Edgeryders: towards de-ideologising the "radical"

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This contribution aims to show how individuals experimenting with radical, innovative work are paving the way to solving collective problems for a better future. Edgeryders is a community of social innovators, artists, activists, global thinkers whose projects have very high social and cultural value, despite having little or no financial support. Once we came together in a European-funded project and model of citizen–institution collaboration, our next goal is to wire seemingly disparate initiatives towards scalability and greater benefits for the mainstream. I am writing from two standpoints: a community builder who is part of the project staff and a member of the Edgeryders community, pretty well immersed in it. My deepest thanks go to every one of my new friends who inspired this account: Elf, Alessia, Petros, Lucas, Gaia, James and the rest of the community.

Briefly, it started with the Council of Europe and the European Commission wanting to understand one of Europe's most ardent problems: the situation of young people who navigate unstable environments, who question the return on investment of formal education, who don't have a place in labour markets or simply step away from traditional channels of participation; basically those who do things that don't show up in statistics or official reports because there are no instruments to measure the type of work they do. And so the Edgeryders distributed think tank was born: an open, online, highly interactive platform where young people from all corners of Europe come together to meet one another, share their struggles and equally the creative solutions they find, and collect everything into a fresh vision of what the future may hold for young Europeans if the right instruments are in place to support their work.

## The community: radical problems need radical solutions

Meet Elf, he has been living stateless and moneyless for over three years, by choice. Like most people, he used to have a job, as a web developer, but decided to let go of humanly produced artefacts that do nothing but condition our exchanges. How does this work? Well, he does things he enjoys for free, building software, sometimes helping grow food and supporting others without expecting anything in return and using sharing as a currency. Yet this comes around, as he receives food, shelter when travelling (across Europe only because he doesn't have identification documents) or whatever he needs for basic survival, and when he doesn't he dumpster dives – not so outrageous when one stops to think about all the perfectly good food that's being wasted daily. Not surprisingly, Elf's way of tweaking his lifestyle is allowing him to experiment with new skills and surface needs in communities he didn't know existed, and all this helps build great relationships with those around him, generating high mutual trust and environments that feel safe.

Meet Alessia, she is a social innovator, designer and activist. Among other things, she is travelling across Italy to save endangered cultural heritage sites. What Alessia and a diverse crowd do is occupy theatres or spaces for culture as a protest against their degradation, private buyoffs, decreasing wages of artists or teachers, and economic decay of knowledge workers in general. Inside theatres the protesters organise workshops and debates on cultural commons or welfare policies, or set up art performances, even transform them into after-school care centres. While occupying state or private property runs against the law and is criminalised, the logic is that they in fact operate to protect these spaces, and their actions are legitimate from the standpoint of the values occupiers fight to preserve: public goods funded by public money belong to the people; access to culture by all; preservation of historical heritage; arts, culture and knowledge that needn't be measured by monetary value. Essentially these guys are putting forward a new model of governance, one that takes into account the knowledge-based economy and is much more inclusive than the current one.

Meet Petros, he used to run an Internet company before the crisis hit. And it hit hard, as Petros and his wife Natalia went bankrupt and decided to move to rural Poland to found the Laboratory of Freedom on a rent-free estate. The FreeLab is a community of international residents researching solutions, offering technical support and building new skills, working together in waste control and electricity (they build rocket stoves or solar water heaters). Very importantly, they're teaching others to become self-organised and live independently from economic systems. Petros believes intentional communities are the best way to cope with the crisis and really be free as they live "off-the-matrix": "We don't want to reintegrate within the system. We are free and want to use our restored freedom for creating."

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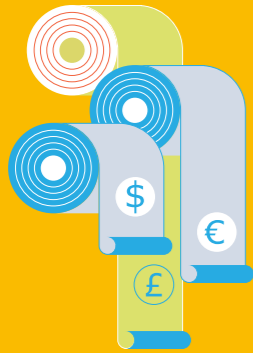
The folks at FreeLab are not the only ones working towards increasing communities' resilience. Lucas, Gaia, James and others in their crowd are looking into breakdowns of health resources (staff, supplies, equipment) and are devising alternate plans. Lucas is a public health physician, Gaia is a researcher and social network analyst, James is a community volunteer and avid cycler. What they question is how we go about leveraging community to improve the resilience of a place. Theirs is an interdisciplinary model for collaboration through networks of individuals, health and non-health professionals alike, who instead of fighting against each other when resources are scarce, work together to better respond to economic meltdowns. This has enormous value in terms of promoting solidarity, mutual aid and strengthening community connections.

What do Edgeryders Elf, Alessia, Petros, Lucas and the others have in common? First, none of these ways to experiment for the greater good are funded or are commercial activities; therefore they don't exist in the market economy. But rather than being isolated, their initiatives are connected to a larger, virtual network of change makers, people who do groundbreaking work often at the cost of living day by day. Radicalism is a cheap way to try new things that only have a small probability of working, but it costs a lot in terms of personal commitment and security. Whether it's re-appropriating commons in mercantilist societies or designing tools to increase transparency and accountability in democracies, Edgeryders are driving the change. Doing work outside the system doesn't equal being outsiders from the real world; on the contrary, their actions are based on deep awareness of the global problems affecting individual lives and communities.

HIGH INTELLECTUAL AND ITC STANDARD

Building bridges

How do we connect the dots and offer support and recognition to people at the edge of change, especially starting with our institutions? First of all, Edgeryders are pretty much against social categorisations of any kind, whether or not we are the "category" in question.[1] I don't think many would think of themselves as radicals. During an open debate at the "Living on the Edge" offline community event in June, someone's attempt to make a general statement about Europe's youth as extremist and violent was abruptly disqualified by the community in the room on the basis that if institutions antagonise citizens they cut off chances of finding constructive solutions, especially together. Also, thinking of Edgeryders as leading radical lifestyles falls short of fully grasping the meaning of their work. Edgeryding is not freeriding, our paths and risks are individual but highly connected because our success stands to benefit all. We are all part of a common future that some have started to build already.

So far the platform is home to over 1200 participants, Europeans and non-Europeans, young or not so young. There are hundreds of shared stories, many of them similar to the ones above, and thousands of comments in conversations. In June 2012 we set up an offline event bringing in over 150 Edgeryders at the Council of Europe. People from all over the Internet met Big Government, up close and personal, to make a case for the immediacy of solutions such as theirs, and they did so successfully. The "Transition handbook for policy makers" in preparation draws a list of policy recommendations that would make it easier for radical innovators out there to continue to do their "jobs". It starts with making a case that policy makers should come closer and understand the lives of young people, and goes on calling for policies to accommodate the isolated, turns-out-not-so-isolated cases of risky transition into cultural norms, so as to relieve some of the societal pressure and stigma associated with doing something outside the mainstream.

Each recommendation can be fleshed out in concrete lines of action to give people in institutions, particularly local ones, the tools to help the young. Edgeryders started with the European institutions willing to lend an ear, and now we want to be lent a hand. With the right incentives aligned – among others, commitment from public servants in key positions[2] – we are moving from a think tank advising on youth policies, to a "do tank" that multiplies positive experiences and puts transformative action at the heart of its collective existence. If you're reading this and you'd like to be part of the change, Edgeryders style, don't hesitate to get in touch. Edgeryders started out as a project by the Council of Europe and the European Commission in 2011. Upon termination end of 2012, the community spun off and built itself a new interactive web platform. A social enterprise, Edgeryders LBG, has been created to maintain and support the community's infrastructure. See more at: http://edgeryders.eu/

[1]This was one of the project's research findings. A small research team was commissioned to do ethnographic analysis of all the platform content, structured into several broad transition themes. After validation of the findings by the community, all papers are now being aggregated into a "Transition handbook for policy makers" http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/finale/making-sense-edgeryders-experiences-where-do-we-go-here.

[2]Many in the community don't trust institutions – deemed as machines that are highly resistant to change, limited in their ability to reform – but acknowledge that institutions are made by and of people; and that public servants can build precedents for good practices and cannot be discarded as untrustworthy. The team at the Council of Europe driving the Edgeryders project is a good example, it can be thought of doing radical work from an institutional standpoint, and the fact that people like Elf or Petros are engaging in conversation through an institutional channel is a good sign that collaboration and mutual support is possible, and that we should move forward and not away from the radical, in any of its forms, depending from where one looks.