

Reimagining the Art Institution as an Open Source Civic Organisation

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Abstract

Free Libre Open Source Software (FLOSS) is an encompassing term, which refers to the licenses associated with making the source code that is the instructions and language per se, which define how software works and is made available for others to read, modify and share. Providing a brief history of FLOSS, this paper presents a hypothetical situation, whereby elements of FLOSS are applied to reimagining institutional change within the context of a contemporary arts venue and organisation. Framed as an artistic intervention, the art institution's structure and its existing forms are considered as the living materiality of the practice. The paper presents a set of processes, defined as 'Acts of Transition', whereby the values of Free Libre and Open Source are collaboratively explored with the institution's staff and executed together, across and within the organisation's teams. As 'Acts of Transition' they aim to support more commons-based peer-production processes, by reimagining the arts organisation as an open source civic organisation.

Keywords

Free Libre Software, Open Source Software, New Art Practices, Art Institution, Commons-Based Peer-Production

Introduction

Historical Free Libre and Open Source Software (FLOSS) refers to different approaches to licensing that are bounded in debates over the nature of knowledge and information exchange, which emerged from the UNIX and hacker cultures at the universities of Berkley and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) from the 1970s-90s. Traditionally the term 'open source' refers to what has been described as the "bill of rights for the computer user" (Perens 1999). In other words, the rights that describe how the source code, the system and symbols that a programmer writes in order to make a software work, are shared and distributed.

With the explosion of the commercial software market in the 1980s the closure of source code became common.

What this meant is that only a few people, most often the original authors, could legally copy, inspect or alter the source code. As a result the upgrade and repair of computers and other forms of technology (smart phones and cars etc.) became more difficult as it was not possible to 'get into the engine' of the machine. Closing the code also meant that modifications and customisation was also unlikely. Ethically this turn towards closure negated the view that information sharing is a powerful, useful and positive, social and common good.

Caring about these changes and the effects of closure on the software scene and industry. Harvard graduate, MIT programmer and hacker, Richard Matthew Stallman developed the four freedoms of software: the freedoms to use the software as you wish; change it to suit your needs; distribute it to anyone else and distribute altered versions. These freedoms were outlined in the "GNU Manifesto" (1989) and the Free Software Foundation (FSF) was established as a vehicle for implementing the manifesto. In order to preserve these freedoms permanently, Stallman inverted the legal system of copyright – by developing what is known as copyleft and in doing so created a licence that protects the commons from private appropriation, and gives power back to the user. Today various forms of FLOSS licences exist, including Creative Commons and its derivatives (Lessig 2004).

Considering the potential misinterpretations of the term 'free' as in gratis versus 'free' as in unhindered in use, Eric Raymond in his book 'The Cathedral and the Bazaar' (1999) discussed how bottom-up, free software approaches can lead to high quality, secure software. Raymond argued that the term open source is a more beneficial and less ambiguous way to describe the approach and its different forms and would encourage more businesses to adopt the method. Given this, the term Free Libre and Open Source Software (FLOSS) emerged as a means to enable people to understand the direct and

wider relevance of Free and Open Source Software.

Today the ideals and values that inform FLOSS are applied not just to computer code but have been used within the fields of governance (Lathrop & Ruma, 2010), architecture (Ratti & Claudel, 2015), community development (Tuomi, 2000), licensing (Lessig 2004; Stallman 1992) and economics (Benkler, 2016; Khalak 2000, Lerner & Tirole, 2000). In this respect FLOSS is best understood as a value system that underpins a particular way of making and doing. This is also referred to as the 'open source way' which, as outlined on the website opensource.com¹¹, includes the following values: *Open exchange*: we can learn more from each other when information is open; *Participation*: collaboration helps us to solve problems, we cannot solve on our own; *Rapid prototyping*: we learn best by doing, testing and experimentation; *Meritocracy*: when everyone has access to the information, collaborative team effort enhances the chances that the best ideas can emerge.

Applying FLOSS values to the Art Institution

Distilling the values of FLOSS and the open source way, the following is a set of activities aimed at supporting an established contemporary arts institution to transition from a hierarchical, closed system into a more open source civic organisation. Specifically this institution is imagined as a national or regional centre with important local significance and a highly regarded international profile. The institution would typically be in existence for at least 25yrs, own or rent its own building and employ between 20-60 people (full and part- time) to run its various divisions (e.g., gallery, education and outreach programme, bookshop, café, studios and or residency programme). The institution is also imagined as one which is experiencing difficult financial or managerial issues, partly due to internal politics, leading to a loss of confidence in its public audience, funders and/or board members. Further drops in public funding and austerity measures extenuate these problems. However the institution has built its reputation on supporting leading contemporary artists, thinkers and creators. It prides itself on taking risks and, given this, it is prepared to open its process up to experimenting with FLOSS models as a means to explore new operational approaches. Central to this exploration is

working with artists, who are familiar with FLOSS values. The following section, 'Acts of Transition', describes a process whereby the values of Free Libre and Open Source are collaboratively explored with the institution's staff and executed across and within the organisation's teams over a 6-month period.

Acts of Transition

1.Enculturation – Taking the position that senior staff may not know about FLOSS, the first step is to provide a mechanism through which this can happen. For example, the organisation could create regular and informal ways to meet, so that mutual understanding and trust can form; develop visual material, which illustrates the history, key terms, licence models and modes of participation; host a salon on the topic and invite guest speakers who have experience of working in a FLOSS manner; create a hospitable environment which can provide space for discussion and conversation.

2.Community Works – In parallel with the first step, consider the arts institution as a community of practice, which has its own set of routines, behaviors, habits and rules. Take time to learn about current working practices. Understand funding models and key stakeholders positions. Use this knowledge to help run the workshop as outlined in step three.

3.Generate Together – Run a workshop or series of workshops, which are open to *all* members of staff. Divide the teams into their everyday groups (e.g., catering, technical, curatorial, educational, bookshop). Invite a FLOSS expert as a support guest to join each team. Open the workshop by welcoming and introducing everyone. Provide a summary of FLOSS and the values of the 'open way'. Create a set of activities, which can help people embody, perform and express the ideals of FLOSS. Design a set of activities, through which each team can brainstorm how a FLOSS approach can be implemented within their team. From this discuss the merits of each idea and vote on 1 or 2 to take forward. Refine the selected ideas, working through the pros, cons, and realities. Present the final idea/s to the wider group and vote collectively on which ideas are suitable to go forward for a 6-month pilot implementation (ideally there should be at least 1 idea per team).

4.Test & Tweak – Post the 'Generate Together' workshop, allow for a period of 1 week-10 days for

¹ opensource.com

the ideas to rest in the minds of each team. Then meet with each team for an update session and discuss how implementation will begin. Develop a plan together, which plots out the course, discussing potential pitfalls and issues. Sign-off on the implementation plan with the team and associated senior members, ensuring that there is enough support for the team to carry it out. Meet the team regularly (every two months) to discuss how ideas are developing. Encourage teams to keep a journal or weekly logbook, which documents successes and challenges.

5.Open Exchange - In order to gain critical and supportive feedback, discuss with teams and senior members of staff how and who can be included within this process. For example, at the end of the 6-months, meet collectively and present the outcomes of the 'Test and Tweak' step. Invite FLOSS experts, critical friends and audience members to join. Discuss strengths, weaknesses and next steps. Acknowledge points of conflict and difference. Make it possible across the 'Test and Tweak' phase for audiences or other key stakeholders to feedback or become involved. Create an in-house, open day for specific audiences and stakeholders to feedback on the working process.

Conclusions: Moving towards a Commons-Based Peer-Production Model for the Arts

FLOSS approaches are considered as examples of commons-based peer-production (CBPP). CBPP refers to the collaborative efforts and outcomes of a large number of people working incrementally on a problem or artifact without being organised on either a market-based, managerial or hierarchical model (Benkler, 2016, 2006, 2002). Benkler, like many others (Lessig 2004; Stallman 1992; Boyle 2010) considers CBPP as an emerging "third model of production" (Benkler 2002), which harnesses human creativity through the use of ubiquitous computer communication networks. In essence the network effect brings about a dramatic change in the scope, scale and efficacy of peer production.

Across the arts there exists multiple examples from individual artists to group practices, institutional approaches, projects and programmes, which already use the values of FLOSS, the 'open way' and CBPP. To name but a few, the international group unMonastery²

²unmonastery.org

explicitly adopts open source approaches to create what they refer to as a social clinic for the future. Championing open source and peer-based approaches to art, Furtherfield³, London, promote and support artistic practices in which people become active co-creators of their cultures and societies, likewise RIXC⁴ in Riga run on similar principles. Major international events such as the 13th edition of the Venice Architecture Biennale explicitly led with the theme 'Common Ground' and open source (Rodger, 2012). Artist groups such as irational⁵, Platoniq⁶, Open Group, Chto Delat⁷ and CAMP⁸ focus on open democratic systems, commons and peer-to-peer processes as means of creating their work, while festivals such as OPEN SOURCE London adopt the term to highlight the focus on inclusive and community focused artistic practices.

The arts therefore are not without their FLOSS or CBPP examples. However larger national or regional art institutions are more hesitant to adopt such practices. There are multiple reasons for this, which are not the focus of this paper. Instead the aim is to present examples from an approach whereby artists lead on this conversation with the institution in a manner that takes the organisation itself as the living material through which the artistic practice is carried out. In taking this approach the artist and the institution enter into relationship, whereby the 'Acts of Transition' become themselves works of art, which operate at an organisational, open and civic-minded level.

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³furtherfield.org

⁴rixc.org

⁵irational.org

⁶platoniq.net

⁷chtodelat.org

⁸studio.camp

Panels

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