

Open Publishing

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Open publishing means that the process of creating news is transparent to the readers. They can contribute a story and see it appear instantly in the pool of stories publicly available. Those stories are filtered as little as possible to help the readers find the stories they want. Readers can see editorial decisions being made by others. They can see how to get involved and help make editorial decisions. If they can think of a better way for the software to help shape editorial decisions, they can copy the software because it is free and change it and start their own site. If they want to redistribute the news, they can, preferably on an open publishing site.

The full rave

Open publishing is the same as free software. They're both (r)evolutionary responses to the privatisation of information by multinational monopolies. For software it's Microsoft. For publishing it's CNN. For both software and publishing it's AOL Time Warner.

Free software gives away programs. They come at no cost. Let's call it free beer. But this alone is not free software. Free software is also free as in free speech, not just free beer. The source code, the genetic blueprint, the internal mechanics are open for others to see (hence free software is also called open-source). So others can take it and change it and pass on their changes to other people. The product is free, and the process of production is free and transparent. If someone doesn't like it, they can take it and change it. The one thing they can't change is whether it is free. The GNU copyleft, a viral subversion of copyright laws, which guarantees freedom for a piece of code and all its mutations. The means is the end. The journey is the destination.

You might think this process wouldn't produce anything truly creative, awe-inspiring, staggering, huge, complex, simple, small, pedantic, reliable, random or enjoyable. If you thought that, you'd be drastically underestimating what humans get up to for fun. Because all of these adjectives apply to free software. Geeks like to joke about what free software needs to do next to achieve world domination.

Microsoft doesn't think this joke is very funny. Microsoft is one of the biggest corporations in the world. Microsoft spends billions of dollars to pay programmers to keep their software closed and internals secret.

Free software is overwhelmingly written by volunteers. Free software runs the Internet and Microsoft does not. The number and diversity of people using free software is accelerating. Microsoft usually responds to such threats by buying them out and assimilating them. Free software cannot be bought. Free software is not frugal with its genetic code.

Free software spreads itself like a benevolent microbe after an evolutionary leap forward.

Microsoft assumes people are stupid and holds focus groups to determine exactly in what way are they stupid. They then pay a small number of people a lot of money to engineer that stupidity into software. Sometimes this works well, because everyone is stupid sometimes. But it doesn't cater well for everyone being smart.

Free software assumes people are smart and creative and can choose for them to swim in the shallow or the deep end of the technology pool. Even the geekiest programmer might want to have their feet planted on the bottom sometimes, and the freshest beginner might make the biggest splash diving into the deep end. Free software programmers still manage to eat despite giving away their code. Software is information. So are news stories. So are opinion pieces. Maybe information wants to be free?

Under the dominant multinational global news system, news is not free. News is not open. It is very expensive. It is highly secretive. To see the news you need to pay with money or with your time spent watching ads (usually for cars) or both. To create the news you need to pay expensive public relations consultants. To write the news you need to obey corporate news values, making stories on a production line, for maximum advertising impact at minimum cost. To edit the news you need to be a global stock market newswire service or a multinational media company. To distribute the news you need to have one of 6 TV transmission towers in a city of millions.

Media corporations assume the viewers are stupid. In their eyes the total creative potential of the audience is Funniest Home Videos. Creative people do not buy more stuff, they make their own. This is a problem for media multinationals. They do not trust their audience to be creative. It might be bad for profits, bad for executive salaries.

But it's OK. The audience doesn't trust the corporate media either. This situation has led to rampant confusion and alienation of society. We are disconnected from our ecology and ourselves. Our planet is functioning as a global ecosystem more than ever before due to the global nature of human activity, yet the humans don't have any way of communicating with each other. Systemic problems go unseen and unsolved by billions. Only the issues that are important to sell ads or grease the stock exchange have reliable global news impact.

What we have is a very complex system within which the humans have recently gained enormous power but as yet they have no correspondingly powerful network of communication infrastructure to support it. We have no neural network to process information. Not so much a global village as a global megaphone.

Then the Internet was added to the global communications pool. If you can read the Internet, you can also write to it. If someone else has told a story on the Internet, you can choose to hear it. Information flows between the net and other communication systems: the phone, the TV, the radio and newspapers, forming a much more balanced web of information transfer. This is a global village where you can climb out of the traffic jam and bump into people on the electronic street and have a chat.

The Internet makes possible open publishing on a city-wide and global scale. Citizens finally have access to the same cheap and powerful two-way global communication that colonial governments and multinationals have had access to for centuries.

What is open publishing?

Like free software, with open publishing the news is distributed at no charge. There are no ads to eat up your time and corrupt the content. But that is not the most important thing.

Open publishing means that the process of creating news is transparent to the readers. They can contribute a story and see it instantly appear in the pool of stories publicly available. Those stories are filtered as little as possible to help the readers find the stories they want. Readers can see editorial decisions being made by others. They can see how to get involved and help make editorial decisions. If they can think of a better way for the software to help shape editorial decisions, they can copy the software because it is free and change it and start their own site. If they want to redistribute the news they can, preferably on an open publishing site.

The working parts of journalism are exposed. Open publishing assumes the reader is smart and creative and might want to be a writer and an editor and a distributor. Open publishing assumes that the reader can tell a crappy story from a good one. That the reader can find what they're after, and might help other readers looking for the same trail. We trust the audience and it seems that the audience trusts us in return. Open publishing is playing at the opposite end of the trust spectrum to the corporate media. We are not working to convince people that this is a good way to do things. We are providing a space in which people might decide themselves if this is a good way to do things.

The journey is the destination.

Open publishing is not new. It is an electronic reinvention of the ancient art of storytelling. Open publishing is free software. It's freedom of information, freedom for creativity.

Open publishing is overwhelmingly done by volunteers.

Who will do the investigative journalism? How will people give a perspective from overseas? What will provide a sense of overview, connectedness and common identity? Will anyone get paid for their work? What will become of motion pictures? Of musicians? Where will be the sustained efforts by hundreds of people?

I am hoping the above questions about open publishing have already been answered by free software. And partly by 'Indymedia' and thousands of other open publishing web sites. Open publishing is merely taking an existing trend and identifying it, amplifying it, and strategically applying it to weak points in the global monopolies on power and information.

The pyramids are awe inspiring. They were also built by slave labour. We've evolved as a species. We can do a lot of amazing things without brutal Egyptian slave handling techniques. We can do without new pyramids.

We are in the middle of a mass extinction of species. We need to figure out how to live in harmony with the ecosystem of this planet before the ecosystem goes into negative feedback and kills life forms by the billions. We're not going to get there by sacrificing our lives for the motor car, trading our human rights for shoes, killing our people for drug companies, hiding our creativity for the multinationals.

We can do better. Forget the pyramids. Bypass world domination.

Free software is wiring the globe. Open publishing just might help us use those wires to save the planet.

Examples of open publishing:

www.active.org.au; www.indymedia.org; www.kuro5hin.org

NOTES

- None of the above meets all the criteria above for open publishing. But they're pretty close. There'd be heaps more out there. Suggestions welcome.
- Note that while slashdot.org has many open publishing features, and was an important inspiration for open publishing, I don't think it really is open publishing. Significantly, the stories (as opposed to the comments) are taken from reader contributions, but are processed behind closed doors.
- Obviously I think we can learn a lot from the free software movement. One idea we haven't developed much yet is an open publishing copyleft, similar to the free software copyleft. The copyleft defines how the information can be shared, hijacking the copyright laws to ensure that the free information may only be re-used in a free context. This encourages growth of free spaces, autonomous zones, as the process of sharing information is spread along with the information itself. This may be a key part of what we need to define open publishing to potential collaborators and ourselves. It doesn't have to be legally watertight to be useful. That can be evolved in later. The most useful thing would be to start playing with the definition. This is partly what we are doing with our work on defining the Indymedia network. But I think we will also need to define how we share chunks of information smaller than that involved in total membership of the network. And the basic chunk of information is a story and the copyleft licence that applies to it.
- The most interesting idea to me so far in this area applied to news stories, is the idea that a story can be re-used anywhere, but only if all readers/viewers exposed to it can easily identify and reach the source of the news story. For example, by a subtitle on the picture with the web address of the Indymedia site the story came from. This means the viewer can not only verify the original version of the story, but also add creative juices to the flow. This would help ensure that wherever the story goes, there is a solid link back to the working parts, the raw process that made it possible and allows new people to contribute and mutate and evolve.
- This does involve giving up the right to demand payment for every copy made. Free software sacrifices the same thing and it turns out there that it really works. We need to try it for news stories and documentaries, and see if it works equally well.
- One key point is that you can still charge for copies of copyleft information. You just can't stop someone else from giving away the copy they bought, including access to the source materials. And the source materials have to be available for no more than the raw cost of distribution.
- And it turns out that people still do buy free software. An awful lot of it in fact. And that in addition, the reputation of free software spreads very quickly if it is good. Which benefits the software project by providing more feedback, more volunteers to help improve it, and in some cases more money.
- The analogy for a video documentary would be placing it under copyleft so that anyone could copy it as long as the copy prominently said it was copyleft and any viewer could find a link back to the source (e.g. the Indymedia web address for the city it came from). But the video maker could still charge for copies to be made. They could charge especially high rates for multinational TV networks that want copies urgently, for example. The TV network would have to pay if they wanted the footage quickly without chasing down someone else who had it and was willing to copy it fast. And regardless of how badly they edited the piece, because of the copyleft licence, they would legally have to give over some of the attention of their viewers to a web address for the source. That viewer attention is an extremely valuable resource for the

network, because it is extremely powerful. It can also be powerful for us. If they fail to give the web address, they can be sued for the value of that viewer attention. That's quite a liability.

- There are ways to play the system. I'm not sure if this would work, but it might be fun and I think it's worth a try!
- Ideals and reality: many of the things I say above are ideals. They do not match reality exactly. But they are useful as a way of thinking about different approaches.
- For example free software and open publishing are not actually free of charge, but the charge is reduced to the bare cost of distribution. This is hundreds of times less than the previous cost of purchase, which tended to include the cost of luxury cars, houses and jets for multinational executives. There is a real difference.
- Another important point with free software is that programming is a skill in very high demand, which gives programmers an unusual amount of power as a group of people at this point in history. Historically I think this has led to great social change. A flaw in this rant might be that programmers may become far less in demand and that storytellers and journalists are already in oversupply in economic thinking.
- However, once we turn down various patterns of overconsumption, we can create a virtuous circle that gives us more leisure time, greater quality of life for both people living in other countries poorer (financially) and us. For example, getting rid of a car creates a huge amount of leisure time because you no longer need to spend all that time earning enough money to sit in traffic jams. Again, this is simplistic, there are urban planning issues to consider, but I believe a lot of it is cultural, and information exchange is part of changing our culture to be more responsive to our own needs as well as the planet's.
- In other words, with any luck and lots of hard work and fun, things might just start falling into place in time to grow and evolve as a species and a global ecosystem.
- It seems many parts of society are being privatised. Health, water, communications and community media. Being owned by the government or a non-profit is no guarantee. Sometimes there are some benefits from privatisation. But I'm not convinced it's the only way to get such benefits, and there are heavy costs. Particularly in poorer countries, where prices for basics (such as water in Bolivia) can become suddenly way out of reach.
- Free software can't be privatised.
- Especially copyleft free software.
- Corporations can use it, improve it, but they can't get an exclusive hold of it, they can't deny others from using it and changing it.
- Can open publishing be privatised? I think the right definition will be strong protection against privatisation. But the large effects of the subtle difference in licensing between copyleft and BSD show how important the definition can be. Let's play with a few and see which ones work best.
- Many ideas in here are shamelessly ripped off from other places. I really should credit those places and people. Or, if you like an idea in here, please assume I ripped it off, and do a web search and find it (actually you might have to wait a few years for search engines that can actually find ideas as opposed to phrases).