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Cows Grazing on Ever Green Knowledge Meadows?

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In the realm of the knowledge commons, one sees cows grazing on ever green knowledge meadows. Upon close inspection, one discovers that the more they are grazing, the faster the wealth of knowledge is growing. For the unacquainted visitor this seems to be the commons paradise! However, tragedy is looming also. The tragedy of these ever green meadows is not that the cows graze too much, but that they do not graze enough.

Why would the cows invest time in grazing “the deep knowledge web” lying under the surface of the grass? What to do with the digital fence that encloses some of the more productive parts? Interlinking the patchwork of knowledge meadows would open an even brighter future for them, but how to decide upon the best way forward?

As this popular story now goes, since Michael Heller and Rebecca Eisenberg’s seminal article, in the case of knowledge, the tragedy of the commons has been turned upside down into a so-called anti-commons. By enclosing bits of knowledge and information through excessive use of intellectual property rights and technological fences, a wealth of knowledge is out there but underused. Of course, this statement needs some more flesh to be made hard and probably the anti-commons is only a part of the story. However, it raises some important problems that ring a bell in the IASCP community and build ground for fruitful exchange: how to build institutions for open access in cases where neither enclosure, nor pure public domain seems to be the way forward? How to organize rapid diffusion of new research results? And how to deal with problems of congestion and limited resources in the organization of the flow of ideas in the knowledge communities?

In the Brescia meeting, we dug deeper into these questions of institutional design for knowledge sharing. In particular, we explored some specific fields at the forefront of the development of the knowledge commons such as the scholarly information commons, the microbiological commons and the open software commons.

What characterizes these initiatives is that knowledge providers commit themselves to building interoperable global digital libraries – with the goal to obtain higher joint benefits and to reduce their joint harm from the enclosure process. For instance, within the field of scholarly information there is an exponential growth of so-called institutional repositories, which are institutional databases of E-prints, with giants such as BioMedCentral with more than 494162 entries or the University of Amsterdam with over 138455 entries. At the workshop, Charlotte Hess illustrated aptly this growth by showing how a simple count of the institutional repositories on the Registry of Open Access Repositories showed that their number had doubled between the

1st of March 2006 and the 20th of March 2006: from 145 in Europe and 98 in the USA to 282 in Europe and 178 in the USA in 20 days. At this rate of change, it will become difficult for commons scholars to follow and to get a grip on what's happening!

To conclude, I would like to raise a note of concern. Sometimes, one has the impression that creating a technical means or a legal license format furthering open access is sufficient to qualify and to become a member of the knowledge commons galaxy. However, the organization of the knowledge commons is not just a technical or a legal issue. It depends on the way that the communities take advantage of the legal and technical rules to design their own governance arrangements. Hence for evaluating these different cases, we will have to specify the particular context, the institutional frameworks and the type of collective action that is required to solve provision and use dilemmas. To deal with these different questions, the IASCP legacy of studying governance as a way through which communities organize and govern themselves through the design of operational and collective choice rule will surely be an important source of inspiration.

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