

Social media and levels of freedom

Juha Suoranta
Tere Vadén
Reijo Kupiainen

Department of Education, University of Tampere, Kanslerinrinne 1, 33014
University of Tampere, tel. +358-50-5277913, fax. +358-3-35517503
juha.suoranta@uta.fi, tere.vaden@uta.fi, reijo.kupiainen@uta.fi

Abstract. We propose that user-generated content creation be analysed in terms of the kinds of freedom it allows for the users. This applies both to content creation that falls in the category of “work” and content creation “for fun”: different levels of alienation are offered by different legal and economic settings. Social media that allows user-generated content creation is the first level of freedom away from the closed or commodified forms of media and education. Correspondingly, ‘socialized media’ would mean that such tools are owned, maintained and managed by the community of users itself.

Introduction

The wish to control digital information implies a need to control and monopolize digital literacy. According to Ivan Illich (1980, 55) monopoly has traditionally meant "exclusive control by one corporation over the means of producing (or selling) a commodity or service." Radical monopoly, on the other hand, means "the dominance of one type of product rather than the dominance of one brand." In other words monopoly is radical when "one industrial production process exercises an exclusive control over the satisfaction of a pressing need, and excludes non-industrial activities from competition." Illich (1980, 58) maintains that people have a natural capacity for practices like healing, learning, building their homes, and burying their dead. Each capacity meets a need, and the means for satisfying these needs are abundant "as long as they depend primarily on what people can do for themselves, with only marginal dependence on commodities." In other words these activities have locally relevant use-value instead of abstract exchange-value.

"Nativity" in the abilities and mastery of the symbolic forms necessary for the production of digital content is currently being counteracted by a massive trend of commodification. This trend not only concerns digital content (such as music, movies, and stories) but increasingly the very "code" in which digital content is expressed. The commodification of code happens under the name of "intellectual property" which is created through legislation concerning immaterial rights including patents, trademarks, and copyrights. At the same time, the legal framework defines the relationship between the users and the content they use, consume or create.

In this respect, digitalized content is analogous to scientific knowledge which receives its special status and credibility from the very fact that it is not owned: knowledge becomes scientific only through the open and free critique of the scientific community. As a speech act,

a scientific text has to be distinguished from the person or persons who "sign" it, otherwise we are not dealing with a text that can assume the special characteristics, and authority and allowances accorded to a scientific text. A particular way of speaking, a particular type of speech act, i.e. scientific texts, creates a community and a way of appropriating knowledge that is different from the case of private property (as understood, e.g., in the Lockean sense). A similar device for co-operation has been developed in the case of digitalized content. This tool, developed by Richard M. Stallman and his co-workers is often colloquially called "copyleft": the copyright statement in question gives the user the right to use, modify and redistribute (the modified version of) the digital content provided that the right is also transferred (see Stallman 2002). Both in science and free software, the goal and the prerequisite is a community of sharing based on a certain set of common values and practices. Both can be seen as ways of acting, as power-structures, that at the same time implicate a relationship between content creators and the results of their creation

The social and political effects of such production are highly interesting and debated (see, e.g., Hardt & Negri 2004, 301ff, Žižek 2002, 2006, Merten 2000, Tapscott & Williams 2006). From the economical point of view, the question of motivation is one of the most crucial: why do people engage in volunteer work like this without immediate economical rewards? The conditions under which voluntary non-alienated work are possible are of the utmost importance for the critical potential of open collaborative projects like the Wikipedia. A whole school of writers (for an overview, see Lessig 2004) has argued that in addition to the "first" commercial economy, there exists another economy, variously called, e.g., amateur economy, sharing economy, social production economy, non-commercial economy, p2p economy, or gift economy. Even if a cybercommunist utopia is still far away – What will the hackers eat? Will everyone be a hacker? – already inside the first economy a change is happening. By adopting aspects of the second economy, the first economy tries to present itself "with a human face". The imitation is felt on many fronts: schools and universities want to augment themselves by providing access to informal learning with social media tools and by presenting themselves as hubs of social interaction rather than formal institutions of power, nation states shift policy from traditional industry to competition in terms of design and high-quality experiences, and companies invite their customers to co-create their future products in a process where innovation itself is supposedly dispersed and equalized (for innovation, see Thrift 2006).

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The term 'social media' can be taken to mean the online platforms and software people use in order to collaborate, share experiences, views, and so on, and to create their social identity. Correspondingly, 'socialized media' would mean, in this context, that such tools are owned, maintained and managed by the community of users itself. Examples of this kind of self-management are many inside the hacker community. There are even cases of actively socializing previously private media, like the 3D-animation software Blender.

But are these means enough to enhance peoples' skills and opportunities in order that they participate in the digitalized world, and are in dialogue with each other by using such social media? And, more importantly, are these means themselves digital? It would not be hard to believe the contention that dialogue both in its traditional forms and in the form of social media, takes us only to the gates of substantial democracy. Maybe we must start to organize strategies to take the hacker ideology of Free/Libre Open Source Software (FLOSS) to its

next logical step, that of 'socialist media' where 'socialist' refers to shared ownership, use and administration of a given media. As Žižek (2002b) puts it in his analysis of 'cybercommunism':

Is there not also an explosive potential for capitalism itself in the world wide web? Is not the lesson of the Microsoft monopoly precisely the Leninist one: instead of fighting its monopoly through the state apparatus (recall the court-ordered split of the Microsoft corporation), would it not be more 'logical' just to socialize it, rendering it freely accessible? Today one is thus tempted to paraphrase Lenin's well-known motto, 'Socialism = electrification + the power of the soviets': 'Socialism = free access to internet + the power of the soviets.'

What would the world be like, if there would be exemplars of socialist media? And what would those examples be like? Can we think of wikipedia as an example of socialist media? Do we have other examples? To answer this question, we need first to answer the following one: What are the definitive presumptions and characteristics of socialist media?

Besides the obvious technological infrastructure (servers, computers, and other devices) which is needed in organizing and using social media, basic energy – electricity, food – is rudimentary. But the crucial question is, who owns and provides energy? The sad fact is that a majority of the energy resources are owned by private international corporations. These are in many ways key players in the arena of international politics directing foreign policies, and making decisions about war and peace. In this sense 'social' and 'political' still rules the 'digital', for -imitating Žižek's 'Leninist' formula- free access to Internet still demands electrical supply.

Without the logical step of being self-reliant when it comes to electricity, all efforts and activity towards open access is freedom without freedom. For without this ultimate step to overcome private ownership of material resources the ideology of FLOSS remains yet another one-issue social movement without political consequences (as Torvalds is very keen to emphasize).

The physical energy – electricity – needed for running social media sites is one condition. Another is the less tangible energy and free time needed from individuals in order to contribute. The Northern and Western bias in most social media should direct our attention to the different possibilities that present themselves to individuals in different socio-economic settings. Also, the fact that cases like Blender and Wikipedia need substantial donations points to the importance of relative affluence. Linus Torvalds was at the time of starting the Linux-project a student in the University of Helsinki, and consequently enjoyed the common benefits of the Finnish welfare state, including tuition-free access to the university and its resources. In addition, the Linux code was initially hosted by the Finnish University Network (FUNET). All of this points to the fact that non-alienated knowledge work in the Internet does seem to need a certain basis of affluence before it takes off. However, it seems that often competences built in the free and public educational system will primarily go to the use of corporations like Nokia.

What is needed, consequently, is a counter-move to free people's minds and intellectual resources from wage-slavery. Indeed, the step from a media constrained by liberal communism to socialist media needs not only basic welfare but also actual control of life-goals and non-physical needs. Paradoxically, or not, the road to the latter runs through the

collective or common control of the production of basic welfare (including goods like electricity). Welfare strategies like a social wage, a citizenship income, or unconditional basic income would pave the way to socialist media.

In sum, we get the equation 'socialist media = basic welfare + common servers + the power of the soviets'. Of course, the order of the ingredients or the components in the formula can be different, in other words, there can be different orders of the free and open world without scarcity (i.e. basic welfare = electricity + the power of the soviets + socialist media).

Table 1. Levels of Freedom

	Characteristics	Media	Education
Closed	<p>Exchange value</p> <p>Commoditization</p> <p>Both vehicle and content controlled</p> <p>"Crowdsourcing"</p>	<p>Media as corporate business</p> <p>Economic utility, control of content (business logic)</p>	<p>Education as an ideological state apparatus</p> <p>Economic utility, control of content (educational policy)</p>
First stage of freedom	<p>Economical utility, limited collaboration</p> <p>Market sphere, entrepreneurship, multicultural capitalism, liberal communism</p> <p>Limited autonomy of content, "Sharing"</p>	<p>Web 2.0</p> <p>YouTube, Google CitizenTV, Adbusters ...</p> <p>"producers"</p>	<p>Educational content business</p> <p>Teachers and students as commodified semi-objects (knowledge creators, consumers...)</p>
Double-Free	<p>Use value/value in itself</p> <p>Full autonomy of content</p> <p>Limited autonomy of vehicle</p> <p>"Commonist"</p>	<p>Media as collaboration</p> <p>Wikis, Linux, P2P</p> <p>Radical openness</p>	<p>Education as collaboration</p> <p>Selbstentfaltung</p> <p>Learning as being</p> <p>Reflective uncertainty</p>
Triple-Free	<p>Value inseparable from the world</p> <p>Aristotelian finalities</p> <p>Full autonomy of content</p> <p>Full autonomy of vehicle</p> <p>"Communist"</p>	<p>Immediate media practices</p> <p>Wikipedia + ecological autonomy + control of resources</p> <p>Promoting other than materially-driven life forms</p>	<p>"Deschooling Society"</p> <p>Learning by doing, native skills</p> <p>Students and teachers as human beings, "life-long learners" in an existential sense</p> <p>Education as commons</p>

An alternative way of conceptualizing the transition from social to socialist media is to think about the freedoms involved (see the path-breaking work on *Selbstentfaltung* by Project Oekonux and Stefan Merten [2000]). The read/only-culture proposed by ultra-commoditized and mechanized life-styles can be seen both from the perspective of media and education. In one extreme, a totalitarian state like Plato's utopia in *The Republic*, will want to control education, reserving true knowledge for the philosopher-kings and telling a 'royal lie' to the working classes in order to keep them at bay. Plato would have known exactly why the party and movement calling for the abolition of copyright is called the Pirate Party (for instance, the Piratpartiet in Sweden). This closed-source approach is strictly correlative with the concept of the media as a private profit-making business where information has an exchange value. As we move towards more free modes of media and education, we first encounter social media and education as entrepreneurship, where the subjects are empowered by active participation in economically constrained activities. This is the first order of freedom where you get free speech inside the confines of formal freedom: you are free in so far as you do not rock the boat. Strangely enough, the road to more freedom goes through realizing, that the economic constraints of liberal, multicultural capitalism are not nearly strict enough. Only when the ghost of exchange value is stripped off, the persistent and non-symbolic use-value or value in itself is revealed. In terms of media, this means Linux or Wikipedia, that do not have any exchange value, but a tremendous utility. But even that is not enough in terms of taking economics seriously: the oikos that humanity is facing is the planet.

Thus the last two modes of freedom are linked to an emergence of transformations in the modes of production, governance and property. These modes of production will 'produce use-value through the free cooperation of producers who have access to distributed capital' (Bauwens 2005): this is called 'the P2P production mode' which differs from the capitalist 'anything for-profit standard', or from public production by state-owned enterprises, a common feature of welfare states. The product and purpose of the P2P production mode is not to produce useless commodities or 'exchange value for a market, but use-value for a community of users'. The changes will also be 'governed by the community of producers themselves, and not by market allocation or corporate hierarchy: this is the P2P governance mode, or third mode of governance'. In addition they 'make use-value freely accessible on a universal basis, through new common property regimes. This is its distribution or "peer property mode": a "third mode of ownership", different from private property or public (state) property'.

From our point of view the beauty of such social media as Wikipedia is precisely in the P2P's use-value based on collective anonymous contributions (and everyone's right not to contribute and still use common resources). For us the triple-freedom of social media means *anonymous collectivism*. In this respect Google's competitor to Wikipedia known as Knol (<http://knol.google.com>) does not fulfill the triple-free standard of social media, but stays somewhere in between closed and first-stage of freedom in terms of openness and collectivism. Compared to Wikipedia's anonymous collectivism Knol promotes *personified individualism*, individual authorship and individual control in deciding who is able to participate and contribute. Thus it builds its ideology mainly on closed model of freedom, and keeps the door open for exchange-value and knowledge business.

Even the subtitle of Knol is rather telling: every contribution is "a unit of knowledge", a separated universe of an individualized author; Knol celebrates alienated individuality by forming a gated or altogether closed community, an expert being a hero of her own

knowledge creation. This does not take into account the social history of knowledge which even in its Western format is a story of collective thinking and wisdom. In this respect Wikipedia is closer to the standard interpretation of how innovations and new ideas are born: those who develop intellectual pursuits and search for truths always stand on the shoulders of giants past and present. In fact, the two extremes of Wikipedia and Knol embody two types of sociality.

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