How Big Tech coopted free software

The open-source world is more and more closed

Free and open-source software (FOSS) has played a huge part in creating our digital world; it provided the foundations of the Android operating system. But it's increasingly been coopted by Big Tech.

by Laure Muselli, Mathieu O'Neil, Fred Pailler & Stefano Zacchiroli

'Another digital world' emerged in the 1990s, alongside the information technology industry. Geographically disparate volunteer developers formed communities to collaborate on software projects that competed with so-called proprietary or commercial alternatives; some of the best-known examples are the Linux operating system, the Apache HTTP server and the VLC multimedia player.

These developers gave up their exclusive rights to their creations not just because their work provided its own rewards (satisfaction, learning, reputation, job offers), but also for moral reasons. A so-called 'copyleft' licence (such as the General Public Licence, GPL) grants users the rights to use, copy, modify and distribute computer code, on condition that these freedoms are preserved in all derivative versions of the software.

Where does the free software movement stand today? It has been coopted, integrated and taken over by the Silicon Valley giants, Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft (GAFAM or the Big Five), to the point that 'open-source' software — a term the industry adopted to talk about free software without mentioning freedom — is now at the heart of the digital economy.

According to a 2018 survey of 1,200 IT professionals, more than nine out of ten applications contain code from the open-source world. The integration began in the early 2000s at IBM and was completed in 2018 with Microsoft's $7.5bn takeover of the collaborative development platform GitHub. Companies pay some developers and profit from the free work of volunteers — and critical intellectuals, who saw open source as a tool for liberation, are left hanging in the breeze.

Two key players

In this process of appropriation, two entities have played a key role in bridging the gap between the commercial world and the FOSS project world. First, GitHub, the platform that hosts software development, created in 2005 and now a central node with some 40 million (...)

Cet article est réservé aux abonnés. Full article: 1 768 words.

Laure Muselli, Mathieu O'Neil, Fred Pailler & Stefano Zacchiroli

Mathieu O'Neil is associate professor of Communication at the University of Canberra's News & Media Research Centre and the founder of a new thinktank, the Digital Commons Policy Council; Laure Muselli is associate professor of Information Systems Management, Télécom Paris; Fred Pailler is a sociologist at the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History; and Stefano Zacchiroli is professor of computer science at Télécom Paris and member of the Digital Commons Policy Council. Please cite this article as: Mathieu O'Neil, Laure Muselli, Fred Pailler and Stefano Zacchiroli, 'The open-source world is more and more closed', *Le Monde diplomatique,* English edition, January 2022.

Translated by George Miller.

(1) Evgeni Morozov, 'The meme hustler', *The Baffler,* no 22, Cambridge (Massachusetts), April 2013.

(2) Keenan Szulik, 'Open source is everywhere', blog.tidelift.com, 12 April 2018.

(3) See Sébastien Broca, 'Fighting the online giants', *Le Monde diplomatique,* English edition, October 2014.

(4) See Benjamin Birkinbine, *Incorporating the Digital Commons: Corporate Involvement in Free and Open Source Software,* University of Westminster Press, 2020; and Arwid Lund and Mariano Zukerfeld, *Corporate Capitalism's Use of Openness: Profit for Free?,* Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2020.

(5) Bradford Biddle, 'Linux Foundation is eating the world', *Journal of Open Law, Technology & Society,* vol 11, no 1, 2019.

(6) Mathieu O'Neil, Xiaolan Cai, Laure Muselli, Fred Pailler and Stefano Zacchiroli, *The Coproduction of Open Source Software by Volunteers and Big Tech Firms,* News and Media Research Centre/Digital Commons Policy Council, Canberra, 2021.

(7) See Shoshana Zuboff, 'Once we searched Google. Now it searches us', *Le Monde diplomatique,* English edition, January 2019.

(8) See Cecilia Rikap and Bengt-Åke Lundvall, 'Big Tech, knowledge predation and the implications for development', *Innovation and Development,* London, 2020.

(9) *TheWall Street Journal,* New York, 9 August 2017; *Fortune,* New York, 15 June 2016.

(10) 'AGPL policy', Google open source, opensource.google/.

(11) See framasoft.org; matrix.org; nextcloud.com/.