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Building an open community: a new opportunity for scholarly projects

Julien Dorra

"However, the magnitude of our dream is too large for just us, and we need you"¹

Introduction - Why build open communities today?

- 1 In the past decade, we have seen the rise of incredibly successful projects built by a new form of collective effort: the open community. Open Communities are different to traditional, locally anchored communities. But they are also different to multinational organizations. They are more akin to *consciously directed ecosystems* – ecosystems with a mission.
- 2 The most famous examples of successful open communities are Linux, Wikipedia, Drupal, and more recently OpenStreetMap.
- 3 My experience with open communities started in 2008 when I joined the French Drupal community. Drupal is an open source web-based content management system (CMS).
- 4 During the 2 years in which I participated in the Drupal France community, it grew from a dozen contributors to many more, allowing the community to organize a 900-person event in September 2009. The Drupal community is historically very horizontal, with no single company or individual being the main driver of the Drupal product.
- 5 We should note that this absence of centralized control is not a given for every open source product: Wordpress is another successful open source CMS, but its design and roadmap is controlled by the company that built it, Automattic. In that sense the Drupal ecosystem of individuals and organizations is closer to the Wikipedia or OpenStreetMap ecosystems than to the Wordpress ecosystem – even though the Wordpress and Drupal CMS are similar, competing products.
- 6 In 2011 I was part of a small group of seven that started Museomix², an event where people with a diverse set of skills and talents gather in a museum, and test new ways of

experiencing museums in 3 days using a wide range of tools and technologies. For the third Museomix edition in November 2013, more than 800 individuals participated in 6 simultaneous Museomix events in 3 countries. A total of 47 prototypes, new museum experiences made real, were built in just 3 days – all thanks to the decentralized, global effort of hundreds of people.

- 7 Launching and growing Museomix at such a fast pace would not have been possible 10 years ago, when most non-tech people were not connected to each other via the Internet. It would not have been possible before the large scale adoption of mainstream social networks. In retrospect, we realize that many projects did not take off because it was incredibly difficult to reach the right people.
- 8 The rise of public personal communication –individuals publicly communicating– makes it easier to reach out to potential contributors, and for potential contributors to find a community that suits their own purposes. As a consequence, new open communities that go beyond the historical mission of producing open source software are starting to appear.
- 9 Open communities make entirely new endeavours possible, as demonstrated by OpenStreetMap, Wikipedia or Museomix. They also make these endeavours sustainable: Linux is 23 years old and Wikipedia is 13. OpenStreetMap is 10 years old and as of early 2014 is still entirely volunteer-based. These projects are not as old as some century-old corporations or charities. But they are a continuous reminder that communities based only on desire and agency can last as long or longer than a closed project.
- 10 Building active local communities was, and still is, incredibly difficult. It involves going door to door, and engaging people one by one.
- 11 Starting an open community can be considered easier, because it is based on the realization that the community already exists in latent form. When I talk about this latent form of community with someone, I describe it like this: “There are people all over the world who want to build this project with you, but they just do not know it yet. Reach out to them.”
- 12 At its most basic, building an open community is using the Internet and events to turn a latent community into a real community. It is not without effort, and many failures. One of the classic pitfalls is trying to *manage* the community when it first needs to be *built*.

A new framework for growing a project

- 13 Community building is a not new technique. Saul Alinsky has dedicated his life to building local communities that empower people, and his 1971 book *Rules for Radicals*³ is the basis of contemporary community organizing techniques. Alinsky’s techniques are based on conflict, but there is also a less conflictual form of community organizing, where the goal is oriented toward social reconciliation more than civic rights, as exemplified by the work of Christophe Jibard in Paris.⁴
- 14 As community building started to combine with the Internet and the web, it transformed into a way to launch and grow a new type of project: knowledge-oriented, technological, creative projects. Most of these are extremely useful in supporting research: maps, encyclopedias, content management systems.

- 15 The key to open community building is creating an ecosystem rather than an organization. It means fostering a balanced environment where both individuals and organizations work together toward a common goal. It also means that agents of the ecosystem may have diverging interests.
- 16 What does *open* exactly mean here? It essentially means two things: first, the community is built with anyone who wants to be a part of it. Second, everyone, even outsiders, shares ownership of the community; or better said: no one owns the ecosystem.

The Open community compared to other ways to build a project

- 17 For a better understanding, we can contrast open communities with the most common methods used to start and frame the organizational aspect of a new project.
- 18 When starting a project, a creator tends to choose one of three ways to build it: the artist's way; the entrepreneur's way; the activist's way.
- 19 In the artist's way, the project creator acts mostly alone, maybe with some help from friends, a skilled craftsman, a computer programmer or other assistants. When acting in this way, you generally use your own resources and try to recoup some of that personal investment later. The artist builds the project, tries to give it exposure and mostly leaves it alone after that.
- 20 In the entrepreneur's way, the project creator starts with select partners, growing a single organization around the project – either a for profit organization, or a non-profit organization. The entrepreneur recruits people to help the project grow. The project is the organization – and the organization is the project.
- 21 The activist's way starts with a small group of like-minded peers, growing a group to support a cause or a social need. The activist's main job is to convince people that the project is important. Admission to and exclusion from the group are subject to rules, but also to the strict adoption of the group's message. There can be no ambiguity around the message (in contrast to the artist's way, where ambiguity is often found.)
- 22 The artist's way; the entrepreneur's way; the activist's way. These three ways of managing a project work well for a wide range of endeavours.
- 23 Interestingly, these traditional ways share a common premise: for the project to succeed, it is necessary to manage the scarcity of resources, probably for the entire life of the project. At any point in time there is a fixed budget and a fixed team. How could it be any other way? Thus certain goals might seem totally unattainable.
- 24 The open community introduces a new premise: the need to manage a surplus of resources. There will be too many people, doing too many things, in too many places. Some of this surplus work will have to be cancelled, deleted or gone back over. An example of this is the edits in Wikipedia: as much energy and time is spent deleting edits or reverting to previous versions as creating new ones.
- 25 This counter-intuitive premise changes the way resource scarcity is addressed. Successful open community builders are always thinking about how to actively create surplus by bringing in more people to the community.

Four principles for building your community

- 26 Many artistic, entrepreneurial, or activist projects fail. Like them, open communities can and do fail. It is still early in the life of open communities as a new social and ideological construct, and studies on how they start, succeed and fail exist but they are not comprehensive. However, there is enough history to draw lessons from the successes, giving new communities a better chance of starting up effectively.
- 27 Empirically, we can distinguish four principles: the open invitation; onboarding contributors; focusing the community; building a commons.

An open invitation to build together

- 28 For people to join your community they have to be invited publicly and openly.
- 29 You should publish a short, simple call. How would you invite people to join your project in a casual, but serious conversation? That's probably how you should write your manifesto.
- 30 Putting an open invitation out to join and build together is the first, necessary step to turn your project into an open community.
- 31 A good way to start would be to lay down the why, what and how of your community effort.
- 32 Why: The frustration, the issue you want to clarify. The current state of affairs, and what's lacking. You should be precise about the issue you want to solve, so that people that share your vision can self-identify with the issue. For OpenStreetMap it was the frustration of not being able to access public mapping data.
- 33 The *why* generally embeds both selfish and altruistic reasons. OpenStreetMap contributors are happy to build a better map of their own town, but also to share it with the world.
- 34 What: The events, the focal points. You want to focus people on the project, and you need to give the community a way to assemble. For OpenStreetMap it was Mapping Parties.⁵
- 35 The *what* provides a deadline for engagement. Active communities set up multiple production events during the year, as a way of focusing the community on deadlines and milestones.
- 36 How: The way people are going contribute. For OpenStreetMap, you can help by adding and correcting geographical data and you are encouraged to do so.
- 37 The *how* gives a clear picture of what people can do, what you invite them to produce together.
- 38 An invitation to join and contribute can take many forms. An open platform is an invitation, as in Wikipedia's case. Or the source code published can be an invitation, for example with Linux or Drupal. Depending on your project, you can accompany your call by something tangible, something you have already accomplished: source code, pictures, data, a common platform. Sometimes the most humble call starts a great, long lasting project, which is the case of Linus Torvald's first public emails about Linux: "I'm doing a (free) operating system (just a hobby, won't be big and professional like gnu)".⁶

- 39 Whatever your project is producing, explicitly inviting people to contribute is the first step to making them care.

Users, Contributors

- 40 To understand community building, we need to understand the distinction between users and contributors and how they relate to our community.
- 41 People who contribute to the common goals of a community are contributors. They may contribute independently of any affiliation, or be part of various organizations that support their active contributions. Those that use the products built by the contributors are users. A healthy community will grow in number both in term of users and contributors, but users alone cannot sustain a community. Your community needs to grow in terms of contributors.

Paradoxical growth

- 42 A community is always growing and shrinking at the same time. Most people will leave the community at some point. And do not expect members of the community to tell you in advance: they will leave without notice, sometimes without even themselves realizing they are leaving the community for good.
- 43 We call this sudden change the baby effect – or more grimly, the bus effect. Things happen, lives change, and people's priorities change too.
- 44 Your goal is to continuously add new members to the community so it grows faster than it shrinks. Of course you also want to create an environment where active members stay long enough and do not suffer from community fatigue. To create such an environment, you should give everyone a view of what everyone else is doing, using tools such as forums and mailing lists, and always empower each member to act autonomously instead of deciding for them how they have to do things for the community.

Turn users into contributors

- 45 “The plural of 'user' is not 'community'. The former may grow in numbers, the latter does not grow by itself”⁷
- 46 To convert users of your project into contributors you have to treat each user as a potential contributor. That means leaving the door open to even the smallest of contributions. If a distant user of your community product is willing to go and talk about it in their own organization, encourage them to do so, and treat that action in every way as a contribution to the goals of your community. Publish a list of possible contributions, to help contributors self-identify with tasks at hand.
- 47 Another facet is the direct relationship you build with your early users. Do not try to act like you have one million users when you have just ten: email them personally, one by one, do not write bland templates to welcome your initial users. Nurturing personal relationships with your first users will create a culture of direct engagement and involvement.

Be radically inclusive

- 48 By definition, anyone can be a member of an open community: there are no barriers to entry.
- 49 To grow an active open community, you should try and include any person interested in contributing. You should judge a good community member on the member's actual actions toward the common goal, not on the member's age, professional credentials or even skills. Your mission as a community builder is to find ways to help each newcomer find his or her place and flourish in the community.
- 50 Sadly, every community creates both inclusion and exclusion dynamics. As an open community builder, your goal is to maximize the inclusion dynamics, minimizing the exclusion dynamics. To accomplish this, you will have to think explicitly about who your community includes and who your community excludes by default.
- 51 The most potent form of exclusion is self-identification. People will ask themselves if you are addressing them, if the community is for them. Think about how gender, ethnicity, age and class affect how your community is perceived. Of course the community discourse, texts, and calls are the first line. They should be particularly inclusive.
- 52 A simple example: if your language is English, it might be easier for you to address your current contributors, members and potential members in a gender neutral way. For example 'participant' in English works for a man and a woman. But I'm French and it is very easy in French to exclude women by using the male form for skills and functions, as this is the traditionally used default. So when I had to call for Museomix Ambassadors in French I took special care to call for "Ambassadrices et Ambassadeurs", not just the male form "Ambassadeurs". It turned out that the first 3 individuals interested in becoming ambassadors were women.

Be radically transparent

- 53 Transparency in open communities is not a political choice. It is a question of effectiveness.
- 54 Every conversation, every content created must be public by default. Do not necessarily publish your old private conversations in block, but at some point you need to switch to public as the default. The sooner, the better.
- 55 By having the conversation public and easily visible to all, you will give newcomers ways to listen. It will be easier to learn the culture.
- 56 Make your budget public. Make your contracts public. Sometimes it might feel like something should stay more confidential, for example lists of personal addresses or discussions with potential sponsors. In this case, always balance the need for confidentiality with the fact that hiding documents and discussions hurt your community by limiting the number of potential contributions.
- 57 The most common problem is having too few people looking at your conversations, not having too many people looking at them.

Onboarding, empowering and thanking

- 58 Wikipedia has a great community guideline page called “Please do not bite the newcomers”,⁸ or more casually “don’t bite the newbies”.
- 59 The essence of “don’t bite the newbies” as a community guideline is the realization that trying to participate in an existing community is hard. Communities have many rules, some of them not fully explicit. Beyond the rules there are a culture, protocols, special people...
- 60 To ease this cultural learning curve, you can create the habit of introducing newcomers to the community at large and to select contributors that can act as mentors. Or even better, ask the newcomers to introduce themselves, giving them the legitimacy to talk and assume a role in the community.
- 61 Once the newcomers are comfortable, you have to empower them. Give the listener the opportunity to talk. Give the talker the opportunity to act. Give active participants the opportunity to tell everyone about their actions by encouraging them to talk as the voice of the community and by giving them publishing rights on the community tools.
- 62 Last but not least, thank people publicly. In an open community, the minimal reward expected is peer recognition, so never hesitate to thank people for their contributions.

Action by default, approval second

- 63 As the community grows from less than a dozen to several dozen contributors, formal approval of all decisions will be less and less practical. You’ll want to favour both reaching consensus and not blocking action.
- 64 One way to favour action over approval is to let contributors announce publicly what they are going to do, for example in a forum, group or list. The expectation is that if nobody disapproves, the contributor or group of contributors can go ahead and implement the action.
- 65 This action-oriented mode can lead to slips. It is a small price to pay, as favouring formal approval would simply never allow your community to exist.
- 66 Another way is to have processes and tools in place that allow immediate action. For example wikis allow a web page to be corrected or created immediately, without the need for approval or even contacting anyone.
- 67 As time goes by, some actions will become so essential to your community culture that even new contributors will implement them without thinking twice.

Plan yourself as optional

- 68 As a community builder, your mission from the start is to build a community that can work without you.
- 69 Give your work to others and help them take over. Write a mission statement that embodies the shared values of the community, so the community can decide by itself what needs to be done.

Events and focus

- 70 Events are an effective way to attract new contributors to your community. Use an event to focus your latent community on the core issues you want to address.
- 71 I tend to favour local, physical events to start a community from scratch. Meeting and working together face to face is a powerful way to create links between people. But you can also build a community by launching an online event. WikiLoveMonuments, NaNoWriMo, Ludum Dare or the monthly Mozilla Dev Derby are interesting examples of a large community focusing on select goals: enriching Wikipedia with photos of monuments, writing a novel in one month, creating a game in just a few days, pushing HTML5 to the limits.
- 72 It's just harder to keep the community involved before and after a purely online event.
- 73 In contrast, when people have met around physical events where they have been active contributors, they tend to stay in touch online for a long time. For example, although the last OrsayCommons⁹ event took place more than three years ago, members of the Facebook group continue to post regularly when the issue of taking pictures in museums arises in their lives.
- 74 Your main community events –online-only or in physical space– must involve people as contributors, not just consumers. As your community grows, you will have other, more frequent events, and some of them will only be organizational in nature, like community meetups.
- 75 Your first event is ideally a co-creative event, where all contributors-to-be gather and start *producing* what your community is about.
- 76 Aim to make your events central to your community. Use them as a moment where collective energy is used to create and enhance the community product. Gathering people just to talk to them would be a waste of time, theirs and yours.
- 77 Events that build up the product and focus contributors include: OpenStreetMap Mapping Parties, where contributors fix and update the geographical information database; the Museomix annual event, where participants and support teams create prototypes in museums; open source code and doc sprints, where coders and non-coders help fixing bugs, building and documenting features.

The deal: we are building a commons

- 78 The goal of your community is to build something that nobody can own, either individually or collectively. A real commons.
- 79 When you use Wikipedia content, you know as a user that you are protected from Wikipedia authors. No small print. Wikipedia is a commons because it is not owned by anyone, not even the community that is creating it. Wikipedia's goal is to create a global, universal encyclopedia, and it is perfectly fine if someone uses Wikipedia without ever making a contribution. Also, it is fine to make money using Wikipedia content as long as you credit the use.
- 80 That's the deal that makes open communities possible. Contributors will help to build the community because they know they cannot be denied access to community-built resources.

- 81 As a community builder, your goal is to protect the users of the communal product you are creating—not necessarily to protect the product itself or a group of people. It is important to keep this in mind when deciding on licenses, for example: the GPL and Creative Commons were created to protect end users first, not to protect the creations from users, and that's why they are favoured in many open communities.¹⁰

Conclusion - From inside out to outside in to outside out

- 82 Building an open community from scratch is possible. It's easier than ever – or better said, most open communities were impossible to launch just a few years ago. When successful, an open community allows a project to be scaled at an unprecedented ratio of impact-to-resources, as Wikipedia has best exemplified: it has very modest resources, and is the sixth most visited website in the world.
- 83 But... how can you start today?

Inside out

- 84 Get out. Not just of the building, but of your own community. Call for people outside your usual circles, reach out by publishing an open invitation. Share what you are doing, as you are doing it, so others can jump in and help. This might also draw you out of your comfort zone, for fear of pushing something unfinished out. You will find that most people want an excuse to help, not to judge. Show your project and talk about it, and more importantly, tell people that they are needed. The first sign that you are succeeding at being inside out will be when you have a total stranger coming from nowhere starting to work on your project unprompted.

Outside in

- 85 Constantly onboard newcomers. Bring new users in, and then turn them into contributors. You need more people than you think. You need ten times more people than you think. And then ten times that. Draw people from other communities, so in turn they can create bridges between communities. Keep people happy and intrinsically rewarded for their work in the community. When you have trouble welcoming newcomers fast enough, when you are submerged by too many contributors' ideas, it will be a good sign: the community will be attracting users and contributors from outside in.

Outside out. And where's the inside by the way?

- 86 You will know you are building an open, healthy, and growing community when the boundaries between who is an insider and who is an outsider are blurred. At that point, you will have a hard time explaining to journalists or grant makers exactly what a “member” of your community is. You may be able to count active contributors. But are users members? Are your blogger friends who follow and comment on the project also

members? Do the curious that attend events with passion but are undecided on how to contribute count as members?

- 87 Open communities challenge our ideas of organizations and of individual agency in a collective. A lot of quantitative and qualitative work lies ahead if we really want to understand the new social dynamics these communities are creating in the world. In the meantime, even before we understand them more fully, we can create new open communities, experiment and reap the benefits of openly producing a commons at web scale.

NOTES

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