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Beyond platform capitalism: Digital solidarity economy and free culture networks in Argentina and Brazil

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Abstract: This article examines the relationship between the digital solidarity economy and free culture in Latin America, based on case studies using semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. The cases are three emblematic initiatives: Código Libre and Alternativa Laboral Trans (Argentina) and EITA (Brazil). Results highlight contemporary advances and challenges, systematising principles and indicators that demonstrate how free culture not only enhances the digital solidarity economy but is essential to genuinely collaborative digital economic initiatives. The study concludes that adopting free culture principles transcends technical improvement, serving as an ethical and practical foundation for alternative economic models capable of integrating social transformation, equity, and sustainability in the region.

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1. Introduction

“Once we defend an economy that is more supportive, we have to defend knowledge sharing and everything with free software, right?", asks Pedro Jatobá, one of the founders of *EITA*, a Brazilian technology development cooperative that works "in dialogue with popular organizations and social movements", as stated on the organisation's own website (EITA, 2025).

The statement, documented during the fieldwork of this study, epitomises the relationship of mutual exchange between free culture and the emerging paradigm of a digital solidarity economy (Rubim & Milanez, 2024; Alvear, Neder & Santini, 2023; Grohmann, 2023). Free culture principles extend the foundational tenets of free software – the freedom to use, study, modify, and distribute – beyond code to encompass all forms of knowledge, cultural production, and technological development, creating a broader framework for commons-based peer production (Benkler, 2006). At a time when digital infrastructures increasingly dictate economic and social dynamics, the fusion of free culture principles with solidarity-based modes of production offers a counterproposal to the extractivist logic of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017).

This paper argues that the convergence between free culture – rooted in the communal production of knowledge (Lessig, 2004; Benkler, 2006; Foletto, 2021) – and the solidarity economy – grounded in democratic ownership and the equitable distribution of resources (Miller, 2010; Coraggio, 2021; Singer, 2022) – holds transformative potential for rethinking work, technology, and value creation in the Global South and beyond. The transformative potential lies in the convergence of free culture and the solidarity economy, as developed throughout the text. This convergence creates synergistic effects that transcend the limitations of each paradigm when applied in isolation: while free culture principles enable the collaborative construction of knowledge and foster innovation through shared learning processes, solidarity economy practices provide the organisational structures and democratic governance mechanisms necessary to sustain commons-based production, thereby materialising an alternative model where technological development serves collective emancipation rather than capital accumulation.

The Latin American experience proves particularly significant for understanding

this convergence, as regional movements have played a decisive role in shaping the very definition of digital solidarity economy (Alvear, Neder & Santini, 2023; Grohmann, 2025; Rubim & Milanez, 2024) – a concept still under construction and contestation – with free culture serving as an important element in Argentina and Brazil's digital solidarity economy initiatives.Through case studies of *Cooperativa Código Libre* and *Alternativa Laboral Trans* (*ALT*) in Argentina, and *EITA* (*Cooperativa de Trabalho em Educação, Informação e Tecnologia para Autogestão*) in Brazil, this article examines how these organisations operationalise free software, open licenses, and peer-to-peer collaboration to construct viable alternatives to the platform capitalism model popularised by big tech corporations (Srnicek, 2017; Morozov, 2018; Zuboff, 2019; Antunes, 2020; Grohmann, 2023; Grohmann & Barbosa, 2025).

The methodological choice to conduct case studies with these three specific organisations is grounded in Yin's (2018) multiple-case study design, which prioritises analytical robustness by examining similar cases rather than disparate ones, thereby overcoming specific peculiarities and singularities to identify intersections of common concerns, problems, and challenges. This approach enables comparative analysis while demonstrating a plurality of possible interpretations, highlighting questions that remain open and new issues to be considered – such as the appropriation of digital commons by big tech companies or the very conceptualisation of digital sovereignty, topics also discussed throughout the article. The selection of *Código Libre* and *EITA* reflects their shared historical emergence during the peak of the free software movement and social and solidarity economy policies in Argentina and Brazil, respectively, when both countries experienced increasing prominence of debates on these topics and the ascent of center-left progressive governments that expanded public university education and developed public policies with principles aligned with those of solidarity economy (Miller, 2010; Coraggio, 2021; Singer, 2022), free culture and digital economy (Busaniche, 2010; Costa, 2011; Zanotti, 2015; Savazoni, 2018; Foletto, 2021).

ALT, whilst newer (founded in 2020), followed the path of both organisations, working with similar principles of solidarity and cooperation. This specific case offers insights about challenges and opportunities of working with the same logic of that period nowadays, in a different and less favorable scenery. It also permits expanding the comparison with another organisation grounded in a similar regional perspective, which allows to compare and amplify the debate about similarities and differences, permitting a deeper analysis. Another factor is that *ALT* functions in a slightly different way than *EITA* and *Código Libre*, with a different approach towards the use of free software, for instance. Although politically the organisation

defends it, there are more junior profiles at the team and, therefore, sometimes they feel compelled to use proprietary solutions instead of developing codes, as pointed out in the interview conducted.

Prior to presenting the empirical findings, the article establishes a conceptual framework for the concepts addressed herein, drawing upon references from the international debate on free culture. Section 2 traces a critical historical trajectory, from the restrictive licences of the twentieth century to contemporary movements challenging the private appropriation of knowledge, whilst also examining the current tension between platformisation and digital commons amid the proliferation of generative Artificial Intelligence systems (Foletto, 2023; IBDA, 2024). The methodological approach, grounded in a multi-case study design, is subsequently detailed in Section 3, alongside comprehensive information regarding the selected cases, their operational contexts, and the specific procedures employed for the case study analysis.

The key findings are presented in Section 4, organised into thematic subdivisions that include a comparative table of the trajectories of the three organisations (*Código Libre*, *ALT*, and *EITA*) and a qualitative analysis of the challenges and potentialities reported by participants. The article concludes in Section 5 by proposing guidelines for digital solidarity economy initiatives, thereby contributing to both theoretical understanding and practical implementation of these emerging organisational forms.

2. Literature review: Digital commons, copyleft, and technological sovereignty

2.1. From intellectual property resistance to digital commons

Rooted in a series of laws, particularly those emerging from liberalism in 17th-century England and the Enlightenment in 18th-century France (Lessig, 2004; Foletto, 2021), modern intellectual property consolidated itself in the Western world by the late 19th century through international treaties such as the Berne Convention (1886) and the expansion of national legislations reinforcing private control over intellectual works. Resistance to these laws paralleled the ways in which new technological apparatuses – such as photography, radio, phonographs, and television – evolved, interacted, and generated new cultural practices in society. At the turn of the 20th century and throughout subsequent decades, anti-proprietary resistance movements[1]proliferated in art and culture, primarily "questioning the notion that ideas, sounds, words, images, and films could be owned by anyone and

used only with the authorisation of so-called proprietors in exchange for financial payment" (Foletto, 2021, p. 99).

Despite these conflicts, it was only with the advent of the internet and digital technologies that the intellectual property framework consolidated in the late 19th century began to face significant structural challenges. The democratisation of access to information and the ease of digital reproduction exposed contradictions between the rigidity of intellectual property laws and the collaborative dynamics inherent to the emerging digital culture (Lessig, 2004), rooted in peer-to-peer (P2P) sharing. The open architecture of the internet itself catalysed alternative responses, such as copyleft – a "legal hack" that subverted the logic of copyright by using flexible licenses to guarantee freedoms of use, adaptation, and redistribution. Originating from free software, particularly through Richard Stallman's GNU operating system General Public License[2](GPL) in 1989, copyleft became "the concept of leveraging legal ownership to, in practice, renounce it by authorising everyone to use the work as they wish, provided they pass on the same freedoms to others" (Foletto, 2021, p. 149).

By prohibiting others from appropriating a given resource, the GPL license – and later other free software-related licenses – transforms the licensed resource into a shared knowledge for common use, production, and governance. This aligns with what Benkler (2006), Bollier (2014), Bauwens and Kostakis (2014), Torres (2019), and Savazoni (2018) term digital (or intellectual) commons. These are defined as "non-rivalrous goods that, when consumed or used by one person, do not become unavailable for others to consume or use" (Torres, 2019). They constitute a modality of collaborative knowledge production rooted in commons, which Benkler (2006) calls *commons-based peer production* (CBPP). This framework underpins projects like Creative Commons licenses and Wikipedia, which reimagine culture as a

1. Some of the movements, groups, and individuals cited in Foletto (2021) include Marcel Duchamp and Tristan Tzara, associated with early 20th-century Dadaism through their ready-mades and Dadaist poems (respectively); Guy Debord and Gil Wolman's Situationist practice of détournement in the late 1950s and early 1960s; and the pop art of Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. In Brazil, the tradition of anthropophagic bricolage from the Brazilian Modernism influenced the cultural sampling of Tropicalismo by Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, Hélio Oiticica, and others in the 1960s and 1970s (Foletto, 2021, pp. 160–161).
2. Published in 1989, the GNU General Public License (GPL) is the primary license for free software and has served as the foundation for many others. It is a generic license covering all GNU project code, designed to establish usage freedoms not permitted by U.S. copyright law. Its creator, Richard Stallman, founded the free software movement in the early 1980s, advocating that all software should guarantee four fundamental freedoms: 0: The freedom to run the programme for any purpose. 1: The freedom to study and adapt the programme to one's needs. 2: The freedom to redistribute copies. 3: The freedom to modify and distribute improved versions. For further details, see Stallman (2002).

space of collaboration rather than artificial scarcity (Lessig, 2004; Benkler, 2006; Bauwens & Kostakis, 2014; Savazoni, 2018; Foletto, 2021).

Despite its innovation, copyleft has not been immune to criticism. While the model works well for software – where source code is modifiable and collaboration revolves around lines of instructions executed by machines – its application to cultural goods poses distinct challenges. Artistic and literary works carry subjectivities and contexts that transcend the binary logic of software code lines, raising questions about authorship, identity, symbolic value, and labour types (Kleiner, 2010; Rendueles, 2016).

The rise of platforms like Spotify and Netflix in the 2010s legalised on-demand access while paradoxically diminishing the urgency of debates about the commons. Downloads, once symbols of resistance, were replaced by subscriptions that normalised algorithmic surveillance and income concentration (Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019), alongside the broader phenomenon of platformisation (Poell, Nieborg, & Van Dijck, 2019). After 2023, a new front emerged: the proliferation of generative AI systems such as ChatGPT, LLaMA, Claude, and Midjourney, trained on vast datasets extracted without consent from authors, artists, and communities[3] – including the "vast treasure of free information" (Wark, 2022) exemplified by Wikipedia, licensed under copyleft. Opening the commodity-form of information toward an abstract gift economy, as McKenzie Wark (2022) argues, has also enabled big tech corporations to appropriate this informational surplus to further exploit social and economic inequalities globally.

The fueling of these generative AI systems, often justified under the myth of "technological neutrality" (Winner, 1986; Morozov, 2018), has reignited debates over who controls the "source code of culture" – no longer just texts or music, but the very raw material of human creativity. If piracy once challenged property, today it is machines that hijack it, diluting authorship into statistical models and provoking renewed discussions about transforming copyright systems (Quintais, 2023; Schirru, 2023; Pasquale & Son, 2024). These debates range from proposing alternatives to advocating for abolition, as previously argued by Smiers and Van Schijndel (2009) in the context of free knowledge dissemination – a stance recently revived by big tech CEOs amid the proliferation of generative AI systems[4].

3. One of the main lawsuits involving this situation is the case GETTY IMAGES v. STABILITY AI (2023). Holder of a vast collection of protected images, Getty Images accused Stability AI (creator of the AI model Stable Diffusion) of illegally using millions of its photographs to train image generation algorithms without a license or compensation. See details at: https://www.courtlistener.com/docket/66788385/getty-images-us-inc-v-stability-ai-inc/

Nevertheless, digital commons persist – not as utopia, but as practice. Wikipedia, for instance, remains in 2025 the largest repository of collective knowledge, moderated by ethical principles of collaboration rather than market incentives or hierarchical control (Benkler, 2011). The tension between the platformisation of culture and the endurance of digital commons, as discussed, does not conclude with theoretical critique but demands engagement with concrete practices that reinvent the collective stewardship of knowledge. It is precisely within this context of contested digital spaces that questions of control, governance, and autonomy assume particular salience, leading us to examine how digital sovereignty emerges as both a response to and a framework for understanding these challenges.

2.2. Digital Sovereignty: contested terrains of technological autonomy

This friction also reignites debates concerning digital sovereignty – a theme that emerged prominently during the interviews for this article and is intrinsically linked to the principles of free culture and the establishment of digital solidarity economy networks. It must first be stated that the very concept of digital sovereignty remains contested; it is currently "understood more as a discursive practice in politics and policy than as a legal or organisational concept" (Pohle & Thiel, 2020). Within the context of these cooperatives, it can be defined as a capacity "to control and govern technologies essential for self-determination, protection of rights, inventiveness, and development, emerging as a counterposition to technological dependency that can reduce countries and communities to the condition of 'digital colonies'" (Silveira & Xiong, 2025). We emphasise that the question of *who* should exercise this control and governance – state, society or organisations, for example – is itself a subject of dispute, including among the cooperatives studied here, which hold divergent understandings of the issue, as detailed in section 4.4.

This expanded and in dispute understanding reveals, first, convergences between digital sovereignty and free culture principles. Firstly, both seek greater control and self-determination: digital sovereignty aims for state, society, or collective control over technologies essential for a country's (or society, or collective) development, whilst free culture seeks to enable artists, citizens, and communities to create, use, modify, and share knowledge (including software) and cultural productions without being "crushed by the cultural giants" or restricted by proprietary

4. The abolition of intellectual property laws was advocated in 2025 at a seminar by Jack Dorsey, former CEO of Twitter and one of the creators of BlueSky, and endorsed by Elon Musk. Source: https://techcrunch.com/2025/04/13/jack-dorsey-and-elon-musk-would-like-to-delete-all-ip-law/ Accessed on: April 14 2025.

limitations that concentrate power in the hands of few gatekeepers (Foletto, 2021).

Secondly, both advocate for broad and free access to knowledge and information, with digital sovereignty aiming to prevent knowledge and data from becoming inaccessible commodities, particularly for developing countries, whilst free culture defends the idea of a "universal, abundant, and shared library" where culture and knowledge remain available as commons (Bauwens & Kostakis, 2014; Bollier, 2014; Savazoni, 2018; Foletto, 2021), cared for by a community. Thirdly, both critique monopolisation and dependency, with digital sovereignty warning against data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019) and the fragility of countries facing foreign technological giants, whilst free culture confronts the dominance of gigantic technological, knowledge, and cultural corporations (Smiers & Van Schijndel, 2009; Busaniche, 2010; Silveira & Xiong, 2025).

In a context in which datafication reinforces systems of oppression and exploitation (Valente & Grohmann, 2025), it is worth highlighting the international networks of “precarious and low-paid ‘data workers’ who prepare data to train, test, check, and otherwise support models in the shadow of globalised AI production” (Tubaro et al., 2025). Looking at those international exploitation circuits (Poulain, 2024) enables a deeper analysis in which sovereignty is related not only to borders, but also to the modes of production, and social and economic dynamics involved. In other words, this analysis directly intersects with the conceptualisation of digital solidarity economy, which emerges not merely as an alternative organisational form, but as an useful framework for creating autonomous technological infrastructures that can resist the extractive logic of platform capitalism whilst maintaining democratic governance and worker control (Gasper, 2014).

Accepting that all those are plain and solved concepts is to ignore the disputes about what digital sovereignty is and how the AI economy is being structured. Here it is necessary to look and listen to those that, embedded at those circuits, are trying to build alternatives, provincialising the approach to renew it (Chakrabarty, 2000), instead of repeating empty slogans. It is worth remembering that big techs have tried and continue to try to appropriate the concept of digital sovereignty, distorting and shaping it according to their interests, as pointed out by Grohmann (2025, p.15). Based on another study (Grohmann & Barbosa, 2025), he points that "Microsoft, Alphabet, and Amazon are selling 'sovereignty as a service' whilst maintaining ownership of and control over these infrastructures" (Grohmann, 2025, p.15) and stresses that "what a country like the United States claims as sovereign does not align with what Brazil claims as/experiences as sov-

ereign" (Grohmann, 2025, p.15). This discrepancy underscores the need for anti-imperialist and anti-colonial perspectives on sovereignty that recognise the differential impacts of technological dependency across global hierarchies. It is precisely within this contested terrain of digital sovereignty and free culture convergences that the present study's empirical investigation of cooperative practices becomes particularly relevant, necessitating a methodological approach capable of capturing both the specificities of local experiences and their broader implications for digital solidarity economy networks, as shall be examined in the following section.

3. Methodological aspects: the concern to listen and learn from concrete experiences

Building on the theoretical framework of free culture and the commons outlined above, the methodological choice was to conduct case studies with the aim of understanding how technology production models grounded in cooperativism, the solidarity economy, and free culture can promote concrete alternatives to platform capitalism. During the first trimester of 2025, the authors interviewed five members of the three organisations mentioned – *Código Libre* and *Alternativa Laboral Trans* (Argentina) and *EITA* (Brazil). Participants included Cecilia Muñoz Cancela, President of Código Libre; Elena Ficher, President of *ALT*; and Frederico Guimarães, Camilla de Godoi, and Pedro Jatobá, members of *EITA*, the latter being one of the organisation's founders.

The option of disclosing not only the name of the organisations but also the identities of the participants – all of them previously informed and in agreement with this decision – is an option based on the fact that all of them have relevant experience and work in the field. Following Yin (2024, p.239), by proceeding this way, "the reader has the opportunity to recollect any other previous information he or she may have learned about the same case – from previous research or other sources (...). This ability to become familiar with a new case study in light of prior knowledge is invaluable, similar to the ability to recall previous experimental results when reading about a new set of experiments" (Yin, 2024, p. 240). The interviews followed a semi-structured script, with questions designed to elicit broad responses and enable in-depth discussions[5].

The choice to work with *Código Libre*, *ALT* and *Eita* was based on their suitability for the case study methodology, which aims for a comprehensive understanding of

5. Two of them were carried out by videoconference, transcribed and systematised, lasting 1h33min54s and 1h30min35s, respectively. The president and spokesperson of the *ALT* chose to answer the questions by email (1,942 words), and the authors respected this choice.

complex phenomena, as well as the possibility of employing Yin's (2017) replication logic. The selection of three cases allowed for an exploration of similarities and differences between the organisations in order to gain deeper understanding of their origins and motivations whilst enabling comparative analysis that demonstrates a plurality of possible interpretations regarding contemporary digital solidarity economy practices.

Código Libre and *ALT* are relevant technology cooperatives in Argentina, both affiliated with the *Federación Argentina de Cooperativas de Trabajo de Tecnología, Innovación y Conocimiento* (*FACTTIC*)[6], offering distinct yet complementary perspectives. *Código Libre* emerged in 2013 from a social technology incubator linked to the National University of Quilmes during a period when the free software movement was at its height in Argentina and solidarity economy ideas anchored in social technologies were gaining traction, subsequently participating directly in the formation of solidarity economy circuits and contributing decisively to the creation of Proyecto Chasqui, a platform that hosts a solidarity consumption community. As Cecilia recounts in an interview for this research, the cooperative was "initially focused on technological solutions for social economy commercialisation circuits through this project, [but] evolved towards fostering technological cooperativism in response to the lack of adequate tools and the recognition of the importance of autonomy and alignment with social economy values". *ALT*, formalised as a cooperative seven years later, had as its initial objective to serve as a bridge for trans people towards employment in the technology sector, emerging within a context where intersectionality had already become a more prominent discussion, including within the technology world. This temporal difference reflects distinct yet complementary approaches: whilst *Código Libre* developed organically from broader social economy principles towards cooperative practices, *ALT* was conceived specifically to address systemic exclusion and create inclusive pathways within the technology industry for marginalised communities.

The Brazilian cooperative *EITA* was founded in 2011 by individuals active in the Brazilian Free Culture scene and the solidarity economy – particularly around the *Cirandas.net* software, managed by *Colivre* (another free technology cooperative from that period) with participation from the National Secretariat of Solidarity Economy and Digital Culture, as Pedro Jatobá recounted in an interview for this research. He adds that "there was a necessity for greater proximity to the develop-

6. *FACTTIC* is a space for workers' cooperatives within the sector to exchange ideas and engage in collaborative construction. The primary objective of the Federation is to strengthen its members and to promote this particular philosophy of work and technology, as stated in the introductory text on the organisation's website. Further details are available at: https://facttic.org.ar/facttic/

ment of digital tools for the movement, driven by the presence of developers amongst the group of voluntary collaborators of Cirandas", a justification similar to that underlying the creation of *Código Libre*. Several of the cooperative's members, including Pedro Jatobá and Frederico Guimarães, had participated in projects such as *Pontos de Cultura* ("Points of Culture"), which were grounded in free culture principles that proved fundamental to Brazil's broader technological landscape during this period (Turino, 2010; Vilutis, 2015). The adoption of free software and free culture principles (such as Creative Commons licences) served as foundational pillars in the construction of the *Cultura Viva* programme in 2004 under the Ministry of Culture (then headed by Gilberto Gil, one of the country's most distinguished artists and musicians), encompassing initiatives including as *Cultura Digital.br* – a platform hosting a network of blogs, resources, and tools developed by the Brazilian digital culture movement (Savazoni & Cohn, 2009) – alongside the aforementioned *Pontos de Cultura* programme. Instituted as the first community-based public culture policy in Brazil in 2014, this programme served as an inspiration for similar public policies across Latin America (as a *IberCultura Viva* programme) and stimulated intersections with debates on the solidarity economy (Costa, 2011; Vilutis, 2015) – and continues to exist when this article was written[7].

Together, these three organisations establish themselves as references for the conceptualisation of digital solidarity economy – a concept still under debate, as evidenced in the results based on the interviews conducted for this study, demonstrating how case studies can be particularly useful for understanding and detailing contemporary phenomena (Yin, 2018, p.15).

A schematic table with information about the history and the reality of the three studied organisations summarises and helps to understand the criteria of case selection. The systematisation (Table 1) of information collected in the research and at the interviews permits to identify similarities both on the origins and the motivation of all the three groups.

ORGANISATION/ INTERVIEWEES	COUNTRY	FOUNDATION AND COMPOSITION	TECHNOLOGICAL ASPECTS
Alternativa Laboral Trans - ALT [Trans Labor Alternative] /	Argentina	Worker cooperative formed in 2020. Made up of six	Regarding the solutions developed, as Ficher explains in the interview, "most of the projects we carry out are built in WordPress, which is the most widely used open source CRM in the

7. In 2025, *Cultura Viva*, a policy originating from the *Pontos de Cultura* programme, features a platform where all current points can be viewed, alongside historical records of the programme, documents, and additional resources. Further details are available at: https://culturaviva.cultura.gov.br/

ORGANISATION/ INTERVIEWEES	COUNTRY	FOUNDATION AND COMPOSITION	TECHNOLOGICAL ASPECTS
Elena Ficher, President of ALT		trans people, the group specialises in the design and development of technological solutions.	world. And to a lesser extent, Node, React, and vanilla custom developments. Once the project is finished, the code is delivered to the client for their free use. This cooperative policy has been present from the beginning." She emphasises, however, that the use of free software is also a challenge: "Our cooperative is characterised by incorporating junior profiles, since we are solely transgender, so we don't have many senior colleagues in the technology field."
Código Libre [Free Code] / Cecilia Muñoz Cancela, President of Código Libre	Argentina	Código Libre was founded in 2013 as part of a social technology incubator at the National University of Quilmes. The group is made up of seven people, including permanent and in a trial period. They all make a living from working at the cooperative, with full-time dedication. This is different from the other cases, where there are both full-time and part-time workers.	The organisation, according to Cancela, works with free software: “We have a Nextcloud instance for documents, we have our own Jitsi for videoconferences, and we have a time management tool called Kimai, which is also free. Everything, I mean, is on our virtual servers that we hired. My dream is to have a 3D printer made by us and work with free hardware also”. The organisation works with free licenses (Creative Commons) for its projects.
EITA / Frederico Guimarães, Camilla de Godoi, and Pedro Jatobá, members, the latter being one of the organisation’s founders	Brazil	Eita emerged in 2011 from the collaboration of people active in the solidarity economy movement, especially around the Cirandas.net	The use of free technologies is intrinsically linked to the defense of a more solidarity economy and the sharing of knowledge, avoiding feeding privatised corporations and promoting the reuse of code. There is exceptional use of proprietary software, but free software is considered a strategic advantage, as explained by Godoi: "This [free software] really facilitates our work and makes it possible for budgets to be lighter in some

ORGANISATION/ INTERVIEWEES	COUNTRY	FOUNDATION AND COMPOSITION	TECHNOLOGICAL ASPECTS
		software. The formalisation as a cooperative occurred a few years later, around 2014. Eita started with eight people and, at the time of the interview, had around 13 members (both formalised and in the process of becoming a member).	cases for the clients we work with. We're working with the same technologies or with open-source systems that we already know or have worked with. I think this makes things much easier". The portfolio available on the organisation's website lists solutions developed in/for “Android, Apollo, Couchdb, Django, Expo, Graphene, Graphql, iOS, Java, Laravel, Metabase, OpenAPI, Postgresql, Pouchdb, React, React Native, Tainacan, Woocommerce, and WordPress”. The projects are made with free licenses (Creative Commons).

In addition to the interviews, the study of the three cases also involved monitoring the work of the groups. The authors have been following the production of the three organisations for at least the last five years. This includes reading their projects and publications, following website development, participating in *EITA* study groups and following public interventions and events, both recorded and live. The analysis of documents and projects carried out in recent years also considers specific moments, such as, for instance, a joint participation with *Código Libre* in the academic congress *PRAXIS. Innovación y conocimiento para la Transformación Socioambiental desde el Sur Global*, organised in Argentina, and a meeting with *Código Libre* and *ALT* at the 2024 edition of CryptoRave, the main festival of free technologies and cryptography in Brazil.

As a qualitative analysis based on a limited sample, this study allows for an in-depth exploration of complex issues but does not enable generalisations about broader sector trends, constituting a recognised research limitation. Rather than providing a comprehensive portrait of all groups operating under the logic of the digital solidarity economy – or of those presenting themselves as part of this phenomenon for marketing strategies or other reasons – this represents an exploration of possibilities drawn from highly specific cases. The current findings may structure a broader research project and serve as a foundation for future quantitative surveys, informed by the results presented below.

4. Results

The analysis presented herein is structured around five thematic dimensions: technical alienation and labour conditions, politicisation of technologies against technological dependency, gender and diversity considerations, digital sovereignty, and the challenges posed by the appropriation of digital commons by platforms and generative Artificial Intelligence systems. Each reveals specific ways in which the convergence of free culture principles and solidarity economy practices materialises in concrete organisational forms and technological interventions.

These dimensions emerged from the empirical analysis as interconnected themes that collectively characterise the distinctive practices of digital solidarity economy tech cooperatives in Latin America. The findings reveal how these organisations construct solidarity against work alienation through democratic labour practices, politicise technologies to combat technological dependency, emphasise intersectionality in technopolitical discussions, pursue digital sovereignty, and navigate the contemporary challenges that free culture faces in the era of platform capitalism and generative AI. Through their democratic governance structures, collective ownership of means of production, and decision-making processes that prioritise social impact over profit maximisation, these cooperatives demonstrate alternative approaches to technological development that challenge the hegemonic models of the technology industry.

4.1 Solidarity against alienation at work

Regarding its work organisation, representatives of the three organisations studied highlighted the difference between operating based on a market logic and in cooperative logic. Alienation is one of the characteristics intrinsically related to the private technology sector and, as expressed by Elena Ficher, president of *ALT*, cooperatives can subvert such detachment:

> "It completely changes the perspective, especially for those of us who come from traditional top-down jobs, where decisions are made without any consultation and simply 'go down' to the workers, who must execute without fully understanding the purpose or impact of what they are doing. In a cooperative structure, the process is reversed: decisions are made collectively, seeking consensus and putting the well-being of the group at the center instead of prioritising exclusively profitability or maximising productivity at any cost." (Elena Ficher, Interview, 2025)

Since Karl Marx, alienation in labour has been a central concern for rethinking economic organisation (Marx, 1884). André Gorz (2010) linked task fragmentation and alienation – a challenge exacerbated by the precarisation of labour through platformisation (Antunes, 2020; Cavalcanti, 2021). In algorithmic systems, alienation reaches a point where multinational corporations deny labour ties, treating workers as "entrepreneurs", what includes, in the field of technology development, low-paid data workers dragged into international exploitation circuits (Poulain, 2024; Tubaro et al., 2025). Platforms enable extensive control within centralised and verticalised structures, operating through opaque networks devoid of transparency or oversight (Grohmann et al., 2022), serving as a veil for exploitative practices that threaten historic achievements like the eight-hour workday. In Latin America, app-based workers commonly report labouring over 10 hours daily (Fairwork Brazil Report, 2023).

For workers developing technology, even those that are not app-based or involved in some kind of platform organised production (like the ones processing data for IA), the market logic also reinforces exploitation – as in the case of game developers subjected to long workdays coding (Woodcock, 2019).

Thus, organisations that operate within what can be called a digital solidarity economy, can subvert this process of alienation and exploitation that marks the production based on a market logic. Instead of alienated workers only obeying orders, without the full dimension of the results and impacts of what is being developed, different forms of labour relations can flourish. Elena Ficher explains the following:

> "Furthermore, solidarity and cooperation within a capitalist economy function as a kind of resistance: demonstrating that it is possible to work differently, without exploiting each other, without reproducing the oppressive hierarchies that characterise most traditional businesses. Although the capitalist system pushes us to compete with each other and prioritise individual success over collective success, in a cooperative we choose a different way of organising ourselves, one that values collaboration, mutual support, and respect for each other's work." (Elena Ficher, Interview, 2025)

All the interviewees point out that the cooperative perspective breaks with the capitalist logic of efficiency measured only in economic terms and the uncontrolled accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few. Instead of working under the constant pressure to generate more profits for an employer or an outside company,

decisions are made collectively, and the general well-being is considered. Instead of alienation, the active process of participation and decision-making regarding the paths makes it possible to include concerns for self-care and collective well-being in the process.

At *EITA*, this logic of solidarity materialises in practices such as the hour bank, where financial planning is structured around the equitable valuation of labour. As Camila de Godoi from *EITA* remarks: *"Everyone organises their own schedule and discusses it collectively. Work structures life, but life doesn't depend entirely on work."* Some members derive their entire income from the cooperative, while others do so partially, with this proportion fluctuating based on projects and individual life phases.

The cooperatives studied acknowledge that financial balance and attention to solidarity and care are not simple tasks, especially initially. All groups highlighted challenges in maintaining solidarity-based structures while ensuring fair compensation for all involved. To mitigate this, interviewees emphasised the need to create solidarity networks and ecosystems – alongside internal self-organisation – that politicise technologies and foster alternative forms of social organisation.

4.2 Politicisation of technologies against technological dependency

One of the concerns reported by members of the cooperatives was not only the use of proprietary software on networks that facilitate data mining and compromise privacy – such as social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok – but also the physical infrastructures underpinning these platforms. A key focus was data centers: how they operate, where they are located, who controls them, and their environmental impact. This issue has gained prominence in academia as the proliferation of generative Artificial Intelligence systems has increasingly demanded scarce resources such as water and energy (D'Andréa, 2023; Lehuedé, 2024; Yang, 2025).

For at least eight years, one cooperative – *EITA* – has sought solutions from groups aligned with solidarity economy and cooperative principles. For data storage, they utilise services from the Canadian cooperative *CanTrust Hosting Co-op*[8], which offers "Canadian data sovereignty with maximum privacy, fair pricing without hidden fees, a commitment to never share data with third parties, and cooperative values as a key differentiator in the field." In Brazil, *EITA* highlights initiatives

8. See more at: https://cantrusthosting.coop/. Accessed on: April 14, 2025.

like *PopSolutions*[9], a software development and hosting cooperative founded in 2015, and *Mocambos Network*, a partner in past projects. Mocambos is a network of community-run data centers established in rural areas of São Paulo with limited or no internet access, designed to empower marginalised communities through decentralised infrastructure[10].

The three initiatives mentioned above, in different ways, present alternatives to traditional hosting corporations tied to big tech. They also raise another key point for this study, emphasised by the cooperatives: the debate around the political role of technology. *ALT*, *Código Libre*, and *EITA* reaffirmed that decisions about where to host data and software, the licenses governing generated content, and which technologies to develop (or not) are not merely technical but inherently political.

In Latin America, a vast body of literature addresses technology's role in systems of domination and control. To name a few, Celso Furtado argued in the 1970s for the need not only to import ready-made devices and solutions from developed countries but, crucially, to cultivate homegrown technologies (Furtado, 1998; Lastres & Cassiolato, 2020). Milton Santos (2000), viewing technology as a terrain of political and territorial struggle, posited that the Global South's subordination to imported technological packages reinforces colonial dependencies – a dynamic intensified by platformisation and what has been termed data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Recently, Valente & Grohmann (2025) have redefined critical data studies to analyse, drawing on Lélia Gonzalez, Ruy Mauro Marini, and Enrique Dussel, how datafication reinforces systems of oppression and exploitation, weaving structural inequalities – class, gender, and race – into its very fabric.

The politicisation of technologies by cooperatives thus emerges as a practical response to technological dependency. While Furtado advocated for the cultivation of homegrown technologies and Santos denounced colonial subordination via imported technical packages, cooperatives like *EITA*, *ALT*, and *Código Libre* embody this resistance by developing tools that confront oppressive datafication. By prioritising autonomous infrastructures such as cooperative servers, *EITA* ensures that social movements retain control over their data. *Código Libre* and *ALT* started a collaboration programme with Brazilian researchers to rethink the future of work as

9. See more at: https://pop.coop/. Accessed on: April 14, 2025.

10. The Mocambos Network (*Rede Mocambos*) is a project of *Casa de Cultura Tainã*, a 33-year-old cultural and memory space based in Campinas-SP. It was one of the first nodes of the *Pontos de Cultura* network (*Cultura Viva* program) in the country. Among other projects maintained by Tainã is Baobáxia, a free multimedia repository designed to operate in these data centers. More information about the network of free data centers and other projects at: https://taina.net.br/dccl/. Accessed on: April 10, 2025.

part of the Worker-Owned Intersectional Platforms (WOIP) project, an initiative that aims to “challenge the dominant narrative that technology can only be built with billions of dollars by a select few in Silicon Valley” and “introduce a vision for technology built with care, autonomy, sovereignty, and intersectionality at its core” (Código Libre, 2025). Meanwhile, ALT, through its transfeminist approach, challenges the reproduction of gender hierarchies in technology, creating solutions that question the neutrality of code. This includes, for instance, the creation of a *South Feminist Knowledge Hub*, a platform built by *ALT* for the organisation South Feminist Futures that presents a multi-thematic catalogue of resources authored by feminists from the Global South.

This technological resistance is underpinned by what can be understood as a form of "political imagination" – a collective and transformative force for projecting futures beyond the Silicon Valley model. *ALT*'s South Feminist Knowledge Hub exemplifies this approach through its comprehensive digital repository, which features carefully curated content spanning topics from feminist economics to decolonial theory, accessible through an interface designed with principles of inclusivity and intersectionality (Alt Cooperativa, n.d). The platform functions as an information repository and as a technological intervention that centres Global South feminist voices whilst challenging the epistemic hierarchies embedded in conventional knowledge management systems. This initiative, in dialogue with the Worker-Owned Intersectional Platforms (WOIP) project, invites us to imagine other possibilities, rooted in intersectionality and in platforms owned and shaped by workers in the Global South, "where social technologies serve as vehicles for challenging Silicon Valley imaginaries that "mystify technological development, making it distant, inaccessible, and incomprehensible to most people" (WOIP, 2025). These initiatives can update critiques by Lélia Gonzalez (2020) and Dussel (1994) regarding the intersectionalities of oppression and also demonstrate that technology, when collectively stewarded, can be reprogrammed to serve the common good, thereby materialising the convergence between free culture principles and solidarity economy practices in tangible technological interventions that challenge hegemonic models of digital development.

4.3 The importance of intersectionality in technopolitical discussions

The case of the *Código Libre* cooperative perhaps best illustrates the importance of intersectionality[11]for many organisations within what can be termed the digital

11. Developed by Black feminists in the United States, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), building on the work of bell hooks and Angela Davis, the intersectional perspective posits the interconnected

solidarity economy. *Código Libre* began as an organisation composed predominantly of men, with five men and only one woman: Cecilia Muñoz Cancela, its current president. Now, among seven people, there are two woman cis, one woman trans, one man trans and three male cis. According to her, the cooperative actively sought diversification: "It's about dismantling all barriers and inertia that would lead us to become middle-class white men. No offense to those individuals, of course! But it's about breaking through that inertia to embrace diversity." Nowadays, among the seven workers, three are women (two cis and one trans) and four are men (three cis and one trans).

The process of diversifying was not easy, though, as Muñoz Cancela explains:

> "We began to conduct specific searches in partnership with organisations, and with a state programme that existed at the time for a transgender job quota. We focused a lot on a transformation that we're incredibly proud of, we also incorporated people without technical expertise criteria, because we couldn't find transgender people in job searches with very high levels of seniority. So, well, we prioritised that, we made all the moves, and well, now we're seeing how we fit in. That's kind of our current challenge." (Cecilia Muñoz Cancela, Interview, 2025)

Cecilia does not regret the strategy; she argues that true democracy requires the inclusion of all voices – and that the best technology emerges from multiple perspectives. In doing so, she aligns with the idea that systems developed collectively by diverse groups are better equipped to identify and correct oppressive biases (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020).

The formation of organisations grounded in cooperation and solidarity that work on technology development also represents a way to disrupt the logic of a labour market that remains overwhelmingly male and dominated by Global North corporations. "We strive to break free from the inertia of serving as raw labour for large Global North companies and instead envision alternative circuits," states Muñoz Cancela. This vision materialises through deliberate organisational practices that prioritise intersectional perspectives in project development, as Muñoz Cancela further explains: "What we do is that as projects emerge, we have a criterion not to assign just any available person, but to think of a project where there are people with significant expertise and someone with an intersectional perspective who trains through that project, even if it means distributing the budget a bit more.

and combined consideration of not only class but also race and gender.

Where there could be two people, there are three because we have that criterion and we distribute the budget. It's an effort we can make, but we can do it because money is coming in. If no money is coming in, well, yes we want to, but we can share the hunger, no more."

Código Libre continues to develop solutions for other social organisations, such as the platform *Caracoles y Hormigas*, built for a Popular and Solidarity Social Economy network, and also works on projects related to educational purposes. Among the clients listed on the organisation's website are the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology, the National University of the Center of the Province of Buenos Aires, and the National University of Quilmes, demonstrating how cooperative principles can be sustained through strategic partnerships with public institutions whilst maintaining commitment to intersectional capacity-building even within financial constraints.

4.4 Digital sovereignty beyond borders

One of the points addressed in the semi-structured interviews concerns the discussion around digital sovereignty, as already mentioned. There is no consensus on the precise definition of the concept, but the interviews conducted make it clear that the idea is not restricted to national borders. This approach emerges as key to thinking, imagining, and disputing internet policies for the future, both at national and international levels. How might regional legal limits and international legislation be established for a new set of economic and social circuits that include colonialist data-worker exploitation (Tubaro et al., 2025; Poulain, 2024)? How can a safe environment be ensured for the development and rise of digital solidarity economies globally? How is it possible to ensure that digital commons benefit society instead of becoming data fuel for the development of commercial AI tools?

There is no easy answer for those questions that are fundamental to imagine the future of the internet itself, but the views shared in this study may give some hints about possible solutions.

This perspective of thinking beyond borders when discussing digital sovereignty involves solidarity to overcome labour alienation, reinforces the political nature of technology, and strengthens the call for a diverse and complex approach. According to the cooperatives, building technological sovereignty is a challenge that demands constructing networks capable of meeting these challenges: it is about creating solidarity-driven networks within ecosystems that enable and foster alternative forms of social organisation.

For the members of the *EITA* cooperative, instead of speaking only about sovereignty, a word they associate with authoritarian connotations, it is better to speak of autonomy. Frederico Guimarães argues that some Brazilian public IT companies have become mere contract managers:

> "They always hire third parties instead of developing in-house solutions. This reminds me of ideas like *Public Code*, *Public Money*. Why spend public funds on non-Brazilian private companies? Why not use that money to reinvest locally as a stimulus for development? (...) Our advocacy for free software is tied to this: [using public resources to] develop something that belongs to everyone." (Frederico Guimarães, Interview, 2025)

The three interviewed cooperatives argue that it makes little sense to frame sovereignty solely as keeping data within local capitalist companies when international cooperatives can offer greater security and alignment of values. In a digital solidarity economy, sovereignty is more closely tied to creating national and international cooperative networks that foster the exchange of ideas, references, and solutions than to erecting digital walls based on restrictive licenses.

Elena Ficher from *ALT* states:

> "In this sense, working with free licenses and promoting knowledge sharing does not mean losing autonomy, but rather redistributing power and access to tools, creating spaces where more people can actively participate and contribute. Instead of viewing sovereignty as rigid and closed, we conceive of it as a shared sovereignty, built from the ground up through community and a transfeminist lens." (Elena Ficher, Interview, 2025)

By developing tools and software for underprivileged groups, the proposed alternatives also demonstrate that digital sovereignty depends less on geopolitical control and more on the ability of local groups to define how, by whom, and for whom technology is built.

4.5 Challenges of free culture in the era of platforms - and generative AI

As demonstrated thus far, the integration of free culture, copyleft, and cooperative models emerges as a structural response to the contradictions of digital capitalism. Cooperatives like *Código Libre* and *EITA* not only adopt free software in their

projects but operate under licenses that ensure the replicability and collective adaptation of their solutions – embodying the copyleft principle, a cornerstone of free culture discourse (Stallman, 2002; Foletto, 2021). This synergy between open tools and democratic management enables organisations to transform technology into digital commons, theoretically preventing codes and knowledge from being appropriated by private intermediaries. By prioritising copyleft-based licenses (such as Creative Commons BY-SA[12]), these initiatives reinforce that technological production can be a collective good, not a scarce product or commodity.

As discussed in section 2, Free Culture has historically been linked to democratising access and collaborative production, with free software and open licenses as central pillars – now faces new obstacles in the era of digital platforms, where data control and centralised infrastructure redefine power dynamics. The analysed cases, particularly those of *Código Libre* and *EITA*, illustrate the practical and strategic dilemmas inherent to commons-based initiatives, exposing tensions between ideals and realities that have spurred ongoing debates within free culture.

As discussed, one of these challenges involves the appropriation not only of information and knowledge released under free licenses but also of practices historically associated with free culture movements. For instance, while piracy was once defended as an act of civil disobedience against the enclosure of knowledge "code" by the cultural industry (and software corporations), today even big tech companies are leveraging piracy to train their generative AI systems. A recent example is Meta's LLaMA system, which utilised thousands of books downloaded via torrent files[13]. There is also extensive debate around "Open Washing" – the practice of private companies claiming their algorithmic systems' code is open-source when, in reality, it is not truly open[14].

Although none of the three analysed cooperatives work directly with generative AI systems, the topic is unavoidable in contemporary discussions about free knowledge and culture. *Código Libre*, for example, emphasises the urgency of redefining free culture in the context of digital platforms, where the business model no longer revolves around selling licenses but controlling data. As Cecilia notes: "I believe this is a debate we must engage in: What does free culture mean in the 21st

12. More information about this license: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en

13. Meta leeched 82 terabytes of pirated books to train its LLaMA AI, documents reveal". Source: https://cybernews.com/tech/meta-leeched-82-terabytes-of-pirated-books-to-train-its-llama-ai-documents-reveal/ Accessed on: April 16 2025.

14. See further details at: https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/17/business/what-is-openwashing-ai.html. Accessed on: Jan 15 2025.

century?" Cecilia also suggests, as an alternative for rethinking free culture today, differentiating between software and platforms, conducting objective analyses of the gains and losses of using "free" resources, and adopting licenses that permit reuse exclusively by cooperatives. On this last point, one applicable license is the Peer Production License, an example of a copyfair license "in which only other commoners, cooperatives, and nonprofits can share and re-use the material, but not commercial entities intent on exploiting the commons without explicit reciprocity" (P2P Foundation, 2024).

5. Conclusion: challenges, opportunities, & recommendations for economic digital solidarity

Finally, by systematising information and insights from three organisations that can serve as references for the digital solidarity economy, this study aimed to contribute to the discussion of this relatively new concept and underscore the importance of principles tied to free culture and technologies. The text outlined elements for establishing fairer forms of technology and strengthening initiatives grounded in intersectionality, autonomy, and international cooperation networks instead of a shallow vision of digital sovereignty based solely on national borders, and solidarity as an antidote to labour alienation.

The article sought to identify common aspects that could both map similar experiences and inspire or support future projects of this kind, as well as inform public policies to foster initiatives linked to the digital solidarity economy. Several parameters, based on the responses, may prove useful for organisations aiming to establish similar initiatives in the field of digital solidarity economies.

The analysed experiences reinforce the article's core argument: the fusion of free culture and solidarity economy aims to resist the extractivist logic of platforms by proposing a new paradigm of value, where knowledge and technology are commons managed *by* and *for* communities. In the Global South, this convergence challenges the notion that innovation must follow imported blueprints – a legacy already contested by Furtado (1998). In this sense, the response to platformisation may lie not in more regulation or less technology, but in reprogramming its ethical *source code*, replacing accumulation with collaboration, surveillance with care, and colonialism with *commoning*.

All interviewed organisations emphasised the potential of cooperation and solidarity in developing digital solutions to address economic, political, and social issues through a critical and engaged technological lens. The cooperatives highlight the

importance of robust networks (local, regional, and international) in an ecosystem where intercooperation strengthens organisational autonomy, regardless of state support – which, while crucial initially, may later hinder independence. Here, autonomy is understood by some experiences as a more vital premise than national sovereignty.

Another common thread is the concern with inclusion, diversity, and gender perspectives, reflecting – at least among interviewees – a commitment to values that transcend mere technological production. Thus, it is not just about creating new digital solutions but, above all, rethinking social, commercial, and human relations – all within a new paradigm that might be termed the *digital solidarity economy*.

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