

Free Culture Communities: Facing Organizational Challenges

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Transnational communities play an increasingly important role in the field of digital knowledge and culture both as providers of goods and services via commons based production (Benkler 2006) and as actors in regulatory processes (Djelic and Quack, forthcoming). While a huge variety of phenomena are subsumed under the umbrella of diverse “community” concepts, most of them share a reluctance to investigate the relationship between communities and related formal organizations (for an exception see O’Mahoney and Bechky 2008). The main reason for this decentred role of formal organization in contemporary community theorizing is probably the convention to describe organizational features and dynamics of communities in contrast to classic organizational bureaucracies, and to thereby emphasize the informal nature of communities.

However, for communities in general and for the free culture movement in particular, formal organizations are of great importance in at least two regards: First, even the most open and self-organizing community projects sooner or later develop formal organizational structures to make their work sustainable and to manage relations with external actors. Second, formal organizations play a major role as adopters, users or sponsors of community work and products.

In my research so far, I have concentrated on these two relatively distinct relations of community development and formal organizing: Together with Sigrid Quack I have investigated the interplay of different types of communities in the realm of the organizational network of Creative Commons (Dobusch and Quack 2008; 2009). In a current research project we are comparing the organizational structure and transnationalization dynamics of Creative Commons with the ones of Wikimedia and its local chapter organizations.¹ Contrasting these two cases highlights not only the importance of organizational participation for community building and development but also the difficulties of organizing participation

¹ Some work in progress can be found on our research blog „governance across borders“, in particular the following posts: <http://governancexborders.wordpress.com/2009/05/25/wikimania-preview-1-the-importance-of-clear-boundaries-for-community-participation/> and <http://governancexborders.wordpress.com/2009/06/15/wikimania-preview-2-different-transnationalization-dynamics-of-creative-commons-and-wikimedia/> [accessed: 20 July 2009].

when community boundaries are fuzzy and changing rapidly. Thereby the comparison shows how different identities and (sub-)communities are a valuable asset for creating momentum but at the same time are a big challenge for design and strategic management of their carrier organizations. To meet these demands, formal organizations regularly have to re-evaluate and re-define their role and the relationship towards their respective communities.

The second line of my research focuses organizational adopters and users of commons based peer production, especially on the local level. In my doctoral thesis I compared how and why the municipalities of Berlin, Frankfurt/Main, Munich and Vienna (failed to) migrate their desktop software environment (operating system and office) from proprietary to free/open source software (Dobusch 2008c; 2009). These in-depth case studies show not only the enormous difficulties in escaping established software paths but also emphasize the importance of rhetorical discourse patterns for success or failure of open source software adoption (Dobusch 2008b): for example, advanced forms of Total Cost of Ownership (TCO) calculations transcend the mere juxtaposition of costs and benefits and thus end in debating what could be considered “sensible”. In these discursive struggles framing of issues by advocates of open source software and their adversaries is key.

But municipalities have a far greater importance for free culture and knowledge than just in their role as mere adopters of open source software: In the edited volume “Freie Netze. Freies Wissen.” (“Free Networks. Free Knowledge.”, Dobusch and Forsterleitner 2007) 17 authors explain different fields of free culture such as free software, open educational resources, open content licensing, open access publishing or free Wi-Fi networks and discuss their implications for municipal politics. At the end of each chapter the authors suggested concrete projects for the Austrian municipality Linz – the European Capital of Culture in 2009² –, some of which have already been realized: for example, new cultural subsidy guidelines since January 1, 2009 reward opting for free licenses for subsidized works with a 10 percent bonus subsidy and over 120 free Wi-Fi hotspots have been established in public buildings and spaces all over the city. These small examples demonstrate the need for and potential of political commitment to new tasks and responsibilities on the local level in spite of the global nature of many free culture communities and projects (Dobusch 2008a).

² See <http://www.linz09.at/en/index.html> [accessed: 20 July 2009]

Taken together, these threads of work lead to the seemingly trivial insight that “organization matters” for success or failure of free culture initiatives on both the global and the local level. For research as well as praxis, however, the importance of organizational structures and processes poses several not-so-trivial questions and challenges:

First, sustainability of commons-based production requires the development and adaptation of appropriate organizational structures for community governance. Generating leeway for strategically shaping these governance structures, however, might be at odds with demands for community participation and/or autonomy. The transnational scope of many cases of commons-based production makes this an even more challenging task. And especially in the realm of what Lessig (2008) calls “hybrid economy” recourse to standard commercial (e.g. corporate hierarchy) or non-commercial (e.g. political democracy) ideal types is not sufficient. The hybrid economy also requires new and “hybrid” forms of organizing. The challenge posed in this regard is mainly an analytical one of developing theoretical frameworks that transcend classical organizational taxonomies.

Second, in addition to the task of developing new forms of governance, the adoption of open content licensing and contribution to commons-based production by existing organizations poses another challenge. While adoption decisions may not be easy for individuals, the necessary *collective* decision making and action makes them even more difficult within organizations. Proponents of free culture inside and outside of these organizations have to deal with diverse local and historical idiosyncrasies, micropolitical dynamics and organizational path dependencies (Sydow et al. 2009). In this context, analysing prevalent discourse patterns and rhetorical strategies in diverse fields of application could lead to more reflexive framing strategies and thus foster change of existing proprietary practices. A promising road for contributing to this challenge could be the methodological development of new forms of discourse analysis that allow accounting for (the interrelationship of) different forms of offline and online communication.

Third, looking from a broader social movement perspective (Davis et al. 2005; 2008) on the free culture movement as a whole also raises organizational question of how different initiatives can be coordinated to increase overall momentum? Not least Creative Commons’ recent attempt of establishing iCommons as a kind of “meta-community organization” demonstrates the enormous difficulties of this task (Dobusch and Quack 2008). Here

analytical and normative challenges converge: not only do we require new modes of transnational governance but we also have to carefully discuss their normative implications to compromise neither the dynamic nor the goals of the underlying social movement.

All these challenges have in common that they require research with a longitudinal process perspective and interdisciplinary as well as continuous efforts.

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Why this Essay is of broad enough interest:

Organizational structures and processes are central both for theoretically understanding the development and dynamics of free culture communities and for strategically managing them. Therefore, this essay should be of interest for researchers as well as practitioners in diverse fields of free culture. Moreover, the essay emphasizes the necessity of an integrated perspective on global and local dynamics in free culture research.

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Leonhard Dobusch is post-doc fellow at the Department of Management at Freie Universität Berlin. Prior to this, he was post-doc fellow and member of the research group on “Institution Building across Borders” at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne and visiting researcher at Stanford Law School’s Center for Internet and Society. He holds a Magister (MBA equivalent) in business administration as well as a law degree and received his PhD in the doctoral program “Research on Organizational Paths”, which is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and situated at the School of Business & Management at Freie Universität Berlin. His recent publications include the book “Windows versus Linux” (VS Verlag 2008) and an article on the development of Economics as a discipline, titled “‘Why is Economics not an evolutionary science?’ – New answers to Veblen’s old Question.” (with Jakob Kapeller, forthcoming in the Journal of Economic Issues).

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