nayafia.substack.com /p/22-working-in-public

22: Working in Public

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9-12 minutes

Last fall, I mentioned a book I'd read called *Free Flight*, by James Fallows, about our commercial flight system and the future of flight. It was published in June 2001.

"Man," I thought, when I saw that date. "*That's pretty unfortunate. Can you imagine writing and releasing a book about commercial flight three months before 9/11?"*

Well anyways, I've got news: I've published a book about online communities, told through the story of open source developers – written just before the stay-at-home pandemic that uprooted how we think about ourselves in digital spaces. **It's called *Working in Public: The Making and Maintenance of Open Source Software,* now available for pre-order on Amazon.**

This was a major undertaking, bringing together five years of research into open source developers, combined with fresh thoughts about how they mirror the creator economy more broadly. I thought I'd take this issue to share why I wrote this book, why I think it matters, and especially why it matters right now.

I was first attracted to open source – public code that everybody relies upon – after observing that its developers are creating trillions of dollars in economic value, while giving away their code for free.

The common explanation for this discrepancy is that open source is a volunteer group effort, like Wikipedia. But, digging a little deeper, I found that the cooperative nature of open source was largely

overstated. While examples of large-scale collaboration exist, there are also countless projects maintained by individual developers. (Imagine if Wikipedia were mostly written by one person…which is actually not entirely off-base.)

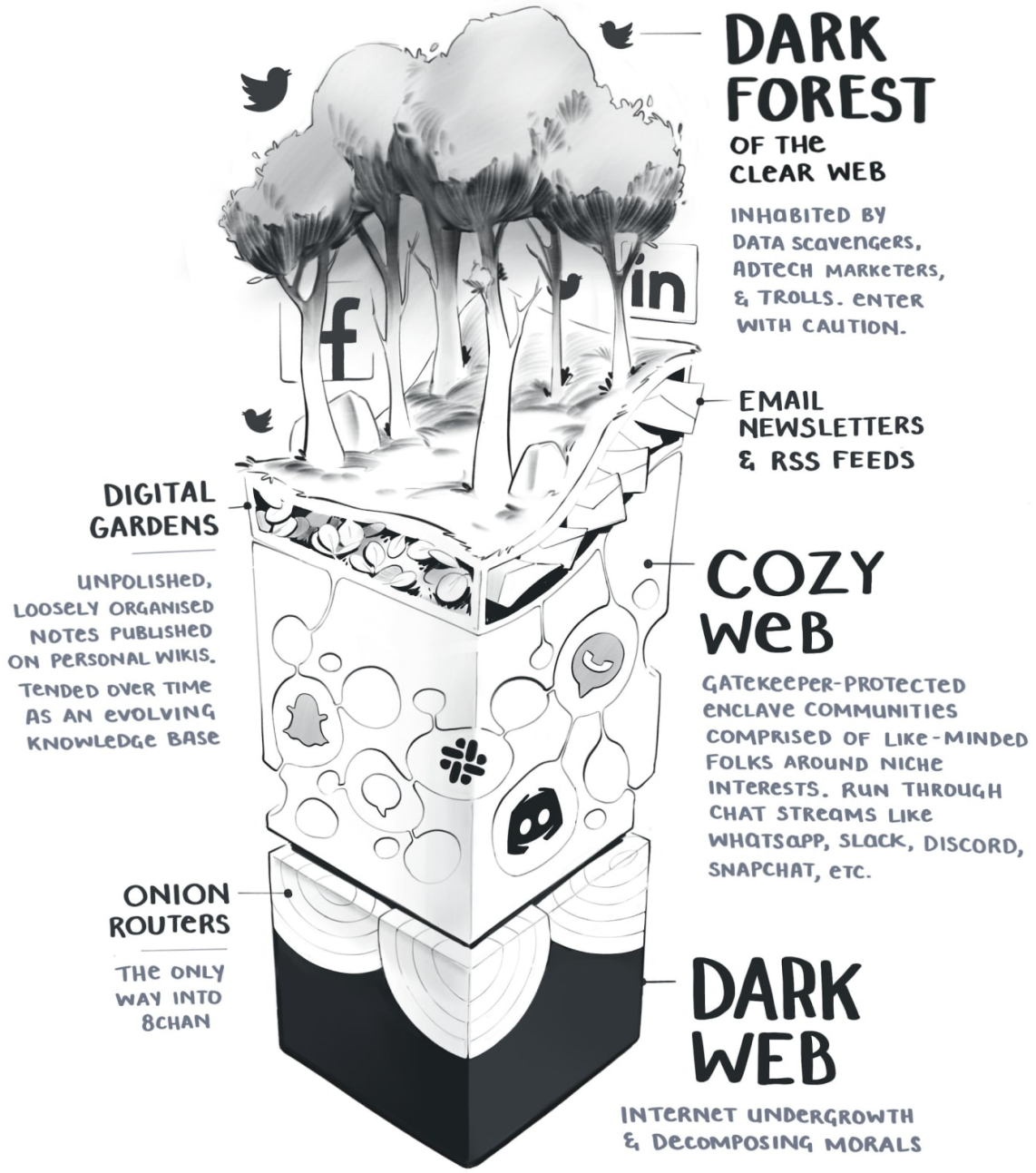
To address this issue, I started with the hypothesis that *"more people should contribute to open source."* If maintainers are overworked, more contributors could help alleviate the burden.

But in practice, this didn't seem to be the case. If anything, too many low-quality contributions were often the *cause* of maintainers' problems!

Meanwhile, as I tried to make sense of these implications, the world went through a populist explosion, driven in part by the 2016 presidential election, which recast our social platforms not as mere entertainment, but *de facto* governments lacking geographic borders.

The ensuing chaos changed how we interacted with each other online, albeit slowly. We sought relief from our cacophonous hyper-public spaces, looking to higher contextual ground for quieter, cozier corners of the web to nuzzle into.

I eventually realized that what was happening to open source mirrored what was happening to the world writ large, and that these developers – who'd started experiencing these issues a few years before everyone else – had a lot to tell us about where the world was going.



Maggie Appleton's vision of the web.

Open source has always reflected the broader social trends of our online world. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, open source inspired people looking to understand the nascent "open web." Both were about maximizing access and participation, where contributors come together in service of a bigger project.

Since 2016, however, we are undeniably moving into a second epoch of the social web, one in which "public" no longer equals "participatory." This shift requires that we refactor our understanding of online communities.

It seems clear to me that individuals, not just groups, are defining the next generation of the internet. Social platforms don't just connect us to people we already know, but also serve as a stage for us to discover, follow, and interact with creators. In the shift from "friends" to "followers," these communities became parasocial in nature, centered around individual creators, rather than a distributed crowd.

Kevin Systrom, who co-founded Instagram, said in 2018 that:

> *Social media is in a pre-Newtonian moment, where we all understand that it works, but not how it works. There are certain rules that govern it and we have to make it our priority to understand the rules, or we cannot control it.*

We all get it at this point: something's changed. But what is it, and how do we navigate and operate in this new world? Are there preexisting examples that can help us understand it? This year, as we're increasingly required to rely upon our online spaces for work and play, it's become even more crucial to deeply understand our underlying social infrastructure.

For me, it was open source developers that helped me make sense of the future. They've long experienced the frog-boiling that came with prior social norms of *"everybody participates"* butting up against the reality of *"participation doesn't scale."* And they have to figure it out in a way that other creators don't. An Instagram creator who doesn't look at their DMs might miss a few good ones. But if an open source developer doesn't read their bug reports, other people's lives are materially impacted, visible in the form of site outages and security breaches flitting through the news headlines.

I wrote this book because I felt there is so much wisdom we can glean from the world of open source. But the only books I could find reflect an expired reality – the early, communitarian version of open source. By shedding light on how modern open source works *today*, I hope to prompt new ideas about how the rest of our online world is evolving.

Finally, it's impossible to examine the social dynamics of these communities without also considering their economic implications. Online content is an unresolved conundrum since the dawn of the internet. It's extremely difficult to monetize, despite being worth quite a lot to us socially.

To address this, I decided to evaluate the economics of code and content in terms of a reputation-based economy. We've historically treated content as a first-copy cost problem, which intellectual property helps to solve for. But the challenges facing online creators today derive from playing a repeated game, not a single one. It's not enough to make one good hit: you have to keep making content to stay relevant. Examining *who* produces content, not just *what* they produce, can help us understand how to think about the value of online content today.

Okay, that's my spiel. You don't have to be technically-minded to read *Working in Public*, just someone who's curious about how creators operate today and how our economy might reorient itself around their work. You can pre-order a copy here:

Pre-order on Amazon

Thank you for reading! On to the rest of your regularly scheduled newsletter.

Notes

Notes from this past month have been updated. A few highlights:

- *I'd rather be a memos-driven company culture than a numbers-driven culture. Are these two things at odds? Do they develop in different ways?*
- *What would spreadsheets reimagined as a messaging app look like? Not repurposing existing spreadsheet software for messaging, but a messenger app that's spreadsheet-like. Like the same way Discord is messaging reimagined as audio-first, this would be messaging that's… tactile-first?*
- *I kinda want to see someone make the argument that terrible healthcare isn't a bug, but a feature of the United States. Like essentially steelman why bad healthcare is quintessentially American, instead of framing it as a crisis*
- *"Builder communities" that are oriented around an activity? (making open source software, playing Minecraft, choreographing dance routines, etc) Getting to know ppl by doing something alongside them is often better than milling around and talking. This was true of offline communities already, but can we now use that as a design principle for online communities as well?*

Links

- Snow Country (Yasunari Kawabata): This book was so sad! It's about a doomed romance between a geisha and her wealthy client (more in the genre of "lonely hearts" fiction), so I knew what I was getting into when I read it, but the heavy unspoken dialogue between characters made it especially sting, like sticking my bare hand into a bucket of snow. If that's your thing, have at it.

- The Rediscovered Writings of Rose Wilder Lane: Literary Journalist (Amy Mattson Lauters): A pleasant collection of essays by Rose Wilder Lane, who co-wrote the *Little House on the Prairie* books and also helped define the early libertarian movement. I love this early 20th century, down-home cozy version of American libertarianism, where everyone's preaching self-reliance and homeschooled education. I enjoyed these both for the first-hand historical perspective and Rose's energetic writing style (her travel essays are great!).

- "Party in a Shared Google Doc" (Marie Foulston): The title says it all. Marie also shares a link to the Google Doc, so you can see exactly how the party played out. Lots of fun inspiration in here.

- "Dear Cynthia" (Marcin Wichary): Marcin tells the story of tracking down the photographer of an image that he wanted to use in his book. Reading Marcin's writing is like looking at a Richard Serra: it's process art. He's writing a book about keyboards, and I don't even care about keyboards! But I care about how much Marcin cares about keyboards; his obsessions are infectious to be around.

- "Sidebar: Mutual Hostilities": A side project I've thought about is creating an anthology of internet-first philosophies and the seminal works of prominent bloggers associated with each one. I'm not sure I have the stamina for it, but I did like reading this piece examining the relationship between rationalists ("amateur philosophers" who refined their thinking on online forums) and professional philosophers. I've often wondered what professional philosophers think of internet-first philosophers, and vice versa, if they think anything at all.