

Research: Open Source

What is Open Source?

Generally refers to software distributed freely under open licenses such as GNU (General Public License) where the source code is included freely with the software for easy modification by anyone who wishes to do so. The guidelines which define open source software, also known as OSS are widely adopted as a standard by which such software may be developed and used.

For definition see <http://www.opensource.org/docs/definition.php>

For history see http://eu.conecta.it/paper/brief_history_open_source.html

Ethos

In a wider perspective we understand Open Source initially as a *developer experience* where the method of developing software is a group experience – proposing, writing and reviewing code and structure cooperatively. The primary objective being for open license distribution, modification and use, by itself, or as an asset or extension to existing software.

Yet the ethos of Open Source extends much farther pervading into the equally important realm of *user experience*. The many popular ideas of community centered development at almost no cost, developed by the community, for the community, its user base and for the wider public, have permeated the way in which the software is fundamentally used. Taking a look at some of the Open Source community's most popular products you'll see titans such as Linux, Apache Web Server, PHP coding language Perl coding language, the MySQL Database, Mozilla based browsers like Firefox and even desktop office tools like OpenOffice. But more interesting is the entire world of online peer experience, seen as entire concepts underlying our online networked experience in the Open environments of IRC Chat, web communities and groupware, RSS dynamic XML feeds (used in newsreaders, blogs etc), and the forefront peer based concepts of Wiki and Blog.

Open Source provides a *user experience* of peer networked community, where the community has delivered a framework of tools which realize the original Open experience of the internet which was simply about communicating with other people. Through the efforts of the Open Source community anyone can interact at a level of authorship rather than being limited to just browsing, or locked in by proprietary services imposing brands and advertising at every corner. There is no hidden agenda with Open Source. The bottom line is a free experience, open to everyone, enabling anyone.

'Open' can refer to the manner in which software is developed and also the manner in which it is used.

OSS ethos promotes the cooperative experience, living interdependently over the corporate competition.

"Our ability to participate actively in the authorship of our collective destiny" – page 18, Open Source Democracy, Douglas Rushkoff, Published by Demos, 2004

Why use Open Source?

OSS is cost effective to deploy, free to use and information is free to share. If you have a problem chances are that someone else has encountered it with free peer based community support. OSS prevents vendor lock-in, being open, compatible and adaptable to existing infrastructure and technology. Compatibility allows for the largest audience possible. Through rigorous peer review and testing, OSS is highly stable and easily immune to viruses as code varies with each adapted copy.

OSS is very proficient and thorough in its level of networkedness, and highly automatic. Take for example *trackback* links in Blogs, dynamic RSS feeds from community websites or easy interface commenting features of news websites. These services are completely fluent in ease of use and very low on back-end maintenance.

Free distribution, no royalties, no discrimination, more equality and less hierarchy – a peer experience.

Case Studies where OSS have been adopted by government and organizations see <http://www.europa.eu.int:80/jda/en/chapter/470/>

How can Open Source enhance our product?

With a primary focus towards the use of popular community oriented OSS, we are looking at tools to increase user participation around our content through peer communications and interaction thus increasing activity and awareness of and around the product. This objective increases use and awareness of product services and brand, promoting it's use and fulfilling it's purpose – which is all very desirable, adding value to the product. Community peer environments are more viral in their propagation of product value as it occurs more laterally on a peer to peer level rather than the more traditional top-down manner of broadcasters. Peer interaction distributes responsibilities of content distribution, communication, brand exposure and awareness of services to the user base and draining less resource and effort from the content provider and host.

This is the principle in essence, yet be aware that both positive and negative value can be propagated by such a peer to peer framework, while always promoting interaction and use none-the-less. In the end the OSS is but a framework, and care must be taken by the content provider and host in how content is presented and managed. This is the decision of openness, degree of open ideology and peer structure which should be appraised and set.

The BBC generally does not develop OSS, but it could adapt and integrate other OSS to enhance its product.

How much Openness?

Before heading headlong into adopting everything Open Source, it is important to assess the applicability of the project at hand to what Open Source Software has to offer. The adoption of Open Source ideology and Open environments can take place to varying degrees of comfort which best fit in with existing models, the objective being to implement the best user experience, low cost and minimal maintenance. Look at existing services based upon Open Source environments which vary in their degree of openness from the open public opinion message boards to slightly moderated tech forums, to more focused personal blogs and then the more restrictive commenting features open to all on popular news websites which themselves have traditionally been of a purely broadcast nature.

The Decision of how open remains with the people who deploy the service – usually the content provider and host.

1. Limited Experience (more commercial, more controlled)
2. Partial or perceived peer experience
3. Two way Peer user experience
4. Two way Peer development and user experience (less commercial, less controlled, open)

What about Maintenance?

From a development perspective OSS will usually be stable and secure at the time of deployment. Updates are free and released by the supporting community and made compliant towards emerging standards and evolving development languages. Long term stability will benefit from simultaneous upgrades of the OSS and the underlying Open Source development language such as PHP or Perl, although upgrading is not a compulsory requirement, unlike closed source software developed by companies like Microsoft where revenue bringing upgrades are encouraged and support for older versions slowly withdrawn. Upgrades are required by close source software to remain compatible, this is not so with OSS. In situations where maintenance of OSS is required, work can be easily carried out by the Content Provider or Host directly within the Open Source to the degree necessary.

Thinking of building an Online Community? (from page 42, CreateOnline Magazine, Winter 2002)

1. Stop and Think: Don't just build a community for the sake of it. What is its function for the brand? Does the product range require a lot of after-care once it has been purchased? Are customer services a key part of the client's proposition?
2. Brand: Does the brand possess qualities or associations with areas people are already interested in and passionate about? For example, Stella's association with film and Nike's with different sports. If so, then it could have much to gain, as communities will already exist online. But if not then think carefully before investing money in trying to generate interest in something that people find boring or too commercial.
3. Clients and Customers: Is your client ready for a one-to-one relationship with its customers and the criticism and complaints in an effective and professional manner? And does it have the time and facilities to do so? If not, then be wary of establishing reciprocity with customers as your client could bite off a lot more than it can chew.
4. Moderator Resources: Are the time and facilities there to police chat rooms or message boards set up for malicious slander and obscenities? These two always rear their ugly heads, and if you don't have the means to watch out for them you could easily find yourself in court.
5. Watch the Volume: never underestimate your online audience and be prepared for the volume of attention that a viral campaign will bring. Communities online can bear all sorts of fruits, but be sure to have the technical facilities and know-how to cope. There's nothing more damaging than promising to accommodate people and then failing to deliver.

Further Reading

European Commission, *The Many Aspects of Open Source* – <http://europa.eu.int:80/ida/en/document/1744>

New Scientist, *The Great Giveaway, Open Source applied to other parts of our world* – <http://www.newscientist.com/hottopics/copyleft/copyleftart.jsp>

News.com, *Blogs play a critical role in campaigns* – http://news.com.com/Blogs+play+critical+role+in+campaigns/2100-1028_3-5432879.html?tag=prntfr

Is it possible that due to an oversaturated capitalist led media market, that we grow tired of the carefully articulated, filtered content which we consume from the mass-media. Perhaps we look towards other sources closer and more genuine to the source? Networked communities allow us to do this with blogs like Dear_Raed by Salam Pax and other personal blogs, message boards of shared interest, chat and online peer communities or Usenets.