FKI Strategic Plan 2026-2030

Table of Contents

1   Introduction

The Free Knowledge Institute (FKI) is a Dutch public-benefit foundation dedicated to supporting and promoting free knowledge, open technology, and initiatives that advance the democratisation of digital technology for the benefit of society at large.

Over the past two decades, the FKI has worked to support individuals and communities in reducing their dependence on technology monopolies and to enable autonomous, mission-driven community initiatives.

However, the current global landscape presents serious concerns, with major technology corporations increasingly aligning with authoritarian political movements. Rather than waiting for governments or private sector actors to address these challenges, the FKI proposes collective funding of necessary technology infrastructure, raising public awareness, and supporting collaborative transition efforts.

It has become evident that the FKI must expand its collective ambitions to strengthen resistance to these trends and, more importantly, to build social capacity for living in a digitally enabled society that balances environmental sustainability with human wellbeing.

Therefore, the FKI proposes establishing a Democratic Tech Fund to support commons-based technology and help mobilise awareness and a collective transition away from tech monopolies. This Fund will be organised by civil society organisations, with matching contributions from municipal and regional governments, as well as from philanthropic foundations and public benefit organisations.

In this document you will find the key achievements of the Free Knowledge Institute; its mission and vision to set up a Democratic Tech Fund, its strategic intentions, and areas of work. At the end the financial scenarios for these ambitions are outlined.

1.1   FKI History 2006 – 2025

Since its founding in 2007, the Free Knowledge Institute has been active in the digital commons movement, translating academic research into practical methodologies and tools for building equitable digital futures.

1.1.1 Key Milestones

Foundation (2006-2011)

- 2006 marks the beginning of the FKI team's work, coordinating the EC-funded SELF project on free/open source software education, while the foundation is registered one year later.
- Formally established in Amsterdam in 2007 as a spin-off from Internet Society Netherlands.

- Secured EC funding in 2008 to establish the Free Technology Academy, offering master-level courses on free software and open standards through European open universities.
- Co-organised Barcelona's Free Culture Forum (2009) and participated in the openSE project (2009-2011).

Growing Recognition (2010-2015)

- Participated in major international commons conferences (Drumbeat, fOSSA, International Commons Conference).
- FTA continued operations on student fees after EC funding ended, demonstrating sustainability potential.
- Deepened engagement with commons economics at Berlin's Economy of the Commons Conference (2013).

Barcelona Innovation Period (2015-2018)

- Participated in the EC's Digital DIY research project.
- Published the Five Pillar Framework (2016) - a methodology for developing sustainable commons-based business models.
- Became legal umbrella for The Things Network Catalonia.
- Signed MoU with Barcelona City Council to establish "BarCola" - Barcelona Commons Collaborative Economy Commission.
- Initiated La Comunificadora, a Barcelona Activa support programme for commons-based collaborative economy initiatives, designed around the Five Pillar Framework.

Cooperative Evolution (2017-2025)

- Convened organisations to initiate CommonsCloud (2017).
- Co-founded femProcomuns SCCL, a multistakeholder cooperative in Barcelona.
- Transferred key projects (CommonsCloud, La Comunificadora, TTNcat) to the cooperative, demonstrating evolution toward participatory models.
- Stepped back from direct implementation (2018) to support femProcomuns.
- Co-founded The Online Meeting Cooperative (meet.coop) in 2020.

Current Revival (2025)

- Reactivated with fresh ambition to accelerate growth of digital commons across multiple domains: to accelerate the building of social capacity outside Big Tech, to foster digital autonomy and sovereignty, working on the set up of a Democratic Tech Fund to collectively fund and mobilise people to make the transition together.

Five Pillar Framework

- The Five Pillar Framework represents a comprehensive approach to developing sustainable business models that align with commons principles. Originally developed by the Free Knowledge Institute (FKI), this framework has evolved into a comprehensive methodology for creating and analysing collaborative, community-driven organisations that prioritise

shared value over extractive practices. In a nutshell: 1) the community in the centre, 2) shared knowledge, 3) shared governance, 4) a co-production model and 5) a strategy for diverse income and mobilisation of resources[1].

- The Five Pillar Framework remains the FKI's most significant methodological contribution: a practical approach for analysing and developing commons-based organisations that prioritise shared value creation over extractive business models. It is a methodology for community-driven sustainability and business models, especially suited for democratic tech initiatives, including cooperative clouds, community networks, platform cooperatives, data commons, community or public AI, and civic technology.

1.1.2. Strategic renewal

In its early years, the FKI may have looked differently at the challenges of systemic change. While policymakers allowed major technology platforms to emerge and consolidate control over significant portions of the digital economy, there hasn't been enough awareness of the problems this creates for democratic societies.

Given the urgency in the current situation, the FKI has undertaken a strategic review, learning from both successes and setbacks, to develop a renewed approach for the period 2026-2030.

1.2 Context

The Digital Technology Landscape: Challenges to Democratic Foundations

Current developments in the digital technology sector present serious challenges to democratic institutions and principles. These challenges include[2]:

- **Economic concentration and extraction:** Major technology corporations have established dominant market positions, with significant economic flows from Europe to the United States. For example, European expenditure on cloud software and services to US companies amounts to approximately €265 billion annually, supporting an estimated 2 million jobs in the United States whilst representing economic outflow from European economies.

- **Wealth concentration:** The technology sector has seen unprecedented wealth accumulation, with some technology executives earning compensation approximately one million times the Dutch average salary, raising concerns about economic inequality and its implications for democratic participation.

- **Algorithmic discrimination**: systems that reproduce and strengthen inequalities.

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1   https://freeknowledge.eu/five-pillar-model-commons-business-models
2   See FKI articles "How BigTech dismantles democratic foundations" - https://freeknowledge.eu/how-bigtech-dismantles-democratic-foundations and its prequel https://freeknowledge.eu/accelerated-construction-techno-authoritarian-infra

- **Information ecosystem concerns:** Large social media platforms exert significant influence over information flows, raising concerns about content moderation, misinformation proliferation, and potential impacts on media independence and democratic discourse.

- **Deregulation**, Silicon Valley and allies are pushing hard for the laissez-fair deregulation doctrine against democratic regulation.

- **Big Tech alliance with authoritarian political movements**. Large technological corporations have used their influence and platforms to promote specific political parties and campaigns.

- **Erosion of collective agency:** Dominant technology narratives often emphasise dystopian scenarios, potentially undermining public confidence in collaborative problem-solving and collective action on major societal challenges.

- **Predictive policing**, threatening equality before the law and presumption of innocence.

- **Reduced security**. Centralised systems with government enforced backdoors seriously limit security and safety.

- **Anti-ecological massive data centres** that consume large amounts of energy and water to power AI and other technologies.

- **Algorithmic killing pipeline**, a growing alliance between big tech corporations and military.

Institutional Responses: Necessary but Insufficient

Digital sovereignty has become a priority for the European Commission and Member States, with multi-billion euro programmes planned to support European technology development alongside regulatory frameworks. Whilst these initiatives represent important steps, the FKI assesses that current institutional responses face three critical limitations:

1. **Insufficient scale:** Regulatory measures, whilst important, may lack sufficient impact. For instance, the €2.95 billion fine imposed on Google for abuse of its advertising network represents approximately 1% of the company's annual revenue, suggesting that such penalties may be absorbed as business costs rather than driving fundamental change in corporate behaviour.

2. **Structural approach:** Current institutional investments risk replicating centralised technology structures rather than fostering decentralised, community-based alternatives. Without careful design, European digital sovereignty initiatives may create new dependencies rather than genuine technological autonomy.

3. **Urgency and implementation timeline:** The pace of technological concentration requires rapid action. Whilst institutional programmes operate on multi-year cycles (the next EU Multi-annual Financial Framework covers 2028-2034), the FKI assesses that effective responses require more immediate mobilisation. Building sustainable alternatives requires not only technological development but also the cultivation of user communities with the awareness, capacity, and commitment to adopt fundamentally different technology models. The window for effective community mobilisation and capacity building may be narrower than current institutional timelines allow.

Given these challenges, the FKI adopts a realistic assessment of near-term prospects whilst focusing on building collective capacity for resilience through solidarity-based, decentralised network approaches.

2   Mission, vision, strategic intentions, areas of work

2.1 Mission

To advance free knowledge and open technology through the development of community-controlled digital infrastructure and the building of social capacity for commons governance, or democratic governance of technology.

To achieve this mission, the FKI has developed specific strategic objectives in collaboration with partners including Commons Network (Netherlands), Waag Futurelab (Netherlands), Goteo / Platoniq Foundation (Spain), and in coordination with other aligned organisations.

2.2 Vision: a Democratic Tech Fund and a federation

The FKI envisions a digital society built on commons, that is, characterised by:

- Democratic control over essential digital infrastructure
- Equitable access to knowledge and technology
- Sustainable, community-driven technology development
- Respect for human rights and environmental limits
- Diverse, interoperable technology ecosystems that serve communities rather than extracting value from them

The vision that the FKI is working on with its partners is to build up a bottom-up organised funding network based in solidarity and contributing gifts/donations. We envision Funding Circles in regions and cities pooling seed funding and allocating that towards democratic tech initiatives. They will help grow up these initiatives, with crowdfunding campaigns directed to the general public, and with matching support from public institutions and philanthropic funders.

The shared mission is stated as follows.

> *We build a bottom-up organised gift-based fund*
>
> *for democratic tech initiatives*
>
> *in our cities and regions.*

What do we focus on?

Elements of a fundamentally different regime already exist: communities, cooperatives, civil society movements and public administrations have been building elements of a public Internet and collective digital means, developing software resources in the free-libre and open-source commons.

However, these tools and materials are still fragmented, incomplete, need further improvement and recognition by the public at large. With this context in mind, we propose the Democratic Tech Fund with a threefold intention:

   1. **Build and provide the tech**: generating working configurations of tech infrastructure and services that address actual, perceived needs, drawing on the reserves of free-libre open-source software and constructing practices of material infrastructure that are under the review and steering of the communities they service. More concretely, we envision online services that work for people and allow them to connect to a growing body of digital services, ranging from email to social network services, from collaborative workspace to economic tooling and community organising spaces. When these foundations are laid, we will continue with the organising of alternative platforms for key sectors, such as energy, health and care, housing, mobility, agriculture and food. Ultimately, we want to enable our communities to organise anything necessary for a good life in harmony with each other and the planet.

   2. **Mobilise awareness towards adoption**: highlighting the clear and present danger and our collective capacity to resist, re-make and re-imagine. There's a need for campaign work, media and visuals, and for intelligence and news about what has already been done. Thus the fund is not simply about collecting and distributing money, and creating more tech. It's also, and significantly, about funding and facilitating the work of visioning and planning, organising and networking, collaborating and sharing of patterns and precedents, protocols and practical insights. There's a whole lot of on-the-ground learning and mutual education to be facilitated.

   3. **Build the community**: nurturing local, regional and trans-regional communities and networks that are capable to articulate these alternatives, to make the change together and to sustain the economic base for radically re-oriented infrastructure.

By 2030 these initiatives should have a solid user base, and together offer resilience.

Alongside the funding work, the FKI intents to build a federation of digitally mediated commons: not geeky but civil society and coop-sector facilitation, mobilisation and 'formación' – the formation of social capacity.

2.3 Values, strategic guidelines

The FKI's strategic approach emphasises:

- **Bottom-up development:** Community-driven technology initiatives.
- **European autonomy:** Reducing technological dependencies whilst maintaining global interconnection.
- **Sovereignty through federation:** Building capacity through networked, decentralised approaches.
- **Safety and security:** Ensuring technology infrastructure that protects users' rights and data.

2.4 Strategic intentions of FKI

For the coming years the FKI intents to build up and enhance existing capacities to resist and be resilient in times of a Digital Coup[3], or the Authoritarian Stack[4]. Therefore our high-level aims: 1) research needs and technological solutions to build democratic tech infrastructure; 2) select, fund and support the set up and growth of democratic technology initiatives; 3) raise awareness and connect communities of peers with democratic tech.

The Free Knowledge Institute takes the initiative together with other committed partners such as Commons Network, Waag Futurelab, taking a lead role as fiscal host and coordinating party and inviting anyone willing to contribute. We therefore seek partners and people willing to contribute as:

1. **Democratic tech initiative**: individuals and teams with entrepreneurial roles, campaigners, community organisers, funding wizards and system administrators;

2. **Organisations as key partners of a Funding Circle**, contributing, selecting and allocating their contributions to the selected initiatives;

3. **Funding Circle Benefactors**: citizens contributing a periodic donation to the Circle;

4. **General public**: especially the aware people, early adopters to contribute donations to the democratic tech crowdfunding campaigns;

5. **Cities and public administrations** committing match funding, doubling the collected funding;

6. **Philanthropic funders** or private benefactors committing development funding and/or matching, multiplying the collected funding.

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3 Digital Coup is a term introduced by Carole Cadwalladr, referring to an coup in the context of an information war, https://broligarchy.substack.com/p/it-is-a-coup
4 The Authoritarian Stack is the name of a project that maps the "Authoritarian Stack"—a network of firms, funds, and political actors turning core state functions into private platforms. Based on an open-source dataset of over 250 actors, thousands of verified connections, and $45 billion in documented financial flows. The lead authors are Francesca Bria and José Bautista. Funded by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung.

2.5 Areas of Work

The FKI's main activity will be in creating and developing the Fund, and complementary courses of action. These courses of action can operate independently too.

1. **Democratic Tech Fund**: Establish a collective funding platform to aggregate and distribute resources for democratic technology initiatives across European cities and regions, with potential for geographic expansion. This fund will operate on participatory principles, enabling civil society organisations, citizens, and aligned institutions to collectively support technology infrastructure that serves democratic values.

2. **Cooperative and Commons-Based Business Support:** Identify and support cooperative and commons-based organisations working in free knowledge and democratic technology. This includes facilitating connections between initiatives, supporting federation building, and contributing to the growth and social impact of democratic technology projects.

3. **Research, Development, and Pilot Projects:** Conduct research and development in free knowledge and democratic technology practices, including pilot projects that empower communities, social movements, and geographic regions (districts, municipalities, or broader areas) to experiment with alternative technology models. These pilots will be designed to function both autonomously at local level and as part of broader federated networks.

4. **Capacity Building and Peer Learning:** Facilitate mutual learning and education around free knowledge and democratic technology practices. This encompasses:
  - **Education programmes:** Building collective capacity within civil society and cooperative-commons economy sectors
  - **Critical awareness:** Identifying practical, locally-manifest challenges related to technology concentration and its impact on democratic institutions
  - **Counter-infrastructure development:** Supporting initiatives that provide alternatives to extractive technology models

3 Finance

3.1 Financial Oversight and Transparency

The following section describes the FKI's financial governance practices, including those to be implemented in the context of the Democratic Tech Fund.

- **Independent Audits and Reporting:** the FKI maintains rigorous financial oversight through independent audits and transparent reporting practices, ensuring accountability and trust among all stakeholders.

- **Board Governance:** The foundation's board exercises oversight of asset management and expenditure, ensuring that financial resources are deployed effectively in accordance with the FKI's mission and strategic objectives.

- **Stakeholder Reporting:** Detailed financial and operational reports are shared with Funding Circles and funders to enable collective review, shared learning, and responsive adaptation of programmes.

- **Public Disclosure:** Annual financial reports are published, providing comprehensive information on income sources, expenditure patterns, and overall financial health, thereby promoting transparency and maintaining stakeholder confidence.

3.2   Income generation - Overview

The FKI generates income through multiple sources: institutional reserves, grants from governmental and philanthropic sources, partnerships, and individual and organisational donations. We maintain a high level of transparency, publishing detailed financial reports and audits where possible. This practice not only ensures accountability but also builds trust with donors, partners, and the broader community. The FKI functions as a custodian and fiscal host for funds received, safeguarding donations and ensuring their distribution according to agreed allocations to specific projects and individuals or organisations.

1. **Own reserve:** financial reserves built up over the years through project funding surpluses and donations, providing operational stability and enabling strategic investments.

2. **Grants**:

- **European Union Grants:** the FKI has successfully secured funding through EU Framework and Horizon programmes, which support research, innovation, and digital transformation initiatives.

- **Governmental Grants:** National, regional, and municipal governments provide funding for projects aligned with public policy objectives related to digital rights, privacy, and open technology. Municipal and regional governments are expected to be significant funding partners for the Democratic Tech Fund.

- **Foundations and Institutions**: the FKI collaborates with non-governmental, non-profit, philanthropic foundations and research institutions that have related, synergistic goals.

3. **Individual and organisational donations** constitute an important revenue source, including both one-time and recurring contributions. The FKI prioritises building lasting relationships with donors aligned with its mission and values.

- **organisations**: contributing in kind or with money to specific Funding Circles

- **individuals**: contributing money to a specific Funding Circle or directly to a specific project.

3.3   Expenditures and fair compensation

The FKI operates on the premise that the people taking responsibility for the work to make this happen are fairly compensated. The high level design principle is that the collectively mobilised funding should be destined to the democratic tech initiatives, and a small part to sustain the work to organise the funding, the community and the projects – key operational circles of work. Further details regarding the Democratic Tech Fund can be found in its detailed plans.

4. Conclusions

The challenges outlined in this strategic plan make clear that our societies can no longer rely on corporate platforms or slow-moving institutional programmes to secure a democratic digital future. Yet the situation is far from hopeless. Across Europe and beyond, communities, cooperatives, public institutions, and civil society organisations have already developed many of the building blocks for a decentralised, rights-respecting digital ecosystem. What is missing is coordination, sustained resourcing, and the social capacity to scale these efforts.

The Free Knowledge Institute proposes the Democratic Tech Fund and its associated federation as a practical response: a collective, bottom-up mechanism to finance, develop, and sustain digital infrastructure that serves the public good. By combining community engagement, technical development, and long-term capacity building, the Fund provides a pathway for cities, regions, organisations, and citizens to participate meaningfully in shaping their technological futures.

The work ahead is ambitious, but it is achievable. The necessary knowledge, tools, and experience already exist; what is needed now is shared commitment and mobilisation. Over the coming years, the FKI and its partners will dedicate themselves to strengthening democratic tech initiatives, nurturing local and trans-local communities of practice, and building a resilient ecosystem capable of withstanding growing digital dependencies.

We invite civil society organisations, public administrations, philanthropic funders, and committed citizens to join this effort. By acting together, we can build a digital infrastructure grounded in solidarity, autonomy, and democratic governance—and ensure that the technological foundations of our societies reflect the values we hold in common.