

Special Issue Paper

A digital ecosystem as an institutional field: curated peer production as a response to institutional voids revealed by COVID-19

Soumodip Sarkar , Anna Waldman-Brown , Stewart Clegg 

First published: 05 September 2022 | <https://doi.org/10.1111/radm.12555>

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Abstract

This paper investigates the ecosystem dynamics of the Open-source [COVID-19] Medical Supplies network that arose to fill the institutional void revealed by state and private sector failures to stockpile and supply enough personal protective equipment. Theoretically, the paper adds correctives to extant institutional theory accounts of entrepreneurship filling institutional voids, showing that these can be filled rapidly and normatively by digital entrepreneurial ecosystems allied with peer production networks. These were able to transform the boundary conditions of a routinized system, refixing its autopoiesis innovatively. The COVID-19 epidemic galvanized hundreds of thousands of volunteer “makers” around the world to cooperate to meet urgent demand for medical supplies. A digital entrepreneurial ecosystem arose in response to the problem of critical equipment shortages, connecting global, expert-curated know-how with local production equipment. We contribute to the theory of institutional voids by documenting and analyzing how the formation and emergent processes that created and sustained a Digital Peer Production Ecosystem based on self-organization, expert curation and scalability, successfully catalyzed local initiatives worldwide. Institutional voids are not just barriers to entrepreneurship; they are also opportunities.