

Expanded abstract

Platform cooperativism: Analysis of the democratic qualities of cooperativism as an economic alternative in digital environments

The platform economy phenomenon consists of models with different perspectives that can include extractivist companies to the evolution of new collaboration models through a digital platform. Despite the relevance of the categorisation and differentiation of organisational models, in the platform economy, there is a lack of empirical studies that describe what differentiates them and that show whether the so-called “alternatives to platform capitalism” are built through more participatory and democratic organisations.

In this context, this article aims to contribute to the lack of empirical research of alternatives to platform capitalism from a critical perspective. Specifically, this study aims to empirically study how alternatives to platform capitalism are configured in practice and which are their main challenges.

To do this, an empirical analysis was conducted on twenty-two platforms that operate in four key sectors in the emergence of the platform economy: taxi services, short-stay accommodation, food distribution, and domestic and home care services.

The analysis will determine to what extent platform cooperatives comply with the cooperative and pro-democratic principles that are defended in the theoretical literature on platform cooperativism. It will also reveal to what extent platform economy organisations, which are postulated as an alternative to platform capitalism, represent an effective alternative to it.

The analysis is based on the analytical framework for the study of the democratic qualities of digital platforms previously developed by Fuster Morell and Espelt (2019) in which the platforms are interdisciplinarily evaluated in terms of their pro-democratic characteristics through 147 indicators, which are collected in four different subsections: (i) governance, (ii) economic model, (iii) technology and data policies, and (iv) social responsibility and impact.

The data collection has been carried out through virtual ethnography of the web content of the selected platforms and a set of structured interviews. The codebook collects data of both an objective and a more subjective nature. For example, in the economic dimension, questions are asked about the economic sustainability of the project, the use of ethical banking services or whether it is considered that the workers are developing hard skills. The collection of subjective and objective data allows us to understand what the strengths and weaknesses of the alternatives to platform capitalism are. In other words, thanks to their combination, we can differentiate the current and measurable results of their activity, from the views that the interviewees themselves have regarding the organisations to which they belong, and from their short, medium, and long-term objectives. For example, it allows us to differentiate whether

or not a platform succeeded in creating the type of organisation defined in the mission, the number of jobs projected, the affinity with the principles of cooperativism and respect for labour rights.

The results of the research indicate that platform cooperativism is characterised by favouring horizontal relationships, by developing a community infrastructure that respects privacy and facilitates the participation of users in data governance and, finally, by addressing some of the negative externalities caused by the platform. At the same time, several challenges are shown, such as the opening of data, the scale of impact, the replicability of the project, economic sustainability, inclusion and gender equality, and cooperation between agents.

Despite the limitation of the number of cases, it is noteworthy that this research contributes to the limited existence of empirical studies, mostly focused on case studies such as Fairbnb or SMart. In this sense, the article outlines possible lines of work that could be tested in future studies. For example, the results of the analysis reveal a tension between the democratic configuration (especially around governance and the economic model) and the sustainability of platform cooperatives. The results also point out the main deficiencies of the alternatives to platform capitalism, revealing both possible future research topics and areas of action by public policies.

The article concludes that there are alternatives to platform capitalism, although they face considerable challenges. For example, in terms of scale, most projects are at an early stage in their evolution. It is relevant to mention that many of the platforms that achieve greater geographic expansion are part of federations of entities. Furthermore, from an environmental perspective, the biggest challenge for platform cooperativism is being able to carry out the holistic vision that the impact of digital technology entails. Even though a good number of projects promote products and services to improve energy efficiency and responsible consumption, only a small portion of platforms are hosted on servers powered by green energy.

Finally, platform cooperatives promote a democratic governance and economic model, based on technology policies around FLOSS. However, platform cooperative projects have two main challenges. On the one hand, promoting an open use of data that enriches public knowledge in the field of platform cooperativism. On the other, the scale of impact, the project's capacity for replication, economic sustainability, gender inclusion and equality, and cooperation between agents.

Keywords: Platform economy, platform cooperatives, democratic qualities, organisational models.