# Civic Spaces and Collaborative Commons:
## Report on Workshops and Engagement

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## Rationale And Method

As part of my contribution to Journal of Peer Production, I am including this report on a series of workshops addressing final draft of the paper in Fall 2021. I sought out community responses as a way to share the research with the community in an accessible way, as well as to provide indications to readers about how the work was received. My goal for the supplement was to try and engage members of CTTO with the concepts discussed in the paper, to get a sense of how the argument resonated, and perhaps even if they might find the perspectives of commons and CBPP in some way useful.

I was eager to see if my ideas would resonate with my peers. To allow participants to engage with the text in a more accessible way I prepared a summary deck (linked here), which is more digestible than an 8000 word paper. In September, I ran four workshops at hacknights where I explained the rationale of the exercise and was available to discuss the content of the paper. I also spent two sessions in advance of these workshops talking with my peers about how to best structure the exercise and to get a sense about what points might be the most salient. In these workshops, I employed a set of prompts that could be used to guide responses. These prompts were open ended, and thematically connected to the content of the paper but able to be answered without any reference to it. I also sought out contributions from my peers by inviting those I had seen at the workshops to submit responses (in whatever format they wished) asynchronously, in case the workshops did not provide enough time for contributions to be made. My hope was that leaving the nature of contributions open ended would allow participants to engage with aspects of the work that they found interesting. In part because the work of reading and commenting on papers is time consuming and difficult, I attempted to provide prompts for reflection that intersected with important thematic from the paper, but drew primarily on experiences rather than specific concepts.

## Results

Attendance at the workshops was generally low (2-3 attendees), and much of the working time ($\tilde{5}0$ minutes per week) was devoted to on-boarding new attendees to the purpose and rationale. These workshops were largely conversational, and since they were not recorded as formal data collection processes, resulted in only a small amount of documented outcome.

Participants were curious about aspects of CBPP, and the contents of the paper were received with interest. While participants generally agreed with my framing of CTTO, they pointed out several points where my application of CBPP was strained. For example, they noted that CTTO's focus on a specific geographic
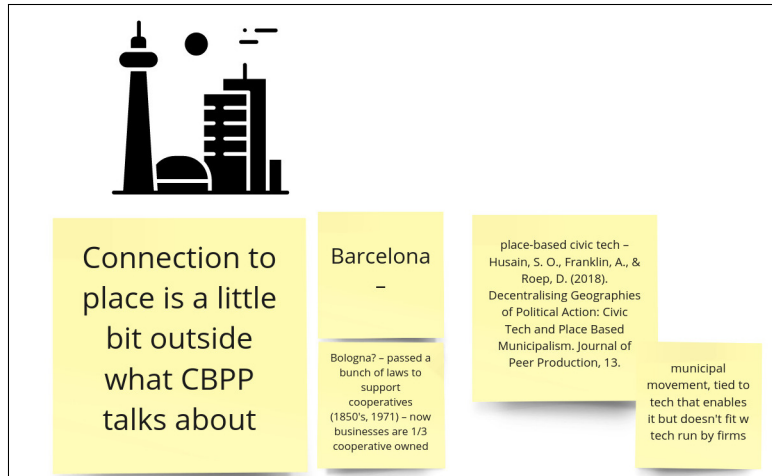
Figure 1: Participants were interested in examples of how commons based production was supported in other locales, especially give CTTO's connection to place.
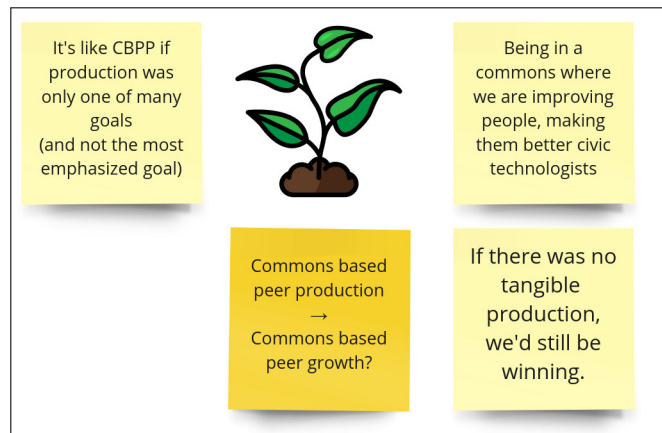


Figure 2: Participants agreed that producing technologies was somewhat secondary to CTTO's main activities of building an engaged community.

locale was at odds with CBPP's focus on distributed and geographically abstract software development, and noted (as I had in an earlier draft of the paper) that CTTO was not very well integrated with other FOSS projects or with knowledge commons more generally.

They noted that while the production of software products seemed central to CBPP, this was not the main goal of CTTO. Rather, they pointed out CTTO's enduring focus on peer support and growth, on their commitments to each other, was central to the work of producing community. Creating this time and place for people to experiment and to help each other fit within a larger goal of collapsing boundaries between 'the civic' and 'tech'.
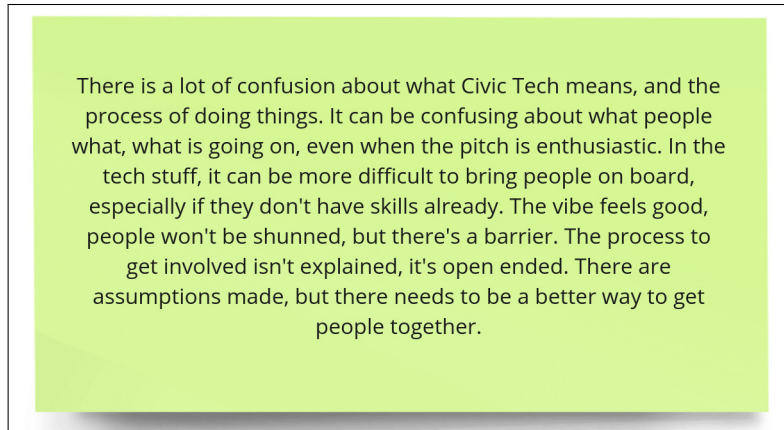
Some participants offered stories of how they had found new opportunities through the community, or about how they could be uncomfortable just jumping into projects that they didn't understand, especially since participation in virtual meetings can be more awkward, lacking important social queues that can make people feel at ease.

Figure 3: Several examples of community building activities were brought up, in terms of what is produced.



Figure 4: Participants also responded to a broader prompt about their motivations for attendance.

Figure 5: One participant (who started attending regularly on ZOOM) spoke about how it could be hard to get started in such an informal environment.

Another participant, Adam, sent a story about how he had become involved at CTTO through his other volunteer work.

> "So, I found out about Civic Tech from a link to a deck in a disability group that I below to, run by OCAD Inclusive Design Research Institute. A friend was still working on the Code Across project more, ... but she asked us to get involved more in CT and she was also interested in maybe seeing if there were people with disabilities that might be willing to take on organizer roles... I got involved, liked what I heard... So that's basically what brought my to CT... I did have two points I wanted to make. What keeps me coming back is A, there's the regular Tuesday events, and B, I always find a few people to bounce ideas off of. It's easy to give back. I can use some of my Zoom skills to help the greater community, and at a time when the governments at all levels are looking and technology because they've had to during the pandemic, I really like being able to discuss and bounce off ideas when it comes to technology. My background is in looking at civic issues and open public spaces. But during the pandemic, I found that the technology public space has actually been a platform that I have been using way more than even I would use normally."

Participants were also interested in the ecosystem of productive community, entrepreneurial coalition and for-benefit association was of interest to some. They noted that while this kind of ecosystem seemed like a good way to support the kind of work we do at CTTO, that such structural supports don't really exist in our case. They noted that the civic tech community in Canada lacked a sort of unifying principle at a national level, even though there are now several such communities across the country. In this vein, another participant sent a short response that remarked upon the difficulties in doing outreach and involving user communities in projects.

## Takeaways and Reflection

Condensing the findings of a long and dense academic paper into something that can be apprehended in a short amount of time was difficult, as was finding adequate time to present these findings, answer questions, and engage with participants to create a shared document. I struggled to refine the main points and present
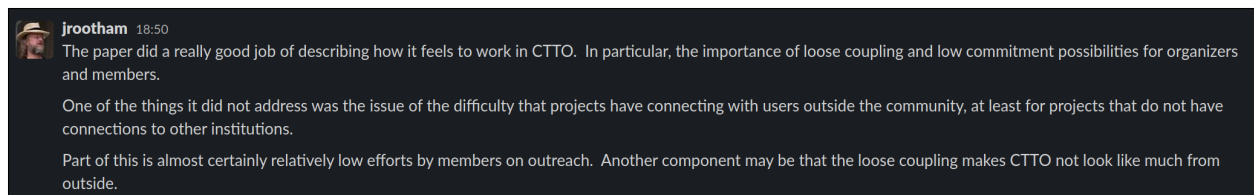
Figure 6: Jim drew attention to the longstanding difficulty that CTTO has with creating lasting partnerships with external communities, and maintaining the capacities to involve a wider based of users in projects.

them in ways that were attainable. This kind of loose interaction, while characteristic of CTTO, was not so conducive to creating deliverables for this supplement.

This hints at a tension felt between the work of doing public engagement (i.e. presenting findings and discussing them) and the creation of presentable documentation. As is always the case in public engagement, being clear about the purpose and goals of the activity is essential. It was difficult to be responsive to participants and encourage them to contribute in whatever way they saw fit while being preoccupied with trying to ensure that what was produced would also be legible to an audience outside of that community. My apprehension was likely apparent to my peers, whose desire to contribute was offset by questions of what sorts of contributions were on-topic or desired.

Some of these problems were exacerbated by the virtual environment. In other circumstances (e.g. in person and longer than 50 minutes), a group activity using a technique like rich picturing would have been a good way of presenting my research in a way that was engaging, interesting and fun. While this sort of technique is still possible using applications like MIRO, it takes time and patience, and is certainly helped when there are enough participants to sustain a conversation without continual facilitation. These workshops cannot make any reliable claims about the group as a hole, as the outreach and recruitment were not conducting in a way that was systematic or representative.

It isn't surprising that some of this feedback from my peers at CTTO don't agree perfectly with my arguments in the paper, where in other cases there is a lot of agreement. Writing this article, revising it, and engaging with my peers continually throughout this process and at hacknight generally has been an incredible learning experience that has given me a lot of perspective on theories of the commons, on CTTO, and on my own research. Thank you!