

## Open source publishing, 'book sprints' and possible futures

### ABSTRACT

A number of open source publishing networks and communities facilitate the use of helpful tools for free publishing and collaborative writing that can be adopted or adapted for various uses. One group that has consciously tried to take into account all of the processes necessary to solve problems is FLOSS Manuals. The ecologies of many groups and networks tend to fetishise the digital and neglect other possible solutions. This article examines the many tools available or in development that value print formats and community-sustaining tools and methods, both online and physical.

Living in Dunedin, a small city with strong community networks, I work collaboratively with artists, educators and designers, businesses and institutions as a supporter of node gateways to new media open methods, resources and tools. This practice extends to national and international networks, including the non-profit group FLOSS Manuals and its agile book creation process.

I came to work with FLOSS Manuals through my involvement within a tiny, inwardly focussed Dunedin subcultural community, and the handful of individuals, who travelled far and cross-pollinated with similar communities in Europe and further.

### FREE SOFTWARE AND OPEN SOURCE PUBLISHING

From the early 1980s open source software was typified by the development and distribution of Richard Stallman's GNU compiler, the best on Unix systems at the time. However, there were often more software developers willing to volunteer their time than there were technical writers and so there was little or no supportive documentation.

It was not until Adam Hyde's 2006 development of FLOSS Manuals that readily accessible and readable documentation became available<sup>1</sup>. FLOSS stands for Free/Libre Open Source Software. So FLOSS Manuals are essentially 'free manuals for free software'. These manuals can be obtained from the FLOSS Manuals website<sup>2</sup> ([en.flossmanuals.net](http://en.flossmanuals.net) is a good starting place), or printed and purchased as individual or multiple copies at print-on-demand online stores.

FLOSS Manuals is an ecology of individuals with few rules, where a community of writers produce a repository of work. Across the board, there is a range of viscosity evident in a survey of collaborative networks, from loose to rigid, with things kept open. This approach facilitates collaborative knowledge

production, encouraging participation rather than regulating content. Adam Hyde, the founder of FLOSS Manuals, began working as a multimedia artist involved in free software and interested in producing quality documentation. Support materials for his projects became software manuals.<sup>3</sup>

FLOSS Manuals are written with a totally open, do-what-you-want-to-it licence, giving writers the freedom to improve and update the manuals as new software versions are released. Manuals are written collaboratively, inviting alterations and improvements from readers and users. The most up-to-date version of the manual becomes available in several formats, including printed book, ePub, PDF, HTML, and Open Office. Books are available from lulu.com as singly printed and bound editions. The FLOSS Manuals group of volunteers writes and develops freely-available online books.

In 2009 Adam Hyde stated:

books are becoming dematerialized, unbound. . . . The model is changing and now publishers should think about who wants a book and what the demand is like. It will change to more of a print-on-demand model, where one pays for the entire production of a book and brings it into existence when wanted. This is also the issue of editions: publishers always tend to think through editions, but FLOSS is a fluid entity in which there is no canonical edition and you can re-edit everything.<sup>4</sup>

Femke Snelting, who has worked with and written about open source publishing, defines it as "...first of all an attempt to facilitate a design practice that starts from a critical use of technology and explicitly functions in an ecology of knowledge based on distribution and circulation rather than competition and exclusion."<sup>5</sup>

## ONLINE AND E-BOOKS

The idea of the paper book has not disappeared entirely from this open source documentation platform. Diverse print outputs are encouraged, including magazine and newspaper formats. Some FLOSS manuals are available for sale at lulu.com, a print-on-demand provider. Costs can be kept low by printing black ink only on white paper, saving on the much higher cost of colour printing. Books can be purchased perfect-bound in a laminated colour card cover, giving the look, feel and permanency of a real book.

In most cases the e-book format is the online alternative to a physically printed, published and mass-produced paper book. Examples of e-books might be found at archive.org. The FLOSS Manuals approach supplements traditional e-book modes with a faster online production process focussing on short articles that become chapters and combine to form books.

The various software manuals at FLOSS Manuals cover technical and social realms, from video and audio editing, HTML and 3D, and also include community-building. The documentation of methodologies exists to encourage an open web (such as how to bypass internet censorship) and the maintenance of free cultures and networks. The number of software projects being documented in 'user manual' form has been steadily increasing, so FLOSS Manuals is becoming known as a book-form archive of 'how-tos', in marked contrast to a knowledge wiki such as Wikipedia, which functions as an online encyclopaedia, a giant global book that would be unwieldy to publish in physical volumes. FLOSS Manuals content, on the other hand, can be individually published as book volumes, chapters or articles.

## 'BOOK SPRINTS'

FLOSS Manuals functions at a community level to encourage collaboration from writers. A significant challenge is completing the writing for the book/manual to be useful. Adam Hyde has

championed a new collaborative methodology for creating books in two to five days—the Book Sprint. This collaborative writing process has been used in the creation of over 30 free software Manuals to date, and has recently extended into other areas of documentation such as Open Oil (openoil.net)

‘Book sprints’ were developed in 2005 by Tomas Krag and a group called Wireless Networks.<sup>6</sup> Krag and his team wanted to publish without the constraint of traditional publishing methods, by turning it into a social process within a compact time frame. They spent nearly two months online, collaborating by exchanging texts and documents, and then met at a physical location, wrote together, and afterwards spent a couple of months online tidying up the writing. Following a meeting with Tomas Krag, Adam Hyde saw the potential of the ‘book sprint’ for building a community writing platform, and refined the process to produce a manual within a week.

The first FLOSS Manuals book, *How to Bypass Internet Censorship*<sup>7</sup>, an activist handbook, used the ‘book sprint’ model: several people working on the same book at the same time to complete the project within five days. This book has subsequently been translated into Russian, Burmese and Farsi.

What are the by-products of this rapid collaborative process? The ‘book sprint’ creates a social event, where the technology is an enabler of the social component. Shared face-to-face participation creates the energy and impetus to finish a book; that includes editing, proofing, checking images, and checking relevancy. Remote collaborations are also effective, but not as effective as the face-to-face ‘book sprint’.

As the current publishing world moves toward distributed digitalised social frameworks and digital online outputs, FLOSS software manual production is moving in the opposite direction, toward face-to-face social processes and printed, physical outputs in book, magazine and newspaper form, as well as online e-book format.

The point here is not whether a book is physically manufactured in the end, but rather that it is a source of knowledge production: ‘book sprints’ carry much more weight and power than ‘pdf sprints’, for instance. The physical book is a powerful cultural artefact; its physicality retains meaning. To David M. Berry and Michael Dieter, ‘the book sprint’ has something positive to offer academic and publishing practices in “allowing the genre of the ‘flash’ book, written under a short time frame, to emerge as a contributor to debates, ideas and practices in contemporary culture.”<sup>8</sup>

## COLLABORATION: A BOOK IS A COMMUNITY

Around FLOSS Manuals a sort of corpus is created: the workshops that we facilitate provide energy to the public. They then become empowered and put lots into the network. It’s a sort of back and forth nature, where one thing fuels the other. Community is an important aspect for motivation. We are sort of a community within a community. It is a question of identification. A book is a community. ‘Book sprints’ form this community. The book is a powerful central focus for a community to build around.<sup>9</sup>

While cloud computing and crowd sourcing are recent developments in network technology, FLOSS Manuals is moving against the trend toward cloud storage. The cloud is about automatically storing and getting content, but FLOSS Manuals facilitates book production through participation, with a necessary hierarchy. “Online communities are not organised as democracies.”<sup>10</sup>

Regarding authorship, some writers might collaborate on a single production of a book and then decide to assume ownership. Alternatively, some writers may prefer to contribute to some parts of a book, and other writers may only contribute as editors. All writers are expected to collaborate freely and openly within the ‘book sprint’ process, while the book design is also in the hands of the writers. All contributors are credited, and FLOSS Manuals books are released under the broad GNU General Public License.

## BOOKI

Booki, also generated by Floss Manuals, is possibly a next step in the development of collaborative writing. If FLOSS Manuals is the platform for development of software and technology resources and writings, Booki.cc is a platform where users can write and collaborate on a broad range of texts. Adam Hyde is enthusiastic about writers generating diverse content. “We hope to ... eventually have students producing their own textbooks.”<sup>11</sup>

Adam Hyde goes on to assert that, “With Booki.cc anyone can apply their own style to the content using Cascading Style Sheets (CSS). So both layout and content are up to you. There is also a standard layout that one can use.” Booki makes an intervention in the publishing field by allowing contributors to re-edit and re-write a book, style the typography, the page layout, columns, margins and colours. The immediacy of this publishing technique means that minutes after the book has been proofed, it can be downloaded, read on a Kindle, printed from a PDF, or purchased at an online book store. The moment of ‘publishing’ is now almost synonymous with the moment of production.

## FEDERATED PUBLISHING

“Federated publishing takes all of the concepts that FLOSS Manuals advocates for—ease of online book production, collaboration, reuse—and applies them to a new networked model of publishing.” The term Federated Publishing is born from Federated Social Network theory; the “Federated Social Web is a vision of interoperable social network platforms enabling ‘people on different social networks (to) connect with each other as friends and colleagues.’”<sup>12</sup>

Federated Publishing was anticipated by this astonishing passage from Marshall McLuhan (1966):

Instead of going out and buying a packaged book of which there have been five thousand copies printed, you will go to the telephone, describe your interests, your needs, your problems, and they at once Xerox with the help of computers from libraries all over the world, all the latest material for you personally, not as something to be put out on a bookshelf. They send you the package as a direct personal service. This is where we are heading under electronic conditions. Products increasingly are becoming services.<sup>13</sup>

Many quote this passage as a prophecy of the internet but it may be argued that it better describes the kind of space in which FLOSS Manuals and Booki operates.

Federated Publishing is not a model, but can be considered a network of models, enabling multiple approaches to content production, distribution, and consumption. At this point, within FLOSS Manuals, the space is enabled by four core elements. These are the digitally networked corpus of works; the interoperable free/libre licensed content; the federated open book production and ‘publishing’ platforms; and the active participation of groups of people, taking on the roles of writers, designers, and producers.

Adam Hyde argues:

In contrast proprietary publishing dominates the search for new distribution formats and economic models, reward systems for authors and others, and fuels an unwillingness to make content interoperable on a technical, legal, or social cultural level. It was this context McLuhan imagined we were escaping. Federated Publishing provides this mechanism.

In FLOSS Manuals anyone can clone or migrate a book to another platform, reuse and change the book without permission, and publish it wherever they like. This is Federated Publishing.<sup>14</sup>

There is currently not a prolific exploration of this model. It may be that at present the Federated Publishing model is used only by FLOSS Manuals.

## TRANSLATION

Translation, the ability to make the manuals available to anyone to read, is also important to FLOSS Manuals. So there is a subdomain in Farsi, others in Finnish, Spanish and French. Writing software manuals in Farsi has required special software coding to make the text pages read from right to left. In examining Matthew Fuller's media ecologies, these translation subdomains are like similar recognisable landscapes, hybrids of each other (Fuller, 2005). FLOSS Manual's translation tools widen participation. Books migrate with little effort across languages, taken to them by eager volunteers who want to bring benefits to their own communities.

## REMIX

The 'remix' tool on the FLOSS Manuals website enables the customisation of content within and across selected books or manuals. With remixing, a writer or new contributor can format a book compiled from various or re-arranged chapters from one or many books. Traditional or historical technologies such as cut-and-paste, help the remix function become a recognisable and easy-to-use tool. Potentially, an online book can become a new paper-based product that could appear as a magazine, newspaper, pamphlet, poster, postcard, ticket, bookmark, or stamp. These digitised actions of copy- and cut-and-paste bring artistic or aesthetic approaches to the book creation process, making the result an individual (and new) interpretation of one or many books, or of an archive of texts.

## OBJAVI

Yet another tool developed within FLOSS Manuals, is the export tool Objavi, which is used at publication time to export entire books (or remixed chapters) to online and/or print formats, including ePub, Portable Document Format (PDF), HTML, and Open Office, in a number of print page sizes, from comic book up to broadsheet newsprint size. Objavi uses a variety of software tools to create PDF format books for print or HTML/CSS pages. Text and images are retrieved from an online database, and Python, Webkit tools and CSS are used to style the text, scale images and build columns and pages before print. Cover artwork can be included, and the style and layout of a book may differ across formats.

Objavi has been used to create over forty FLOSS Manuals titles that can be bought as printed, perfect-bound A4 or A5 books from the print-on-demand website lulu.com. A broadsheet newspaper format is the only untested format at the time of writing, but this large paper format is affected by the current decline in broadsheet newspaper production in New Zealand, Australia and elsewhere.

Objavi allows text to flow from column to column, scales and fits images within columns, provides a masthead, extra articles, cover, and caption or reference boxes. Using the powerful 'remix' tool, as previously described, users can take chapters or sections from different books, and compose a publication of their own selection of chapters, then make the book available in a number of formats.

## CONCLUSION

FLOSS Manuals offers many tools and methods to support and foster agile book creation. A mix of online tools (remix, Objavi) and real physical methods ('book sprints') shows that FLOSS Manuals is responsive to the needs of members of its writing community. This hybrid approach can be found elsewhere too, for example, in the Google Summer of Code writing camps. While much development

is taking place in turning some of our world into its digital equivalent, it is encouraging to note that some communities are hybridizing their methods.

Is an entirely digital model good for our futures? Hybridising digital and physical methods and tools is a path towards better open source publishing methods, again liberating the means of production, ensuring that printed matter retains its value as a form.

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