

# NEWSANALYSIS

The Linux Voice view on what's going on in the world of Free Software.

Opinion

## Steering where you look

The seductive power of boundary conditions can ruin your business and community.



Simon Phipps is president of the Open Source Initiative and a board member of the Open Rights Group and of Open Source for America.

When I learned to drive, my instructor told me "you steer where you look" – in other words, wherever you focus your attention becomes your destination, so keep your eyes on the road ahead and don't worry about the stores at the roadside (or even too much about the kerb and the parked vehicles).

The same principle seems applicable in other contexts. We're moving away from a hierarchical, post-industrial society and evolving into a meshed society of peers, interacting in variable roles on their own terms. That's challenging established institutions, but sadly they have frequently "steered where they looked" and made the wrong choices.

The big media lobby – especially the movie and music industries, but also book, software and games publishers -- is right to be concerned about systematic infringement of their copyrights by commercial-scale criminals. But they have let their eyes wander.

They have looked so long in anger upon those crooks, invested so much time and money in frustrating them, that they've become fixated on copyright enforcement

and forgotten to keep pace with the expectations of their customers.

They've let the market run away from them and failed to build new businesses around their fans and friends. Instead, fixating on copyright infringement, they alienate the very people who should be their best bet for the future by treating them as criminals. They may not go as far as chasing everyone with lawsuits, but the unskippable admonishments on DVDs and their like shout loud and clear: "We may have some of your money but we still don't trust you."

### Open entrepreneurship

Open source projects are another case, perhaps a little more subtle. Entrepreneurs see the word "free" and assume there's a commons there to exploit for profit. But open source only has a commons once a community gathers – it doesn't magically arrive the instant you apply an OSI-approved licence. Moreover, the commons exists only by the collective agreement of its participants to set aside certain rights so that collaboration becomes possible. Entrepreneurs tend to be so focussed on leveraging a free network effect that they overlook the actual mechanism that makes it happen.

An open source community is an example of a group of people choosing to synchronise a fragment of their mutual interests, each at their own expense, for the benefit of all involved including themselves. While there may sometimes be a non-profit organisation for administrative reasons, an open source community is inherently neither

a non-profit or a for-profit organisation; profit is an orthogonal concept.

The process by which this distraction from core values happens is subtle, and undoing the error is hard. It probably happens incrementally as communities pass through the scales described by Dunbar Numbers [the theoretical number of people we are capable of forming direct relationships with without our brains melting, proposed by Robin Dunbar to be between 100 and 230]. They eventually mistake their boundary conditions for their core values.

At first a community is small enough for everyone to have a set of direct trust relationships. As the community grows through the Dunbar limit, it becomes necessary to define the norms for the community, to make it clear to newcomers what the values of the community are.

As growth continues, those norms become rules and the frequency with which they are enforced increases. Gradually, communicating the rules to outsiders becomes a common community function and the ability to do so becomes a community skill. Over time, application and explanation of those rules becomes so important to the community that they overshadow the original core values.

### Influence, not control

There's no canned solution for this; it takes a brave executive to step away from the weapons and chart a course for influencing the meshed society instead of attempting to control it. The news that Getty Images is now allowing free embedding of their entire catalogue for non-commercial use is just such a bold, visionary move. I hope we will see much much more of that and many fewer anti-fan lawsuits and copyright-assignment-based open source projects.

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