

Chapter XXXV

The Labor Politics of Scratching an Itch

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will focus on the economic and temporal/labor demands of creating free/libre and open source software (FLOSS). It begins by analyzing the economic and educational foundations of those countries most actively involved in FLOSS development, and how that affects the overall demographics of the FLOSS movement. Through examining the symbiotic relationship that the community has with commercial or closed software development, the educational and employment prerequisites, and overwhelming gendered makeup of the movement, we will come to see the movement in new ways. This is supplemented by an examination of how this economic structure could conceivably be exploited for increased economic gain at the expense of those individuals actually involved in the creation of the software. Finally, the chapter concludes by looking at possible ways in which FLOSS software could be opened up more broadly to non-technical software users.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will focus on the economic and temporal/labor demands of creating free/libre and open source software (FLOSS). It begins by analyzing the economic and educational foundations of those countries most actively involved in FLOSS development, and how that affects the overall demographics of the FLOSS movement. Through examining the symbiotic relationship that the community has with commercial or closed software development, the educational and employment prerequisites, and overwhelming

gendered makeup of the movement, we will come to see the movement in new ways. Expanding our understanding of who is actively involved in developing the software, will enable us to come to a better comprehension about what sorts of economic and temporal resources are necessary for its development and continued growth. This is supplemented by an examination of how this economic structure could conceivably be exploited for increased economic gain at the expense of those individuals actually involved in the creation of the software. Finally, the chapter concludes by looking at possible ways in which FLOSS software

could be opened up more broadly to non-technical software users.

BACKGROUND

Recent quantitative studies of the FLOSS movement indicate that the overwhelming majority of FLOSS participants are from the United States and Western Europe. France and Germany lead the pack and the U.S. comes in third. When taken as a whole, Western Europe accounts for nearly 65% of the total number of developers active in the development of free software. When those developers from the U.S. are added the numbers become even more skewed. Nearly three quarters of FLOSS development occurs in these two regions (David, Waterman, & Arora, 2003; Ghosh, Glott, Krieger, & Robles, 2002).

While much has been said about the differing understandings of what precisely “freedom” refers to in the context of FLOSS, the focus is often on that of the source code. When the focus is not directly on the source code, there is a conflation between civil liberties and code liberties (Stallman, 2002). The freedom of developers typically only extends to their freedom to learn/modify that source code. The question of what economic, labor, and political demands precede this freedom is almost entirely neglected by leaders of the movement. While the liberatory promises of FLOSS are indeed admirable, the inability to see their relationship to other economic factors is problematic. While the software is indeed free in both senses of the word, it is difficult to assume that either kinds of freedom automatically indicate participation. Nor would this indicate the kind of discrepancies we see between Western Europe, the U.S., and the rest of the world. There is also the problematic extension of “user” status to that of developers (Karim & von Hippel, 2003). While some would site FLOSS as an exemplary example of participatory design (Schuler & Namioka, 1993), the fact remains that for the most part most current FLOSS

users are not typical users. The level of technical expertise and time required for altering the shape and direction of FLOSS projects is not typical. The future trends portion of the chapter looks at ways in which some FLOSS projects have made potential steps, and opportunities for continued pursuit of the more emancipatory claims made by FLOSS proponents.

If FLOSS is looked at as a social movement, as opposed to a development methodology or ideology, there are two important aspects to examine. While these are not the only aspects or approaches to understanding a social movement (Hess, 2005; Hess, Breyman, Campbell, & Martin, forthcoming), they are the most relevant to this chapter. Resource mobilization and frame analysis draw on what is often referred to as new social movement theory. Resource mobilization looks at how people and economic resources are drawn into a movement, it also scrutinizes the strategic connections which movements make in order to reach its goals (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001). Frame analysis on the other hand examines the kind of rhetoric being used by movement leaders to attract new followers (Benford & Snow, 2000). It is possible for there to be competing frames, or for frames to change over time. What becomes quickly apparent is that in the case of the FLOSS movement, by and large the reasons why people have become involved, and the resources necessary for them to do so departs rather dramatically from the primary frames being presented by the more vociferous leaders of the movement, Richard Stallman being the primary example.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

The Labor Politics of the FLOSS Movement

The primary social and political-economic prerequisites of the FLOSS movement can be boiled down into three primary needs: higher education,

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