

Chapter 44

Establishing Ethos on Proprietary and Open Source Software Websites

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ABSTRACT

The increasing prominence and variety of open source software (OSS) threaten to upset conventional approaches to software development and marketing. While a tremendous amount of scholarship has been published on the differences between proprietary and OSS development, little has been discussed regarding the effect of rhetorical appeals used to promote either type of software. This chapter offers just such an examination, focusing its scrutiny on the websites for three pairs of competitors (operating system, Web browser, and image manipulation program). The means by which the OSS websites promote their programs provide a significant set of insights into the potential trajectory of OSS development and its widespread public acceptance, in terms of both its initial philosophy and its perceived alternative nature to traditional software products and models.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, the open source software (OSS) movement has garnered considerable attention from the public. Previously, users of computer programs were often restricted to choosing from among a relatively small selection of proprietary products, but today an explosion of freely available alternatives produced by continually reconstituting

teams of volunteers has initiated a radical shift in the ways that computer software (proprietary and OSS alike) are advertised and otherwise promoted to potential users. This shift in self-promotion must be understood in relation to conventional market expansion: Just as the sheer number of individuals who own or have access to computers has increased, so has there been the potential for a wider range of proprietary (as well as OSS) options for specific ends, from the operating system to the word processor.

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However, the proprietary model of software development is challenged by OSS philosophy as much as—if not more than—any individual product is challenged by its competitor(s) in a given market. It is this larger challenge to the status quo that is of immediate interest, since the means by which OSS developers present their products to public audiences can tell us about how those developers wish for their projects to be compared to and distinguished from proprietary competition. There has been a tremendous amount of research into the means by which OSS products and communities might be evaluated, often in terms of the social dynamics of a particular community (Aberdour, 2007; Casaló, Cisneros, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2009; Lemley & Shafir, 2011) or how users determine the value of a specific program (Gallego, Luna, & Bueno, 2008; Grodzinsky, Miller, & Wolf, 2003; Raghu, Sinha, Vinze, & Burton, 2009). However, relatively little has been discussed about the explicit rhetorical appeals and efforts developers make through various media to gain new users/customers. This is potentially problematic given the complex constructions of *ethos* that often underlie particular interactions between users and these media, including appeals to brand loyalty and anticipated recognition of a product's (or media's) functionality. Even those studies focused on users' evaluations of their software do not provide much insight into how those users were made aware of any program qualities or features included in the evaluative criteria of a given study (such as Del Bianco, Lavazza, Morasca, & Taibi, 2011). This text will explore how OSS and proprietary products are marketed to potential users through the content of the products' websites, with special care taken to examine the *ethos* generated through the presentation of OSS philosophy compared with that presented by proprietary developers. Several competitive pairings will be examined (each consisting of one conventional proprietary product and one open source product), with each pair related to a different specific area of computer use: operating

system, Internet browser, and image editing and manipulation.

The major difference between these two models of software development—the developmental philosophy of each approach—serves as the primary point from which much of the rhetorical appeals used by each development community are constructed. However, as we will see, these fundamental philosophies are not always presented consistently to their intended audiences. In fact, there appears to be a trend among OSS websites to imitate appeals to *ethos* that are traditionally representative of the websites for proprietary entities and their products. If these imitations are indicative of a larger trend among OSS websites, there could be serious implications for how OSS is perceived in a broader sense by the public. Specifically, the trend may compromise public awareness of OSS as an alternative philosophy to proprietary development and, instead, OSS may come to be viewed as being *fundamentally the same* as proprietary software, with the only significant difference being the market price of a particular product compared to that of its competitors. The potential consequences of such a shift are significant in that many technologies built philosophically, as well as structurally, upon OSS—such as wikis, open-access repositories of scholarly and professional information, and even the web itself—may similarly be reevaluated through this lens, to the potential detriment of these technologies as we currently know them.

BACKGROUND

How Does OSS Differ from a Proprietary Model of Software Development?

Traditionally, software development exists as a centralized process generally closed off from a program's user base until a "finished" version of the program is released into the market, where it

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