

The free beer Richard Stallman loathes is everywhere. Media companies are currently falling over themselves to produce the new hive for user-generated content. The names have rapidly become commonplace—YouTube, MySpace, Flickr—and their effect has been enormous, dramatically changing the production and distribution of media globally. Free beer pours from the taps of these new hubs of participatory media as they clamour to get you in the door. But free beer, as Free Software Foundation founder Richard Stallman has always emphasised, is not the same as freedom.

The Free Software Foundation has a stock standard one liner about what free software is and is not: “free as in free speech, not as in free beer”. That is, free software is not about price, but liberty. Free software is software that may be freely shared and modified on the basis that those modifications be made available to others. The defining document for free software is the GNU General Public License (GNU GPL).⁰¹

Free software is the philosophical genesis of a much broader set of practices that seek to empower the user and challenge the limitations of the proprietary model in the realm of software, culture, media, politics, science and more. The model and ethics of free software production can be ported to a range of other realms. I will explore two activist media and software projects I am involved with that attempt to embody free software principles and challenge the proprietary model.

They are:

- EngageMedia.org—a Melbourne-based free software project and video sharing site for social and environmental justice film from Southeast Asia, Australia and the Pacific.
- Transmission.cc—a new global network of social change online video projects co- founded by EngageMedia.

But first.....

What's not free about free beer?

The spread of affordable media production equipment, combined now with a global online distribution network, provides grassroots media makers with an amazing opportunity. This ground-breaking shift cannot be overstated. However, many of these new distribution networks are a double-edged sword, on one side liberating, on the other representing a new nexus of control.

Many of the new commercial media-sharing sites offer highly restrictive terms and conditions on their user contributions. The most dubious is that of YouTube who state:

...by submitting the User Submissions to YouTube, you hereby grant YouTube a worldwide, non-exclusive, royalty-free, sublicenseable and transferable license to use, reproduce, distribute, prepare derivative works of, display, and perform the User Submissions in connection with the YouTube Website and YouTube's (and its successor's) business... in any media formats and through any media channels.⁰²

By uploading to YouTube you grant them the right to do near anything with your video, including modifying and selling it, as long as it stays on their site.

Even as it appears the big players are giving up control by opening their sites to user contributions there remains a strong desire to control the content as much as possible. There are some exceptions, Flickr, for example, does allow you to add Creative Commons licenses to your photos.

Creative Commons⁰³ is a form of 'Open Content Licensing' that derives its roots from the principles of free software. Creative Commons allows users to specify on what basis their work may be shared—for example, whether or not the work can be modified, used for commercial purposes or only non-commercial purposes. Whilst more conservative than the GNU GPL, Creative Commons situates itself as part of the 'free culture movement' and seeks to lessen the restrictions of traditional copyright by creating a more 'flexible' copyright regime.

Beyond this specific example however there are many more general problems. The acquisition of YouTube by Google in 2006 for 1.65 billion USD dollars highlighted just how much money is at stake in this arena, and just how big the gap is between those making fortunes and those making media. The work of the founders and employees of YouTube, while responsible for creating the infrastructure that allowed

others to publish, represents only a fraction of the work that made the site such a wild success. Literally millions of people added videos, comments, promoted the site, built profiles and more, all creating value for the company and enhancing the experience of other users. All of these users should be paid for their contributions given the wealth they generated, none have, though YouTube has recently announced plans to create some kind of revenue sharing model. It's either this or lose market share.

Up until a few years ago the idea of building a site based on user-generated content was a fringe idea that worked counter to the 'in control' philosophy of most business practices. Additionally, there was no 'business model' for this type of site. How could you make money providing free hosting and distribution for other people's content?

Communities for Sale

One of the key business models for these "Web 2.0" start ups has been the basic idea of providing an infrastructure and technology for users and then selling those eyes to advertisers and the contributor community to a larger company—it happened with Flickr, YouTube, MySpace and more. There is a huge rush of companies trying to create the next big site to bring in the people and make their pot of gold. Users need to become far more savvy as to the imbalance in power that is being generated and whom they are helping make millionaires.

Most of these platforms offer a simple trade-off: distribution, storage, membership in a community, and an audience in exchange for advertising next to your content. You provide the reason for coming to the site, they provide the infrastructure. This situation, however, mirrors the current exploitation of artists in many other fields: you get an opportunity at a slice of the pie but you must provide your work for free, or almost nothing, just to prove yourself. It's like being on permanent provisional employment. "We (might) make you famous, just give us your talent and we'll see."

If we think of online media in terms of the public sphere we can see that it has very quickly become 'mallefied', that is public debate has moved, just like the town square to the shopping centre, to a privatised and commercialised space.

Sites like YouTube, Google Video and MySpace employ a 'hoarding architecture' that provides only a form of pseudo sharing. These sites severely limit what you can and cannot do with the media you upload and view. For example, YouTube doesn't enable you to download the videos on their site (there's a small hack you can get that will allow

you to do this but it isn't official), only embed them in your blog with YouTube branding. As such, you can only share through YouTube and the videos are of such low quality they are almost useless offline. You can't control how your video is encoded and instead get left with a generic low-resolution Flash Video version, a proprietary codec that Macromedia control. You can't subscribe to feeds of other users' videos off-site (video podcasting), only through the YouTube site—where you'll of course get to view many ads.

Added to this, and this applies to even the more 'progressive' companies, the software used to run the site is entirely proprietary and not available to you, the user, to share and improve upon lest you go and build your own site.

With all these limitations why do people publish on these sites rather than those that are more likely to respect their rights? One key reason is the ubiquity they've been able to establish—YouTube and Myspace are the names that get thrown around most in mainstream media and, as such, many people just don't know about the alternatives. They've reached such a scale as to be able to offer potentially huge audiences, if you don't get lost in the noise every other contributor is making. Additionally, the massive resources these companies command mean they can offer features many smaller initiatives can't, and implement them much more quickly.

What's concerning and puzzling however, is the apoliticism with which many independent media creators approach these sites. Even with the knowledge that Rupert Murdoch owns MySpace, somehow it doesn't seem as corporatised and controlled as the 'old media'.

The degree to which people's critiques of these new media corporations have been disarmed is highly alarming. People are happy to make the compromise for the additional features and the larger audience: it's hard to blame them—and we shouldn't make apologies for badly designed but politically correct sites. All this adds up, however, to a more subtle form of control that is in many ways more exploitative than the passive consumerism of television. Online video demands your creativity, thoughts and feelings, and then sells them: television just asks you to be a passive receiver of information and sells you to an advertiser. With media-sharing sites you become an underpaid (if paid at all) precarious contractor who produces content while others make millions.

When is there going to be a stronger reaction to it all? One could imagine unions of media makers going on a content strike, demanding pay increases—or any kind of payment—for their work. It sounds unrealistic, in many senses, but not unwarranted. Unfortunately the

major players have such massive audiences that the balance of forces is squarely in their favour, especially until people realise the bad deal they are getting. Resistance currently takes place within the framework of the market: those unhappy with the current state of affairs move to friendlier spaces, or if they have the skills and energy, they produce their own sites that promote a different ethic of collaboration and sharing.

Free Media Models

For many years one of media activism's cornerstones was the idea that dissenting and minority voices were denied the ability to have their issues heard due to their exclusion from mass media channels. The answer was to build alternative media infrastructures—magazines, newspapers, radio and television stations—that would act as 'the voice of the voiceless', or to campaign for space within the mainstream. Access was the panacea for injustice: if only people could have their voices heard society would change.

This idea was pushed to its limits with the birth of the Indymedia network and its 'open publishing' philosophy which stated "Open publishing is the same as free software"—the title of the seminal article written by Sydney-based Indymedia activist Maffew.⁰⁴

In late 1999 when Indymedia was born there were few places that allowed non-geeks to publish their content online. Open Publishing was a radical idea that aimed to bridge the divide between the have and have-nots by democratising media access. Using a piece of free software called "Active", suddenly anyone with net connection could publish their thoughts to thousands of others with little or no editorial control.⁰⁵ The possibility of making your own media and reaching a large audience at zero cost was suddenly available.

Indymedia's tagline of 'don't hate the media, become the media' has now been realised. Apple, MySpace, Google, YouTube, and more, all want us to 'become the media'—and they want us to buy their products to create it and put their advertising next to what we create.

The web itself has become 'Open Publishing' and access is no longer the issue. Those using media as a tool for social change need to start asking new questions. How do community and activist media define themselves now that one of their core aims has been fulfilled? How are the processes of production different from, or antagonistic to, the commercial sphere? What social relations are being sought between users and how do they translate to the offline world? How can these 'free media' projects directly effect social change, or support work towards it?

The issue now is, Who controls this media, this community, the money it generates, its infrastructure and its technology? Fundamentally the question is one of self-management and democracy. As the old saying goes, "we don't want a slice of the cake, we want the whole bakery."

Some basic principles for "free media"

If we are looking to create media and infrastructures that are free as in freedom, not as in beer, what core principles do we need? The list below shouldn't be seen as exhaustive. However, they might be useful in assessing how much any given project seeks to control its users, and how much it is controlled by its users.

Those key elements are:

- ability to add open content licenses to your work
- transparent and democratic editorial processes
- use of free software to run the website with the code available for others to make improvements
- use of free software codecs⁰⁶
- revenue sharing if the initiative is a for-profit entity
- ability to download, redistribute, screen and remix works, including the ability to download and share via open source protocols such as peer to peer networks
- a guarantee not to sell you and your community to the highest bidder

Practical Examples

Within EngageMedia,⁰⁷ attempting to incorporate most of the above principal—as a small group of just four people initially and having no budget—we immediately went looking for some free software to run the site we wanted. We found very quickly, however, that the software that did exist either had very few features, a small or non-existent developer community, or had not yet been customised to really handle video. We set out to adapt a free software Content Management System⁰⁸ (CMS)—Plone⁰⁹—to be able to handle video. We soon discovered others doing the same thing and were able to join forces and share code which gave momentum to our respective projects.

Inadvertently we found ourselves spending the first eighteen months as software developers, rather than running a video sharing website. Building the system from scratch, however, would have taken years longer; making the code we wrote closed and proprietary would have meant others couldn't build on and improve our work. Despite taking so long to launch our site we now have a 'free' system we can offer to other video projects. The software is by no means perfect but the more people that use it the better it gets and the more quickly the problem of producing a sophisticated video CMS is solved. To control it means only to slow its evolution.

In the course of looking for software to adopt we noticed another thing: almost every activist online video project was using a different CMS—and most of them were written from scratch. With little collaboration going on they were able to offer very few features to their users and improvements were very slow. People weren't communicating, everyone was re-inventing the wheel and we were all being less effective.

On this basis, in June 2006 EngageMedia collaborated with the Italy's CandidaTV to put on Transmission—a gathering of around forty people from twenty-five different free software activist video projects—from Korea, Australia, Argentina, the US, Malaysia and a range of European countries—at the Forte Prenestino Social Centre in Rome.¹⁰ For four days we discussed ways in which we could collaborate better and attempted to find common ground.

At the end of the four days we agreed to form an ongoing network and to work on a range of common projects that would take us all forward collectively.

Those projects included among others:

- creating a common meta-data standard to allow greater sharing of content between projects
- a wiki-based common documentation repository where organisations could work together to create open content licensed tutorials on online video
- closer collaboration on some of the CMSs currently in use
- a global database of video screening organisations
- development of a collaborative subtitles and translation tool

- the development of tools to facilitate the uptake of free software codecs

The social relations built on by these projects through their use of free software and open content licensing are dramatically different from their commercial counterparts. Instead of dependence and control we have free collaboration, sharing, and a true many-to-many model. But the benefits are not just ethical. Beyond a close alignment with free software principles and progressive politics, this type of collaboration also makes sense for groups with limited means as a more efficient mode of production. The ethics do not sit outside the form of production but are integrated within it: sharing is not a moral imperative but a better way of doing things. Competition and selfishness are counter-intuitive in this context. Collaboration and solidarity become the principles that spur on improvement and build different social relations in the here and now.

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The explosion of user-generated content is a major crack in the passivity that has been fostered by both governments, media, political parties and business over the last hundred years. The one-to-many model is being usurped by the many-to-many, the masses are replaced by the network, command by collaboration. We are only just scratching the surface. The desire to control and exploit has certainly not ended, but has shifted to a new phase. New antagonisms emerge in this space, demanding the ability to participate meaningfully in the construction of every day life, not just to choose between a series of choices. The future remains open.

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Endnotes

01
GNU stands for GNU's Not Unix. It is part of the basis of the Linux operating system. <gnu.org>

The four freedoms of Free Software are:

- * The freedom to run the program, for any purpose (freedom 0).
- * The freedom to study how the program works, and adapt it to your needs (freedom 1). Access to the source code is a precondition for this.
- * The freedom to redistribute copies so you can help your neighbor (freedom 2).
- * The freedom to improve the program, and release your improvements to the public, so that the whole community benefits (freedom 3). Access to the source code is a precondition for this.

02
<www.youtube.com/t/terms>

03
<creativecommons.org>

04
<www.cat.org.au/maffew/cat/openpub.html>

05
<active.org.au>

06
'Codec' is an amalgam of compressor/decompressor. It is a programme that will "encode a stream or signal for transmission, storage or encryption and decode it for viewing or editing." <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codec> A common example would be mp3, mp4 or wmv. Most audio and video codecs are proprietary, not open to modification, and often require users to pay licensing fees. There are concrete alternatives such as OGG that are open source. <theora.org>

07
<engagemedia.org>

08
A Content Management System, or CMS, is software that "facilitates the organization, control, and publication of a large body of documents and other content". Most websites these days use a CMS to manage and present their content.

09
<plone.org>

10
<transmission.cc>