What are the digital commons, anyway?

The Ecological Commons are the best place to start when trying to understand the digital commons—as the history is deeply embedded within. Snyder describes the ecological commons having been “defined as ‘the undivided land belong to members of a local community as a whole.’ This definition fails to make the point that the commons is both specific land and the traditional community institution that determines the carrying capacity for its various subunits and defines the rights and obligations of those who use it...because it is traditional and local it is not identical with identical with today’s ‘public domain’ which is land held and managed by a central government...such management may be destructive...” (33). We, as a people, do not have any say in what happens to our “commons.” Furthermore, we think areas like “public domain” belong to us until the government--always in the interest of a big corporation or profit--decides to destroy it. “The village and tribal people who live in the tropical forests are literally bulldozed out of their homes by international logging interests in league with national governments” (37). What happened? How did the idea of the commons change?

The Enclosure Movement marks when the commons, and the local people they housed, started to become enclosed and the idea of the commons eroded. Snyder argues that “destruction extends worldwide and ‘encloses’ local commons, local peoples” (37). This is problematic, of course, because the ones who are excluded and unable to enjoy the benefits of a commonly shared domain are already the ones who already have less capital and fewer resources to begin with. Those with capital, resources, political might, and power dictate who has access to what lands and ultimately has the final say in how these spaces are utilized or treated.

The Digital Commons can easily be understood through the Ecological Commons if you simply make a few adjustments. Instead of land being harnessed by the government and big corporations, it is information, academic work, and creativity. And instead of physical fences and enclosures limiting access to the commons, it is firewalls, copyright, and passwords.