

# Chapter 3

## Political Common(ing) in a Smart City



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**Abstract** The concept of *commons* has been investigated in academia through multiple disciplinary lenses. This chapter explores the concept of commons, attempting a thematic categorisation along those disciplinary lines. The themes thus derived include—availability, accessibility, conflicts, rights and innovation. Thereupon, a framework is drawn to develop a supra-concept of political commons relevant to our study of governance in smart cities. Smart cities are essentially state projects aimed at living better and governing smarter. Their default initiation from the state quarters stipulates placing commons within a political context—one pertaining to the public sphere and its activities. Conceptual explication of political commons then outlines its measurable ‘*SOFT*’ characteristics that relate to the interests of the *subjects* (people) with an implicit *objective* of a politico-democratic functioning, between interoperable *forces* of state/market/society, and using technological and social processes as *tools*. The chapter uses community media as an example for empirically rooting this concept. The utility of political commons as a conceptual framework is, thus, suggested in its ability to direct *identification* of newer and relevant commons, provoke theorisation (*ideation*) around them and create pathways for their active application/commoning (*instrumentality*) in pursuit of sustainable urban futures informed by democratic principles and practices.

**Keywords** Commons · Political Commons · Political Commoning · Smart City Governance · Democratic Governance · Community Media

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## Introduction

Perusing the pieces of political art since before the emergence of modern nation states, one notices a pattern of public life depicted through them. A thematic distinction is accorded to the cities, vis-à-vis other social geographies, in terms of the exclusive portrayal of people meeting, engaging, and deliberating. A sense of ‘people power’ undergirds these depictions despite the encoded socio-political hierarchies between the characters. Be it the 1791 ‘Oath of the Tennis Court’ by Jacques-Louis David that captured the political scene of the city of Versailles leading up to the French Revolution or Raphael Sanzio’s sixteenth-century masterpiece ‘The School of Athens’ that showed Plato and Aristotle dialoguing amidst a crowd in the city of Athens. Cities have historically been the locus of political acts and activities, while most critical political ventures and astonishments of power have also had a city at their focus.

In recent history, however, the city has diversified its portfolio due to reasons attributable to—the paradigmatic eventuality of spatial and temporal growth of human societies (Redfield and Singer 1954; Soja 2011), anthropo-ecological dynamics (Moran 2019), accommodation of complex governance architecture, disrupting/constructive forces of globalisation and development, or assimilative response to human technological innovations. This has resulted in cities becoming repositories of development narratives around human societies. In the process, however, the fundamental political function of a city polity—that of meeting, engaging, and deliberating through ancillary acts of policy-making, economic exchanges, social gatherings, or religious events—has undergone a radical change. From the austere, in-person, locale-centricity of pre-modern cities to the digital, multi-layered, global orientation of smart cities, the political functions within them too require platform and procedural upgradation. Contrastingly, what has remained a constant feature is the denomination of certain spaces as ‘commons’, vis-à-vis their shared ownership or use by the city commune and its necessity for a healthy and sustainable city life.

Smart cities are essentially political/state projects assigned with the *telos* of living better and governing smarter. Their default initiation from the state quarters is a result of both its financial scale and multi-sectoral leverages that demand permission, coordination, and support from the state. Exploring commons in a smart city, therefore, stipulates placing it within a political context. Here, *political* does not entail discussing the function of power, though that is certainly an implicit element. Political, for the purpose of this chapter, pertains to the public sphere and its activities.

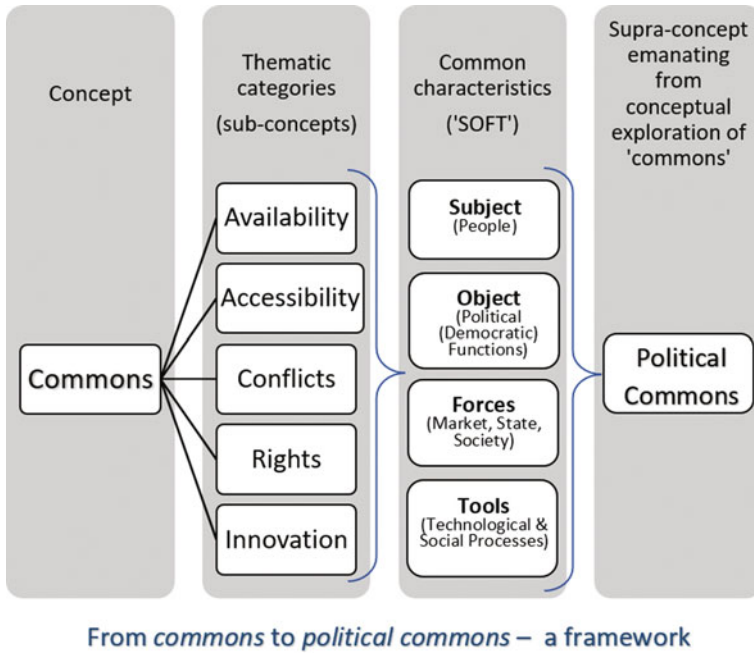
The authors are aware that this chapter does not conform to the general ingenuity with which testable models and frameworks are elsewhere presented in this book, and therefore fear putting it forth as an odd addition to the list. What it seeks to contribute, however, is a direction in the form of a ‘sensitising concept’ (explained by Herbert Blumer in his 1954 essay ‘What is wrong with social theory?’)—*political commons*. By developing a skeleton of political commons in terms of its definition and characteristics, this chapter intends to set the stage for more nuanced research on urban commons in smart cities. In the next section, we first attempt the thematic

categorisation of commons as a concept based on an overview of the literature from different disciplines. Five major themes are derived out of this exercise, namely—the *availability* of common as a resource (short term and long term), their *accessibility* to groups and individuals, *conflicts* that ensue out of commons, *rights* associated with the usage and control over them, and *innovations* that introduce new commons or transform the dynamics around existing ones. In the subsequent section, governance in smart cities is studied to help the political placement of the concept of commons and understand commoning as an intrinsic part of governing. After this literature-based conceptual derivation, four common (‘*SOFT*’) characteristics underlying these themes are then identified, forming the basis of the concept of political commons.

In the last section, the concept of political common is explored through an example of community media. The justification for taking this media-medium as an adjunct empirical category to our central conceptual enquiry into political commons is embedded in the purposive nature of this media and the emerging governance

**Table 3.1** Works on ‘commons’ in literature: a thematic categorisation (Source: Literature survey by the authors)

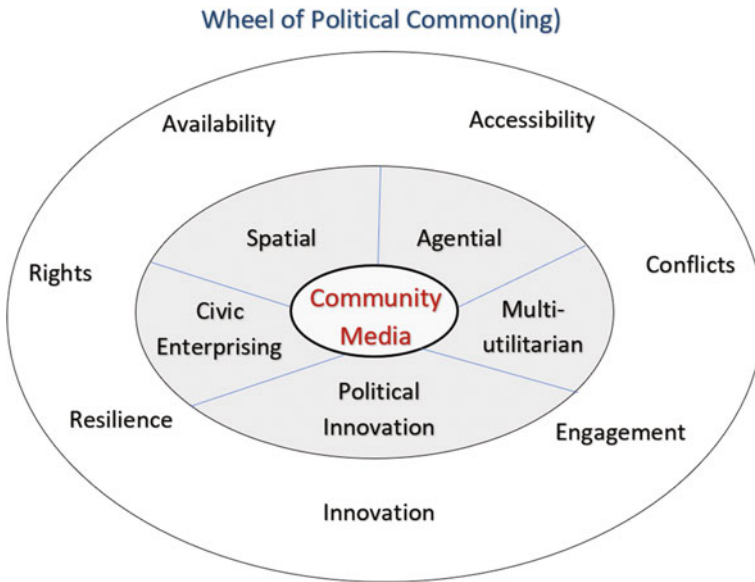
Fields	Focal points	Related works	Theme
Economic and Ecological History, Human Geography	Resource scarcity, resource exploitation, sustainability	Garrett Hardin’s 1968 seminal work <i>The Tragedy of the Commons</i> ; Cox (1985)	<b>Availability</b> (long term and short term)
Economics	Macro (property, ownership, markets, contracts, enclosures); Micro (shared use, game theory, free rider problem)	Property rights regimes and resource management (Feeny et al. 1990) Common-pool resources (Ostrom 2000); Labour Resource (Harvey 2010)	<b>Accessibility</b> (individual and group)
Psychology	Social traps, commons dilemma, etc.	Edney (1978), Messick and McClelland (1983), Fox (1985)	<b>Conflicts</b>
Politics, Institutions and Governance	National (property rights), International (jurisdictions, inter-state conflicts, global governance)	Governing the Commons (Ostrom 1990); Adaptive governance (Dietz et al. 2003); Others include Benkler (2003b), Thompson (2000) and Armitage (2008)	<b>Rights</b>
Society and Technology Studies	Ease of access, exploitation, exploration; Problem-solving paradigms	<b>Knowledge Commons</b> (Hess and Ostrom 2007) <b>Information Commons</b> (Beagle 1999) <b>Innovation Commons</b> (Allen and Potts (2016) and Potts (2018); <b>Digital Commons</b> ; <b>Creative Commons</b> (Bollier 2003)	<b>Innovation</b>



**Fig. 3.1** An outline of the conceptual derivation of the concept of political commons (Source: Authors)

demands of a smart city. Community media, or the alternative media to the mainstream one, quasi-institutionalises the fundamental democratic functions of a city that we discussed earlier, i.e. engagement and deliberation in a public space or through a public platform. Furthermore, the smart city context provides a challenging socio-technological landscape which seeks to disrupt these ‘ordinary’ democratic acts of meeting, engaging, and deliberating. Community media, therefore, provides for a relevant example that interweaves the basic premise of a common and its governance in a smart city. It builds upon the ‘common’ character of its platform—i.e. relating to public, with a democratic objective of promoting people’s participation, interplay of state/market/societal forces, and operating through social and technological processes—to explore the possibilities of an informed civic engagement. Community media, thus, lends a measurable element to the process of political commoning in a smart city.

The chapter seeks to indulge the issues immediately beyond the materiality of commons in the context of smart cities to include the ideational recalibration of commons in the light of emerging trends and demands on cities’ governance. The authors do not wish to introduce the reader to any new paradigm or a measuring scale for commons. Any such extravagant claim would be a deeply farcical and self-defeating exercise given the existing corpus of rich academic analysis in the field that extensively covers the connected issues, otherwise very narrowly discussed



**Fig. 3.2** Wheel of Political Common(ing): a roadmap for inclusive governance in smart cities (Source: Authors)

here. It deals with the literature on three independent yet interconnected concepts of commons, smart city governance, and community media. A common underlying factor is their rudimentary association with people and public life, making the acts of engaging with any of these as deeply political. We attempt to connect the dots of the pre-existing ‘frame of analysis’ of the commons across different disciplines and subdisciplines (primarily—media studies, political theory, community, and smart city governance) and simultaneously highlight the similar people/public-centric principles and practices across domains.

### **Reading Commons: A Literature Survey Through the Lens of Public/Political**

*Each commons has distinctive dynamics based on its participants, history, cultural values, the nature of the resource, and so forth.*

(Bollier 2007)

A universally applicable definition of the term commons has been jettisoned as a difficult project given the ‘fluctuating and fluid’ nature of the forces, ideas, and institutions that underlie the emergence of commons (Holder and Flessas 2008). When seen as a ‘school of thought’ or ‘frame of analysis’, any idea of commons

points to the two structural aspects—social situatedness and relation vis-à-vis market or state (Bollier 2007). Mapping the progress in conceptual development of the term ‘commons’ from natural commons to social or immaterial commons, and to the most recent post-dualistic dimensionality imparted to the term through recent studies, Bresnihan (2015) notes that ‘commons is not land or knowledge but a way these, and more, are combined, used and cared for by and through a collective that is not only human but also nonhuman’. Bollier (2007), in one of his important works on commons, examines it as a ‘third force in political life’, exemplifying its constant tussle with the market and the state forces. He also cautions us against the need to universalise or box the commons into tangible groups.

In the more updated conceptualisations of commons, their socio-political relevance is extensively discussed. Holder and Flessas (2008) observe that ‘the idea of ‘the commons’ can work as a signifier—of resistance, community, collective action and common values’. Commons also allow participation in socio-cultural and political discourses and the actualisation of vocal agency (Benkler 2003a, b). The contemporary forces and challenges of social life, therefore, necessitate the politicised meanings of commons and warn against the dangers of de-politicisation by capitalist forces (Bianchi 2018). Discussing the commons in the plausible post-political condition, Varvarousis et al. (2020) make a point,

*(o)ur argument is not that the commons in our study are revolutionary ‘hotspots’ or panaceas that will unhinge the neoliberal logic, but rather that they merit attention for the politicisation potentialities in terms of subjectivities and social fabric...*

In fact, beyond the traditional domestic/local mapping of commons relation, the multi-levelness of the commons through technologically and politically entrenched global linkages has also been explored (Berkes 2008). Furthermore, in galloping the cross-disciplinary environments, the newer issues and avenues for commons and commoning have also been discussed in the literature (Hess 2008; Holder and Flessas 2008; McCarthy 2005).

In this section, a multi-disciplinary conceptual derivation of the term *commons* is secured based on the engagement with corresponding texts in ecology, history, geography, economics, politics and governance, and technology studies. It is hoped that the concept of political common methodologically achieved from this endeavour, in the later section, holds generic relevance for transdisciplinary application without succumbing to the problem of ‘conceptual stretching’. Based on the exploration of the concept of ‘commons’ from different fields of study, Table 3.1 stipulates five broad themes (also discussed below) dominating the concept. This thematic categorisation is a simplistic textual attempt to make sense of complex theoretical and empirical research across different fields and opted to facilitate the broader understanding of the ‘commons’ in general.

1. **Availability**—The object of ‘common’ here is taken as an exhaustible resource. Given its relevance for the basic sustenance of human life, its availability has become an issue of concern.
2. **Accessibility**—This relates to the predominantly market-centric or/and quasi-market relation building between the resources and dependent communities. The

accessibility is decoded, assumed, contested, dispersed, and managed through market mechanisms of property ownership, contract making, enclosing, resource-pooling, etc.

3. **Conflicts**—The implicit discord generated from the limitedness and liminality of the common has also been extensively researched. It broadly relates to the issue of interests (selfish or communal) and existence (individual or social) in public life.
4. **Rights**—It pertains to the politico-institutional placement of the common. The active managerial role of the state, in addition to or together with the community and market, becomes a central concern.
5. **Innovation**—It accounts for the in-flux developments that are at times socially driven or politically determined, and at other times technologically stimulated or market run.

These themes are not exclusive of each other; instead, a deep interconnection between the three major forces of any human society—namely, community, market and state—dominates these, albeit to varying degrees.

## Governing Smart Cities: As a Democratic Polity

*Part of what makes democracy work is the sense that it is necessarily about contesting and changing the ways in which citizens communicate with power over different distances, how they oppose it, and how they try to hold it accountable. Democracy is about the re-invention of these relations in changing situations in different geopolitical contexts.*

(Low 2009)

Smart cities have essentially changed the urban scape of human societies around the globe. There is a functional urgency to transform the old into ‘sustainably’ new, black into ‘ecological’ green and traditional, and archaic into expeditiously modern, all this while maintaining the principles of inclusivity, accountability, and sustainability. A smart city is defined as ‘*the utilization of ICT and innovation by cities (new, existing or districts), as a means to sustain in economic, social and environmental terms and to address several challenges dealing with six dimensions (people, economy, governance, mobility, environment and living)*’ (Anthopoulos 2017). The role of government in smart cities is also being rethought and re-adjusted given the high-tech realities of the smart urban spaces. The governments are forced to explore the participatory digital mechanics of decision-making, public services, and principles of good governance (Rodríguez-Bolívar 2016).

## Governing

Smart city governance is comprehensively defined as a ‘*form of smart governance, enabling and allocating decision-making rights to stakeholders (in particular citizens) to participate in effective and efficient decision-making processes to improve the quality of life in cities*’ (Pereira et al. 2018). In their holistic framework of assessment on smart city governance, Castelnovo et al. (2016) also discuss ‘public value generation’ as one of the major dimensions. It deals with the social goals and long-term impacts of smart governance projects and interventions, specifically with respect to wellbeing and social inclusion. They discuss the ‘codesign(ing) and coproduction by stakeholders and social innovation(s)’ implicit in the process of value generation in the public domain. The concept of smart cities has also been theoretically and empirically linked with the quality of human life. Besides the components of sustainability and smartness, the aspect of ‘social cohesion’ also holds universal relevance (Arroub et al. 2016).

Despite the overbearing technological character of smart cities and their obsessive reference in most academic and business accounts as ‘socio-technical systems’, their acknowledgement as ‘people-centric paradigms’ is a functional characterisation that sees people as ‘smart users’ with human (sharing information) and digital (aggregation of sensorial information using digital devices) components (Delmastro et al. 2016). In the systems analysis of smart cities consisting of multiple subsystems, human beings are seen as active agents ‘involved in shaping the behaviour of each urban subsystem and the system as a whole’ (Razaghi and Finger 2018). In this analysis, they act as ‘prosumers’ of services in the cities. To extend this argument further, citizens function in both *corporeal* and *meta-corporeal* forms in contemporary ‘smart societies’. In the corporeal form, the visible political acts of engaging and deliberating are done. In the meta-corporeal forms, their effective participation in the public sphere is enhanced by their interaction with social technologies. This enhancement may be symbolic or real, depending on the policy output reflecting those tech-assisted socio-political interactions.

However, the governance efforts in a smart city are not devoid of risks to the ‘smarting’ project and society at large. Shayan et al. (2020) delineate a rich list of risks to smart cities, of which ‘social risks’ are of value for our analysis here. These include mistrust of the technological interventions, limited citizen participation, ICT-induced digital disabilities, divide, and inequalities between citizens and vis-à-vis market forces and states. To understand the link between urban sustainability of the ICT-enabled smart governance modularities, a study conducted by Tomor et al. (2019) noted the importance of a ‘context-sensitive framework’. One major observation made in the study was that despite the availability and accessibility of the general public to the digital services provided by the government, the citizen-state interaction predominantly relates to a ‘one-way information supply’. Digital engagement and empowerment, in this case, do not effectively result in deliberation. In a similar vein, a study conducted on the EUROCITIES network and exploring the concept of ‘creative citizenship’ found that though these embolden the dynamics of information



transparency in the democratic set-up, these ‘do not generate virtual environments favouring fluid interaction between local governments and citizens’ (Rodríguez-Bolívar 2018). ICT cannot, therefore, be assumed as a sufficient condition, ‘(f)or a city to become a “smart city” it needs full engagement of its government and its citizens’ (Rodríguez-Bolívar 2015). Moreover, the compounded nature of emerging urban problems points to the need for not only increased participation within the cities but also a feature of networking and learning between cities, thereby highlighting the need for regional and global integration (Bai et al. 2010). Nam and Pardo (2011) elaborate on the innovation in smart cities in technological (tools-based), organisational (use-based), and policy (problem/solution-based) terms.

This, however, also points to the need for social innovation using the available mechanisms of power and politics available in smart cities, commoning being one of them. The community participation and political functions possible through the spaces and ideas of smart cities can give birth to democratic practices even in the intensely capitalistic and politically enclosed environments of smart cities across the world. Empirically speaking, considering that the idea of smart cities is associated with capital, technology, and people, it is imperative to account for the centrality of cross-cultural and inter-governmental (vertical and horizontal) learning and exchanges for future sustainability.

## ***Commoning***

*To devise common spaces means something much more than to succeed in re-appropriating small pieces of still available open space. It means...to discover the power to create new, ambiguous, possibly contradictory, but always open institutions of commoning. Space, actual physical space, but also metaphorical, imaginary space, becomes not only the ground that is necessary in order to see those institutions function, but also the space that shapes institutions of commoning and is shaped by them.*

(Stavrides 2015)

Recent works on the concept provide an interesting reading of commons by focusing on the agential role assigned to the communities—from passive ‘spectators’ to the active ‘sparring partners’ with the state and markets (Leitheiser et al. 2021). In other tangible conceptualisations, commoning is seen as ‘engag(ing) with grassroots communities’ (Teli et al. 2020) or having close association with the emergence of local social movements (Susser 2017). Gibson-Graham et al. (2016) discuss the post-capitalist transformative commoning strategies beyond the ‘capitalocentric discourse’—whereby commons are considered as a type of property and ‘the coming community of commoners’ is seen as an exclusive response mechanism. They take into account the ‘more-than-human’ components of commoning, classifying commoners as all-encompassing ‘assemblages’ of human and non-human, animate and inanimate, market and social, and governmental and institutional. Nightingale (2019), while providing a political ecology critique from a feminist perspective, give a radical reconceptualisation of commoning to make it more ‘durable’. She focuses on

‘doing commoning’ and ‘becoming in common’ as symbolising continuous performance and efforts based on the understanding of the emergence of commons as an ‘exercise of power’ itself.

These developments, theoretical and empirical, do not necessarily suggest that the process of commoning would inevitably lead to a healthy and unidirectional trend of making the city spaces participative, responsive, and democratic. Low (2009) argues that there are risks implicit in assuming cities as inherently democratic spaces. While discussing a circuit-based analysis of the political communications within a democracy, Low notes that in a traditional understanding of democratic functioning, a continuous flow of feedback from citizens is a structural demand, where ‘*the longer the flows of communication between demos and political power the greater are the possibilities for democracy’s corruption...*’. In this scenario, cities are assumed as ‘privileged democratic spaces’ that provide avenues for countering such challenges to effective citizen participation by ‘shortening and purifying’ the circuit due to increased proximity between different stakeholders. He, however, warns against the ‘overvaluation’ of emergent governance forms that tend to easily connect citizens with the policy-making and implementation apparatus. This is a remarkable observation that holds critical relevance for our efforts at contouring the concept of political commons and commoning in the next section.

## Political Commons: Developing a Framework

The classical meaning of the term *political* is derived from the Greek word *polis*, meaning of or relating to the city-state. In generalist terms, a city-state is seen as a political unit with the infrastructure for institutional governance in place (tentatively) within a geographical boundary. The related verb *politheuesthai* deals with being a citizen and ‘to be active in managing the affairs of the city’ (Mulgan 1990). In the Habermasian knowledge of politics in human society, two points are established (Habermas 1974): firstly, its relation to the sphere of public activity, and secondly, the range of activities possible (accessing/assembling in public or expressing the personal). While exploring the issue of politics and its empirics in conjunction with science and technology studies, Gomart and Hajer (2003) pose a critical question—‘*Is that Politics?*’ (as a challenge to the central enquiry in political science—‘*what is politics?*’). In their reading of John Dewey’s work *The Public and Its Problems*, they discuss ‘public’ as having an emergent character (rather than as a fixed category) and ‘politics’ (in contrast to its ‘institutional fix(ation)’) as constructing and evoking collective actors in the form of state, society, and people. There is an essential verbification involved in the efforts at ‘doing politics’ (Wodak 2009). Politics in this reading is induced with a performative character with a set agenda.

In this context, if we try to define the commons as organically ‘political’, it may seem an easy act of umbrellifying a concept because all its related functions and entities are dynamically public in their origin and orientation. And anything public has the potential of being accorded a political tag as well. We shall try to avoid this

and maintain the semi-exclusivity in the politicality of specific commons. Political commons can, therefore, be comprehensively understood in the following terms:

- Availability is significant for a *meaningful social and public life*.
- Accessibility apparatus is *ensured and governed by a recognised authority*, social or governmental.
- Rootedness of the common in a *legal constitutional rights paradigm*.
- It provides transformative avenues for *constructive engagement and social development*.
- A *locale for conflict* visibility, assessment, and management.
- Fosters *innovation in institutions, processes, and ideas*.
- *Source of resilience* in exigencies (like pandemics, violent conflicts, natural disasters, etc).

In doing so, we further identify the ‘*SOFT*’ characteristics (Fig. 3.1) of the political commons. These are elaborated below:

- **Subject**—people, the central character of all socio-political developments;
- **Object**—the democratic political function of meeting, engaging, deliberating;
- **Forces**—navigating the interoperable routes between market, state, and society/community;
- **Tools**—looking at technology and social processes as mutual-feeder channels for political communications.

The concept of political commons/commoning, thus derived, has the potential for wider purposive application on the following fronts:

- first, as an *identity category* (identification) of the commodity/entity/process;
- second, as an *idea category* (theorisation) for developing a conceptual clarity of those commodities/entities/processes;
- third, as an *instrument category* (application) for mobilising those commodities/entities/processes for tangible changes.

Identifying certain sectors/entities as ‘political commons’ (within/adjunctly to urban commons) may serve four major goals. Firstly, accord the status of imminent political relevance to the entity despite its ‘common’ character. Secondly, instil awareness about its power-embeddedness, ideological fertility, and communicative potential for citizens and state alike. Thirdly, impart authoritative and comparative legitimacy to the entity when juxtaposed against the similar mediums/entities readily available in the ‘common’ space of the city. Lastly, it will help leverage the entity as a crisis response channel for urban emergencies. These themes require further exploration beyond the confines of this chapter.

The political commons, however, should not be seen as incubated from the power politicking. Structurally, these may seem neutral, ‘politicised’ only by association, affiliation, and funding from the government/state. Instrumentally, it may engage in ideological propagation/erasure with scope for socio-political bandwagoning by

stakeholders. The political commons in this sense largely include educational institutions, public-community healthcare systems, publicly owned/operated communication systems, etc., that are critical for the wellbeing of the resident population and impart infrastructural essentialism to the urbanism of the space and its future development. The (neo)liberality of these state-supported political commons, therefore, stipulates substantial socio-academic auditing beyond the minimal breadth of this chapter.

## Community Media: An Example

*Citizens can be the shock troops of democracy. Properly deployed, their local knowledge, wisdom, commitment, authority, even rectitude can address wicked failures of legitimacy, justice, and effectiveness in representative and bureaucratic institutions. The contemporary ways in which citizens make these contributions, however, assume neither the forms, purposes, nor rationales of classical participatory democracy.*

Fung (2006)

Media, despite its technologically distinct and communicatively diverse forms in contemporary times, has historically had a typical *public/political function*. It pertains to information gathering, processing, and communication/dissemination. This made it a co-witness to any kind of governance or institutional developments in the polity, along with the citizens and the state. If this is to be considered a triad, then community media holds a crucial link between the way states and citizens interact and interpret the messages emanating from respective quarters. The explorations of *alternative media*, as opposed to mainstream media, highlight certain general traits in terms of its relatively smaller scale, orientation towards marginalised groups, independence vis-à-vis state and market, horizontal dispersion, facilitator of representational politics, and possessing non-dominant or counter-hegemonic discourses (Carpentier et al. 2003). The linkages between community communication and human development have also been researched, and concluded the important role these mediums play in democratisation, citizenship building, social struggles, and awareness raising (Milan 2009). Saeed (2009) also highlights the coterminous development of media and mass democracy.

In a way, community media is a choice response to the mainstream media, which inevitably gets entangled in ‘fictionalisation of everyday politics’ and in turn, results in disillusionment with politics itself (Wodak 2009). The journalism of the mainstream and alternative media also differs—while the former focuses on the legal dimensions of the news, the latter shows socio-economic issues of immediate relevance to the people, hence, promoting the christening of community media efforts as a ‘radical tradition’ (Harcup 2003).

Further, the dynamics of ‘platforms’ through which community media operates and the commoning is done also needs investigation. The essentially participatory online media is ‘rediscover(ing) the social foundations’ such that normative social

structures and collaborations are becoming the basis for technological designs and interventions (Bollier 2007). The online platforms and content providers are laying ‘strategic claims’ in becoming ‘curators of public discourse’ with very little liability for what users of these platforms opionate and a disproportionate influence on the information policy of the respective states (Gillespie 2010). These media platforms have also become the source of information procurement pertaining to citizens’ political needs, policy feedback, and grievances, thereby generating greater participation from the public (Kumar et al. 2016).

The operations of community media as an alternate discursive space available to the masses are not devoid of its challenges. There are issues linked with the sustainability of community media platforms—like short-life, under-capitalised, and relatively smaller audience base (Harcup 2003). In their cultural analysis of community media, Howley (2015) also urges us to explore the performance continuum of the medium whereby it ‘demonstrate(s) not only signs of resistance and subversion but evidence of complicity and submission as well’. Dreher (2010), while empirically detailing the ‘politics of listening’ in concomitance with the ‘dynamics of speaking up’ points to the fact that ‘speaking up does not guarantee being heard, but rather depends on being “granted an audience”’ and that research must take cognizance of ‘silences and refusals of dialogues’.

Based on a literature survey and field-based observations of the community radios in India, the authors propose community media as not only an example of a political common but also as an effective political commoning tool. Community media, with its focus on *community* and *info-mediation*, possess the following characteristics (tabulated in Table 3.2). In this pursuit, the role of community media is explored as a principal political common with the potential of turning the available state-citizen communication infrastructure into an action-oriented, participative, inclusive, and transformative governance tool.

It has the capacity to not only harness the traditional mould of grassroot political governance aimed at imparting socio-economic agency to the citizens (social auditing of projects and processes, fiscal accountability of local governments, participatory developmental planning, etc.), but also incorporate the dynamic engagement realities of the socially volatile mediascape, and bouts of technological innovation fuelling a smart city. Political commoning is then acknowledged as a mutual discursing process within the community, facilitated by the state from a ‘principled distance’ through an infrastructural platform, and adaptive to the challenges and demands of sustainable civic engagement.

### ***Community Radio: Political Commoning in India***

Community radio (CR) is a type of communication technology that works on the principles of electromagnetic radiation. It consists of a transmitter and a receiver. The basic design and operational principle make it a convenient tool for information dissemination at the grassroots level. Furthermore, CRs have three characteristics that

**Table 3.2** Features and functions of community media as a political common based on literature survey and field-based observations of community radios in India (Source: Authors)

Key features of community media as a political common	Corresponding functions of the community media
Spatial (Virtual + Real)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information exchange between state-citizens in a public domain through a communication infrastructure, both digital and physical</li> </ul>
Agential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discursive, interpenetration of the ideas between the triad—market, state, society/community</li> <li>• People may be both, passive or active recipients of the information delivered</li> </ul>
Political innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constructive, cocreation of the content by the triad</li> <li>• Technologically re-igniting the traditional modes of democratic engagement</li> <li>• Info-mediation, exclusionary/inclusionary by way of content circulated</li> </ul>
Civic enterprising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political activity (engaging, deliberating) through diverse technological platforms</li> <li>• Comanagement of the infrastructure</li> <li>• Popular voluntarism</li> <li>• Non-rivalrous yet competitive growth</li> </ul>
Multi-utilitarian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural communications</li> <li>• Policy influence</li> <li>• Resilience and responsiveness during emergencies like COVID-19 pandemic</li> <li>• Avenue for regularised public engagement</li> <li>• Policy literacy and awareness of the masses</li> </ul>

make them a potent community medium, i.e. ‘community participation, non-profit making, and community ownership and management’ (Malik 2015). CR provides a democratically moderated channel of communication with a transparent list of programmes and content. Since no personal data is directly needed for its operation and access, it may dissuade fears and negate the element of potential threat while providing crucial services like education, skills, agriculture-related information, cultural and linguistic preservation function, and moments of sensory ‘escape’ and entertainment.

Government of India’s Central Sector Scheme—‘Supporting Community Radio Movement in India’—seeks to provide ‘resources, capacity, and technology’ for the promotion of CRs in ‘remote and rural areas, and to promote the socio-economic and cultural development of communities’. These are considered third-tier broadcasting corresponding to public (AIR) and private radio (FM) broadcasting. In the Indian context, studies have explored CRs ‘counter-hegemonic’ role vis-à-vis dominant discourses and in the development of ‘participatory communication ethos’ (Patil 2014). In the larger South Asian context, these are believed to have a role in addressing the ‘voice poverty’ of the otherwise marginalised groups and the

macro-level institutional environment is the need for ‘democratic and sustainable’ CRs (Pavarala 2015). It allows for people’s participation in content creation, station management, information production and, most importantly, in its ability to facilitate people to ‘choose their own stories, express their voice, and define their identity’ (Malik 2015). These also have a crucial role in building women’s lives in terms of—giving education, skilling, overall development, and empowerment (Nirmala 2015).

These can, therefore, be seen as ‘social objects’ with unique existence among the larger institutional paradigm of media and democratic governance (Riaz and Qureshi 2017). The CRs are also embroiled in the ‘development discourse(s)’ of the nation, which is often contradictory to the theoretical roots of the CR movement itself (Backhaus 2020). This makes it a dynamic space of exchanges and counter-exchanges. Furthermore, the idea of ‘community’ in community radio is also up for deliberation. Bailur (2012), while exploring the concept of community, theoretically argues that these are indiscrete, dynamic, cognitive, and performed deconstructs. This, when related to conflict environments provides a relevant insight, i.e. if the communities are dynamic and non-rigid in their virtual composition and function, then there does exist a possibility of creating temporary and transitory communities engaged in political commoning, whereby it undertakes politicisation of the grassroots demands and channels the power of a collective medium for civic participation.

On synthesising our conceptualisation of political commons with the explorations into community media, we generate a two-layered wheel of political common(ing) (Fig. 3.2). The inner layer depicts the key features of community media (an empirical example of political common), and the outer layer contains key components of the concept of political common. This abstract wheel seeks to perform two functions:

- Posit community media within a conceptual frame of political commons, suggesting a similar treatment for other undefined and unidentified political commons.
- Provide a roadmap for utilising the said common for political commoning, and suggests actively engaging with commons for the larger purpose of bolstering the democratic governance processes.

The inner wheel can be retrofitted with other examples of political commons, for instance, a public healthcare or education system, and spoked with a different set of features specific to that common. The outer layer, however, imparts a robust sheath of elements required for understanding the existing and newer commons within a public/political domain of a smart city.

## Assessment

*Yet we are less sure about what the practices of a democratic politics in our age will and should look like.*

(Gomart and Hajer 2003)

The democratic ideals of informed civic engagement and inclusive governance models have influenced the conceptualisation of political commons in this chapter. We do not assume that all smart cities would be within a democratic polity or that only democratic ones are housing smart cities. Any objective empirical enquiry would indeed point contrarily. What we propose, however, is that for smart cities to be sustainable (socio-ecologically, ethically, or politically) and for the commons within them to be just and equitable, democracy pre-positions itself as a credible context.

Not all urban commons can be convincingly portrayed as political commons; neither can the political commons only be confined to urban spaces. The concept also does not attempt to replace the existing commons but rather refine them. Affixing *political* to the commons is to impart operative urgency to the concerned entity/process with respect to their critical role in the governance of smart cities (administrative accountability, feedback mechanisms, procedural and institutional transparency, public participation, inclusive structures, etc.). The resulting ‘politicisation’ of commons can, therefore, be used as a measure to place the commons (urban or otherwise) within the governance apparatus and channelise it in a manner to positively connect citizens with the state.

Leveraging community media as an example of a political common involved its pitfalls. The community, taken independently, suggests a correspondingly smaller group within a larger society, making it look like an isolated category. However, it was precisely this idea that supported its usage as an example of a political common. The geographical and issue-based limitation of the community media makes it an exclusively community-centric tool. As discussed previously in the chapter, one of the major challenges to smart city governance relates to the effective distance between citizens and states (or between people and power centres) instilled due to the technological orientation of smart cities, despite the virtual proximity. Community media presents itself not only as a political common (with its public orientation, facilitating democratic engagements, promoting multi-stakeholder interests, and flexible interactions between the social and technological processes), but also as a potent tool for political commoning.

Finally, after providing our justification for *why cities in democracies, how political* and *what media*, we come to the crux of it all—the *commons* and *commoning*. Instead of studying in detail the length and breadth of an existing urban common, we venture into articulating why specific entities can be framed as political commons within the perimeters of a smart urban space. With political commons, we do not just suggest a static descriptive concept but a potentially performing concept. Commoning is also seen as an inextricable part of governing. This postulation may be useful in providing an analytical frame for looking at urban commons in smart cities or



in identifying newer commons within them for planning inclusive and sustainable urban futures.

To conclude, while the material facets of human lives will inevitably face ‘forced obsolescence’, the socio-political traditions holding the societies together shall continue with minimal adaptations. The urban political life has historically and artistically been depicted as people meeting, engaging, and deliberating. Despite the ‘technological embeddedness’ (Anthopoulos 2017) of contemporary smart cities, these functions persist, albeit in different forms and through different mediums. Political common(ing) is, therefore, an attempt to facilitate the designing and production of inclusive and efficient governance in smart cities.

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