodification of the networked society?

Collaborative Platforms

To consider these questions, it is necessary to shift attention to a place where social capital is being both stored *and* distributed. Since Castell and Himanen's observation, Internet-centred technological innovation has continued to progress thanks to government promotion and support, as well as large amounts of venture or speculative for-profit capital investment. A key aggregator of both volunteer and corporate energy and investment, was the entrepreneurial honey-pot of Silicon Valley, USA, attracting both open-source and commercially driven software developers.

As part of this process, participatory online interfaces on the World Wide Web were re-branded by Tim O'Reilly as a "platform" and "Web 2.0" [35]. The often-sourced origin this was O'Reilly's news blog entry "What is web 2.0: Design patterns and business models for the next generation of software" in 2005. Media theorist Olga Goryunova, in her thesis *Art Platforms: The Constitution of Cultural and Artistic Currents on the Internet*, has gone on to explain that the term—"Web 2.0"—had been coined, and trade-marked by O'Reilly's partner organisation LiveMedia (now CMP) conference organizers, in late 2003, "to market the phenomena of online collaboration, sharing and communication with the interfaces of wikis, blogs, collaborative mapping or tagging platforms" [36]. A diverse mix of free (but mostly corporate) services were designed "enabling Internet users to participate, exchange, link, map, upload, post, and comment—all in all, to create online within a certain social dimension" [37]. Goryunova recognizes she was not alone in taking a skeptical eye to this supposed "programming upgrade" for the social and participatory aspects of sharing information, text, data and media online, referencing inventor of the http protocol Tim Berners-Lee's own opinion of the hype: What O'Reilly claimed was new in Web 2.0 was for Berner-Lee, "what the Web was meant to be all along" [38].

WikiWiki

It may be argued that the best case of continuity of the old in these so-called "new" Web 2.0 platforms is that of wiki, originally conceived and initiated as *WikiWikiWeb* by Ward Cunningham in 1994. As a summary, *WikiWikiWeb* is still described on the front page of the site as "a composition system; its a discussion medium; it's a repository; it's a mail system; it's a tool for collaboration. Really, we don't know quite what it is, but it's a fun way of communicating asynchronously across the network" [39]. Dramatically opening up the ability to edit content—at first text, and in later versions of such software, multi-media content—and accessible through any Internet browser, *WikiWikiWeb* dispensed with the problem of logging in to servers to put or edit online. Emphasis of ease was reflected in the choice of name: *wiki* is the Polynesian Hawaiian word for "quick", hence translated it meant, "QuickQuickWeb".

WikiWikiWeb was shortened to Wiki in other developments of the software, and has over the years become a popular tool and platform for collaborative and accumulative information sharing. In the long term, one of the main legacies of Cunningham's initiative, was that a clone of his software called *UseModWiki*, that became known to Larry Sanger and Jimmy Wales, who then used this wiki-technology to technically support *Wikipedia* when it initiatlly launched in 2001 [40]. Another offshoot project of *UseModWiki*, called *MeatballWiki*, founded by Sunir Shah, adopted "Barn-raising" as it's key metaphor for making the "impossible possible" and making friends [41]. And arguably, with the focus on information- gathering and building, both these things are exactly what *Wikipedia* went on to do.

The non-profit *Wikimedia Foundation*, based in San Francisco and founded by Jimmy Wales, emerged a few years later, in 2003. Their mission, as stated in their 'Frequently Asked Questions' page online, is "to empower and engage people around the world to collect and develop educational

content under a free license or in the public domain, and to disseminate it effectively and globally" [42]. They rely on public donations and grants, operating essentially as a charity. To achieve their objectives, *Wikimedia Foundation* focuses upon free, open content wiki-based internet projects, the most well-known being *Wikipedia* (encyclopedia), *Wiktionary* (dictionary), *Wikimedia Commons* (media repository), *Wikispecies* (directory of species), *Wikinews* (news) and *Wikiversity* (pedagogical materials), as well as several others.

Furthermore, *Wikimedia Foundation* also provide the same wiki software platform for individuals or organizations, to freely install on their own servers and use for their own purposes. Erik Möller, as Deputy Director of *Wikipedia Foundation*, presented in their *Wikimania 2009* Conference, the following aspirational question: "Can Wikipedia become a 300 million people movement by 2020?" [43]. On this matter of scaling up, Möller referred to the following statistics as an indication of the issues they would face to achieve this goal. Over 300 million people were unique visitors to Wikimedia projects in first half of 2009, however, only about 90,000 of those visitors made 5 or more edit contributions, half that number made 10 or more, whereas only around 11,000 made more than 100 edits [44]. In his presentation, Möller gave an indication of the factors which influence this disparity: complexity of correct syntax (also known as "wiki mark-up"), the increasing scrutinization of contributions by editing committees, and the hardening of contribution rules [45]. A people's movement, according to Möller, would be "to motivate every 10th reader to become an active participant". He proposed steps of improvement towards better interfaces for contribution, new opportunities for collaboration, community governance (via notability and verifiability), and interestingly, dedication of physical spaces [46]. The suggestion I would like to make here is that the *Wikimedia Foundation* are organising an "*maailman tietotalkoot*" (an international info-bee), as might be said in the Finnish language, a vast project of voluntary information sharing and knowledge construction on a global scale.

However, this global ambition, as the imagined dedication in the future to physical spaces suggests, is really happening at a local level. In her article "Forms: On Platforms and Creativity", Goryunova, in reflecting on her collaborative curatorial project www.Runme.org, and the process of designing an online space for software art, defines the term "platform" as following:

> A platform differentiates itself from other websites by the relations of creative, social, instrumental, educational and historical character it establishes and is involved into. A platform is aimed at supporting and stimulating creative initiatives and work, and it provides a possibility for continuous exhibition of the artefacts, often accompanied by reactions to them, various discussions. Sometimes there is also a set of instruments for particular kind of creative work available. A platform often also puts efforts into translating digital creative processes into offline and more official cultural scenes, establishing connections between cultural movements of different times and orders. Most platforms organize (ir)regular 'real-life' gatherings such as festivals, concerts, workshops or those of a less formal nature [47].

When platforms such as *Wikimedia* software are set up on a server it first begins as a localized affair. Another self-constructed phrase in Finnish that attempts to conceptualize this platform situatedness might be: "*Paikalliset tietotalkoot*" (local knowledge-bee). Such a *tietotalkoot* may be installed and "called" for many specialized purposes, including creative processes, as Goryunova's paper's title suggests. Moreover, wiki platforms can, and often are, used to gather, organize, activate, and nourish *offline* activities.

Examples of *Keoste* & *Kasvitietotalkoot*

Keosto is a network/collective of independent cultural workers and activists using *Wikimedia* software which anyone can edit. The project is a closely connected affinity groups of persons, distributed between different towns and cities in Finland. The group's logo is placed on the top-left corner of the site and resembles a stylized wasp motif, or possibly a flying ant. On the bottom right corner is a stamp-style logo, with the slogan "*Mekin rakennamme Turusta alakulttuuripää-kaupunkia 2011*" ("We build a city of sub-culture in Turku 2011") [48]. The reference alludes to an alternative festival of events that could take place in parallel to the official European City of Culture, to be held in Turku, south-west Finland and Tallinn across the Gulf of Finland in Estonia in 2011. This information project is proposed here as an example of *tietotalkoot*.

Keosto group's web-pages specialize as an open information space for alternative culture in Finland (currently most text is in the Finnish language). They are also a place to gather together representative bodies of information and a forum for discussion and debate on plans. In essence, it is a website that enables cooperation and project development between different cultural actors. *Keosto*'s affinity groups adopt an agricultural—or one could argue, rural cooperative—metaphor for bundling together information. Singular subjects on the site are known as "straws" (*korsi*). Those who/which are gathered together are conceived as being in a "haystack" (*kekoja*). On *Keosto*'s front page, under the title "how Keosto works", it is declared that *Keosto*'s content (including the manual) is 99% the responsibility of the users. The final 1%, it is written, is the voluntary efforts of the work of public, scientific, technical moderators' work.

As a further illustration of this way of working, *Pispalan Kulttuuriyhdisty*s (Pispala Cultural Association), based in Pispala neighborhood of Tampere, who are also part of *Keosto* collective, initiated another wiki project, called *Kasvitietotalkoot* (Plant knowledge bee) in 2010. Building upon prior wiki initiatives, they presented the project in public for first time during Pixelache Helsinki Festival in late March 2010 and, at the time of writing, is currently ongoing.

Adopting the phrase *tietotalkoot* to describe the effort to gather information about plants in the local environment, the initiators Mikko Lipiäinen and Markus Petz started the process by hosting a information workshop and discussion [49]. This participatory event, open to anyone interested to attend, informed about the use of different wiki platforms, user-contribution issues on *Wikipedia* (as mentioned above), and *MediaWiki* software installations related to environmental, ecological and sustainability issues, for example, *Appropedia*. Choosing this wiki platform, noted for its open and less strict contribution rules, its content thematic of "appropriate technologies", but also for it's mainly english language content, Lipiäinen and Petz proposed to set up a Suomi (Finnish) language section on Appropedia.

As their project name suggests, *Kasvitietotalkoot* project aims to gather together resources from different open and public information sources, including the various wiki platforms. Participants could choose indigenous plants which are good for foraging—collecting in the wild—and useful for nutritional or medicinal purposes. The initiators and participants in the project would then research and gather information and media materials from the internet. These choices and edited materials (translated if necessary into Finnish) were then collated onto a dedicated wiki page for the plant, for example *Nokkonen* (Nettle, *Urtica dioica*).

However, this initiative is not done to multiply information online. The main purpose and focus of the webpages are to collate materials that can be re-situated *offline*, in situations where the plants are growing. Each wiki page which contains information and an image of the named plant is the

content materials to make a physical representation: A laminated information panel attached to a wooden stake that may be planted in the ground next to a living plant in the city, roadside, suburb, coast, field or countryside. These information panels, which also contain a link to the related wiki page, are similar to those that botanical gardens might use. However, they are multiplied, and during Pixelache Helsinki Festival, were presented in public lobby space of Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art. Given away for free for people to distribute, identify and mark the location of useful plants, their accompanying slogan read, "Please take a sign and place it near the plant which you have recognized" [50].

Projects such as the above examples are using internet platforms, as Goryuanova suggests, to organize "(ir)regular real life gatherings" of people involved in volunteer collaboration. I propose in this article, this is also producing locally-specific knowledge, that is valuable and shared in the process of collaborating. In the contemporary information and networked society, where knowledge connects power and opportunity, the practice of *tietotalkoot* has social, political and economical implications.

Neo-traditional forms of talkoot

The P2P theorist and researcher Michel Bauwens, in his paper "The importance of neotraditional approaches in the reconstructive transmodern era", located on the *Foundation for Peer-to-Peer Alternatives* wiki website (also using *Wikimedia* software installation,), asks "Can the transmodern peer to peer ethos be mixed with neotraditional approaches"? In other-words, can the distributed computer networks, with *living labour* sitting behind them—as exemplified in peer-to-peer media-sharing, open-source software development, and peer-production of value seen in wiki platforms—share similar, if wider reaching potential affect to pre-modern social networks of help and support? [51].

In Finland, where rural-based cooperative support is, for the majority of the population, only one or two generations seperated, the connection between contemporary ICT-based and traditional forms of cooperation perhaps comes to mind easier than in some other places. Certainly *talkoot* is a word which cuts across generations, managerial and political classes, and technological spheres.

To back up this statement, it is appropriate to return to reference of the *Alternative Economy Cultures* seminar. As a chair of the afternoon session, Roppe Mokka of *Demos Helsinki* (an independent think-tank on progressive democracy), shared the following anecdote when introducing Tapani Köppä's presentation:

> This morning we [Demos Helsinki] were presenting to the parliament futures committee, what is the next phase of the information society.Yes, it is going to be based on sharing.. Alot of these things that are peer-to-peer, are very difficult to understand, but as soon as we showed a picture of *talkoot,* Juha Mieto and other Finnish parliamentarians suddenly captured what this is about, and you could see smiles coming to their faces, and they started explaining how fantastic it is to take part in these activities [52]

It was not the first time the connection had been made by members of Demos Helsinki: For example, in conversation with Bristol-based National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts (NESTA), who have a remit to explore and foster all aspects of innovation in United Kingdom [53]. Further, in late October 2008, one of Finland's well-known technology bloggers, Tuija Aalto, researcher and journalist for YLE national broadcast corporation, wrote an entry titled "Crowdsourcing = Talkoot?" on her *Tuija TV* blog (now called *Tuhat Sanaa*). She qualified this by commenting that "Finns always knew how to get a big project done. Be it building a new sauna or

an operating system: invite the whole community to do the job" [54]. Aalto was particularly making the connection with a new business and organizational model called *Crowdsourcing*, described by Jeff Howe, culture and technology journalist based in Brooklyn, as "the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call" [55].

To support her inquiry, Aalto further included a short interview with Finnish film entrepreneur Peter Vesterbacka, who was inspired by one of the first large online crowdsourcing projects in his sci-fi parody feature film series *Star Wreck* (1992-). Vesterbacka is now marketing and PR person for such a *talkoot* model to others, via the *Wreck-a-movie* project, which facilitates collaborative feature film-making. In this case, open-source thinking and online networks are used to distribute, and divvy up labour among many persons in different locations for the production of animation and feature-films. For Vesterbacka, the Finnish word *talkoot* is just waiting to expand beyond Finland, entering into the world's crowdsourcing vocabulary.

In principle, I agree with Vesterbacka's claim. I have been suggesting several examples and associations of neo-traditional forms of talkoot throughout this article, such as its relation to wiki collaboration and the BitTorrent protocol. It is clear, however, that the word *talkoot* is already being used in contemporary Finland in a wider context than its usual rural and urban/domestic uses, and that new associations with online networks are already being made. *Talkoot* has in the last year or so, in Helsinki at least, entered other entrepreneurial and agenda-based contexts, such as mobilising people and businesses.

Three major universities of Helsinki—the University of Technology, University of Art and Design and Helsinki School of Economics, merged at the end of 2009, and the combination is now called Aalto University. Earlier in the year, a group of associated students decided to create an Aalto Entrepreneur Society. One of their first gatherings was called a *Start Up Talkoot*, held on 24th April 2009, in one of the new research lab/office spaces for Aalto University, called the "Design Factory" in Otaniemi district of Espoo, the neighbouring city of Helsinki. On their webpages (all in English), they wrote the following for the event:

> As you might know, talkoot is the Finnish word for a group of people gathering to work together, for instance, to build or repair something. AES is gathering students, entrepreneurs, investors and other experts together to work on Aalto startups [56].

The Aalto Entrepreneurship Society "strives to create an entrepreneurial eco-system in Aalto University. Our goal is to catalyze 50 ambitious startups per year". One of their goals is to adopt a positivist and accumulative philosophy where "success breeds success and activity".

While the new adaptations of the *talkoot* concept are indeed full of collaborative promise for a new form of online and offline cooperativism for our times, these "new-talkoots" do raise for me a critical question. When *talkoot* is referred to as a positive force today, who is benefiting? Private organizations or public bodies? If these are not open, and co-operative or voluntary forms of labour ventures, is it an appropriate use of the word?

Reflections and responsibilities

In advance of the seminar, Roope Mokka, my collaborator sharing responsibility for promoting the *Alternative Economy Cultures* events to the local press, used the term "Talkoot 2.0" in the Finnish-language press release [57]. This term expressing my wish to bring traditions from outside Internet culture—in this case rural cooperation—to bear in a seminar within a festival of electronic/

participatory arts and network culture. There was little, if any, press response. No newspapers or magazine journals picked up the lead, and beyond a few online syndications, the phrase did not spread. I think, in reflection, that it was a good thing it slipped quietly away.

Following the *Alternative Economy Cultures* programme of *Pixelache 2009*, with its long processes of production, promotion, and post-production, I reflected upon how we introduced the connection between older cooperative traditions and newer trends in cooperation in digital culture. I now believe, after the 2009 programme, that we do not need an "upgrade" or a "2.0" of something which has a long and living history such as *talkoot*. We do need, however, to reflect more upon what we are doing in these new digital and networked terrains, and whom is benefitting from them—individually and, especially, collectively.

I am thankful, as an immigrant to Finnish society, that their language has a specific word for "community effort" which is still in everyday use. In this process of research, I have also learned of other words in regional languages already mentioned. In some places and cultures, such as in Finland, older words are being resurrected when thinking about newer cooperative practices in newer networked spaces. Elsewhere, older forms of cooperation and mutual aid—and the words that name—seem to have already been forgotten or at least not on the "tip of one's own tongue". In the land where modern (urban) cooperativism was founded, Scotland, and part of my own cultural heritage, what might be the Scots' word for *talkoot* be? I don't know. Was it not promoted while growing up in the 1980s onwards, during the so-called "Thatcher years", or in UK's economic boom-time during the 1990s? I am surprised at my loss, given that I grew up in the central Scottish countryside, next to small-holdings and farms, and even helped in harvest activities as a boy. Moreover, much of my creative and cultural production activity as an adult has been based on voluntary collaborations with others. And still, I do not use a native Scots (or English) word for *talkoot* in my own vocabulary. Now, resident of Helsinki, Finland, the Baltic Sea region, in North-Eastern Europe, I am borrowing and asking help from others in order to know more about a concept for what I have been practicing for a long time.

The highly networked society in the contemporary global North, dominated by information technology and communications, has been closely positioned in this text with older, traditional ones. There is an explicit ambition for viewing such patterns; to learn more, and set up research and action-based platforms for making trans/inter -disciplinary, -local, and -generational weaves. We have to engage substantially, some say immediately and unconditionally, with our material, natural and social environment... Our habitat. We have to take individual and collective responsibility for these environments, and encourage others to engage also. We should kindly remind ourselves and others to avoid spending imbalanced and excessive time in virtual environments and information sites. As I hope is tangible in the textual gatherings above, there are many good examples from historical and online contexts to ways in which we can come to rebalance our collective lives. *Paikalliset tietotalkoot* (local knowledge-bee): Keep looking for connections.

Endnotes

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