

Chapter for:

Baier, Andrea, Tom Hansing, Christa Müller & Karin Werner (eds) (2016) *Die Welt reparieren: Open Source und Selbermachen als postkapitalistische Praxis [Repairing the world: Open Source and DIY as Postcapitalist Praxis]*, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, PDF ISBN 978-3-8394-3377-5

available at: <http://www.transcript-verlag.de/978-3-8376-3377-1/die-welt-reparieren>

Otto von Busch,  
Parsons School of Design, The New School, NYC

## Open realism, or: open in what end?

---

A very simple image I once encountered in my education was to think of the design process as a pipe. What you put in one end is transformed throughout the journey into a result, for example a product or service. The teacher emphasized that you could point the pipe towards an end, a higher aim, or simply let it rest in the direction of all other pipes. And you had to make sure you put useful stuff into the inlet, well researched user-studies or thorough analysis, to make sure you got good output at the other end, the outlet. If you put crap in, you most surely get crap out at the other end.

The image of the pipe is of course far too simple to tell us much about design. Some work may be fairly straightforward, but most design processes are confusing, foul and dirty, perhaps more like malformed sewage systems than straight and clean pipes flowing of milk and honey. Yet the metaphor may help us think of design and the real issues at stake as we try to open up design to become a more democratic and engaging endeavor.

Over the last decades there has been a lot of discussions concerning “open design”, or collaborative forms of design processes, where participation and user-engagement are key strategies for opening and disseminating design. Most seem to agree that users should have a stake in the design, and the usefulness of this engagement seems obvious in many fields. The question mostly seems to concern the quantity and quality of the various forms of open engagement: what kind of openness is best for your specific type of issue?

Openness is in many cases an obviously good characteristic of a design process: it allows for direct feedback from users, quick prototyping and iterations, free use and

distribution, as well as continuous improvement, engaging users and dividing ownership so anyone can “scratch their own itch”, as programming guru and open source proponent Eric Raymond has suggested (Raymond cited in Moody 2002: 150). And of course the whole idea of a more “democratic” design, where the design brief and market-forces don’t set the whole agenda, can be a great contribution to civic life, especially if users get to take part in the decision-making around the design of their everyday.

Many designers have also suggested the merits of “closed” design, emphasizing how radical innovation and visionary reimagination is offered by the innovators at the secluded labs; just think of the iPhone and such. Most consumers at the time could not envision such gadget at the time it was launched. Another critique is that a too open design system may produce conflicts concerning compatibility, optimization, liability and sustainability, as too many competing systems may emerge and produce more conflicts, more frustration, and in the end, more waste.

### Open to what end, and *in* what end

I will not argue if open or closed is the best option for design. My question concerns the open process itself, and once again I think of the process as a pipe. If we hold up this conduit for closer examination I would like to examine it from two angles, firstly; *to* what end is it open, and secondly; *in* what end is it open?

So firstly; design is open *to* what end? What is the purpose of a platform being open, the outcome from the outlet being shared freely? It may be open in order to promote co-production and crowd-sourcing, that is, participation and a sharing of perspectives, skills and labor. It may also be open for a wide dissemination of the results, making the outcome, software or hardware, free to use, copy, modify, and redistribute, that is, making the outcome open source.

But a central question emerging from this endeavor concerns who controls the process. That is, even if the process may be open there are still a lot of mechanics of control within the social situation and condition of the collaboration itself. Even if something is open it usually means more a *laissez-faire* mentality, rather than a real intervention to address the problems of the social distribution of agency. That is, being open does not necessarily promote equity or justice, but rather, an open process may indeed amplify social injustices, just leaving social problems open for later.

For example, if the openness of a project means all should work on a voluntary basis, it mostly means getting participants who don’t work full time in one or two jobs, or have kids to take care of and feed, etc. The voices and skills of participants may tilt the project towards the needs and ideas of a group who is already empowered, who is already “on top of the game” – even if the result is freely distributed and open. The result may simply not match or have any direct need for the elderly, migrants, people with disabilities, or people working double shifts in order to feed their families, or simply people who are not used to public

engagement. These groups may be hard to attract to the open lab, but may be the ones mostly in need of the voluntary help from the design community.

Indeed, the very ideology of DIY and making may feed into the marginalization of the already powerless, rather than empower them. The very narrative of the maker-community has a tendency to see the individual as an entrepreneur or self-employed factory-worker, where every participant is an “army of one,” their own soldier of fortune. As highlighted by sociologist Johan Söderberg, the very idea of individual freedom within the making community may feed into current processes of the neoliberal economy, undermining solidarity, loyalty, and social commons, as a general narrative of the movement asks the question “what’s in it for me?” (Söderberg 2011)

So *for* what end is open design open? It may be of little use to frame an ultimate end, or a utopian target. But at least we must be conscious about towards which direction we point the outlet of the tube, what social orientation the open process points towards. This direction must inform the discussion of how to best facilitate an open, equitable and democratic process, even if it may be conflict-ridden and controversial. How exactly does an open design in the best way promote an open society.

So secondly: design is open *in* what end? Many forms of open source licenses, of open hardware or open code or content, guarantee that the *outcome* of a process is open and *stays* open. If we put in open source code into the inlet of the tube, the outcome at the outlet needs to be open and free too. The process, the journey within the tube is open for influence, the future usage and reproduction too. Open licenses, like the GPL, Creative Commons, and Open Source, all aim, in their own way, to assure the previous as well as the new labor used to build the new code or content stays open in various ways and kept safe within the public realm.

But what has become more apparent over the last years is that most open platforms, of compatible codes and modules, may indeed be open to use and reproduction, but not open for co-ownership or influence from the participants or users. No matter how much time or efforts you as a user invest into working for an open platform, you are still not offered any real control over the platform itself. The open platform is like an unlocked factory: you can work in there, buy your machines and tools, but the critical infrastructure is still controlled by the factory owner.

Media theorist Alexander Galloway already pointed towards this problem the book *Protocol* (2004). Open protocols shift control from a highly visible, top-down command structure to a mode of control that is hidden inside the collaborative procedures themselves. Power moves from the top of the hierarchy to the layout of the platform, from the upstairs office to the floor itself. Under the umbrella of openness and collaboration, a systematic execution of power may still reside that is just as effective as hierarchical oppression. As Galloway puts it, “the contradiction at the heart of protocol is that it has to standardize in order to liberate. It has to be fascist and unilateral in order to be utopian.” (Galloway 2004: 95) Furthermore, open protocols may acts as “a technique for achieving voluntary regulation within a contingent environment.” (Galloway 2004: 7)

In open design it is easy to take for granted that we can control the outcome of the process, that the result of our labor stays open. But how are we to interrogate the control of the platform itself, or the protocols which guide our collaborations? The structural power of platforms, often hidden behind “sharing”, has been widely discussed and debated, not least in the examples of digital services such as AirBnB, Uber, and Taskrabbit (Olma 2014; Scholz 2014)

Who controls the platform, the inlet of the pipe, and who really gains on my production on that specific platform? Take for example many of the open hardware platforms of today, from software modules and mechatronics-kits to 3d-printers and drones. Many of these platforms have amazing supportive communities, and founders who spend huge amounts of time sustaining and facilitating the collaborative ecologies that sustain these creative environments. But the more robust the platform becomes, the more every addition to the platform reinforces the original foundations of control. Not only do the providers of hardware or the platform itself gain on all open and free labor that is contributing to the platform, and also for selling the equipment we need to get compatible work done on that platform, which in turn makes the platform even more robust and attractive for more future work. But whereas I get to control the outcome of my own work, and add it to the open library of the platform, I have no or very limited control over the platform itself. As Galloway argues, I have submitted to the voluntary regulations of the platform, and thus relinquished my claims of any co-ownership.

The outlet of the pipe is open, the outcomes shared, but the inlet is strictly controlled and not open at all. I may come with suggestions, there may be a lively community debating and working on the pipe, but the hand that holds the pipe, who did the original input, stays in a tight grip.

Thus for things to be truly “open” we will need to be more conscious about the whole pipe of design, the inlet and outlet of the pipe, as well as towards where the pipe points. Openness does not abolish politics, it simply hides control from immediate sight.

### **Realist ends of open design**

If we want to gain more control over open design we better introduce some political realism to our perspective. I must come to see that my work is done for my own interest, perhaps my own enjoyment, but even more in the interest of someone else. This may in the case of open design be the owner, founder, or the firm providing the tools and hardware for the platform.

As political theorist Hannah Arendt has pointed towards, the first political question is, and has always been, “Who rules whom?” (Arendt 1970: 43) Similarly, we must start asking, who has power in open design, and how is it reproduced? How does the mechanisms of openness coerce and designate user behavior towards new forms of control and exploitation?

If we strip away all idealistic and moralistic claims about “sharing”, “collaboration” and “peers,” and see these fictional virtues as false fronts, we may see a more Realist patterns emerge within the landscape of openness, quite different than the Idealism of utopian shared bliss. From the Realist perspective, open is a

pretexts for the material interests of the founders, a system made to increase the power and advancement of the interests of the founder or owners of the platform. Their only limits are what they get away with, as long as users keep contributing with their time and labor to the platform. The very rationale of the platform itself is to further the interests of the original makers, and as long as it coincides with the laboring participants of the platform, the loyalty of the contributors can be bought.

A realist perspective may help us become better at asking the right questions, unmask unjust power relations, and start building more equitable platforms. But as mentioned by political philosopher Raymond Geuss, the question “who rules whom” should be expanded into a more analytical form: “Who <does> what to whom, for whose benefit?” (Geuss 2008: 25) As Geuss suggests, the key part here is to look for *doing*, that is, actions, for real work and contributions, and the flow of political agency, of power and real assets, money, time, labor, and capabilities. A realist looks for how action affects and reproduces the world, beyond than the idealist slogans of democracy, cooperation, sharing and openness.

Furthermore, to avoid missteps, we better start examining the instances where “scratching one’s itch,” as Eric Raymond suggests is the first instance of coding, may be like scratching an eczema: what is the systemic and long-term cost of that individual scratch? And after too much scratching, will that itch start to bleed? Some problems are better cured without scratching at all, but instead need a healing of the social body. Scratching sometimes only enhances symptoms on the surface of deeper illnesses. Be careful where you scratch, and also whose back you scratch.

A realist perspective on open design may help us foster a culture of making which starts looking more critically on the pipe itself, on how we design the design processes and what constitutes their openness.

We must ask who controls the open protocol. Openness should perhaps also include open control over the protocols, a full transparency and redistribution of the overall profits, systems of co-ownership where the people working hard on a platform also become its shareholders. We must ask: how does an “open” design process contribute to an everyday which is more collectively owned, more democratically controlled, and more widely engaging throughout the whole length of the pipe?

And perhaps most crucially, we must start working on how to aim the pipe towards *civic virtues*, at least virtues of a real and thorough openness, or what philosopher Roberto Unger has called “deep freedom” (Unger 2005). We must design platforms which build on the lessons from the political struggles that produced the precious and fragile experiment we call our democracy: encourage engagement and co-ownership, foster reliability and critical examination of power, holding those in power responsible before law, cultivate arenas for radical praxis, of dissensus and compromise, which can question the foundations of the open platforms themselves.

Open is thus much more than a fun way to build stuff together, in its extension open design asks us one of philosophy's most fundamental question: what constitutes the open and good civic life?

**References:**

Arendt, Hannah (1970) *On Violence*, Orlando: Harvest

Galloway, Alexander (2004) *Protocol: how control exists after decentralization*, Cambridge: MIT Press

Geuss, Raymond (2008) *Philosophy and Real Politics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press

Moody, Glyn (2002) *Rebel Code: the inside story of Linux and the open source revolution*, New York: Basic Books

Olma, Sebastian (2014) "Never Mind the Sharing Economy: Here's Platform Capitalism", Institute of Network Cultures, October 16, 2014, available at <http://networkcultures.org/mycreativity/2014/10/16/never-mind-the-sharing-economy-heres-platform-capitalism/> [accessed Oct 20, 2015]

Scholz, Trebor (2015) "Platform Cooperativism vs. the Sharing Economy" available at: <https://medium.com/@trebors/platform-cooperativism-vs-the-sharing-economy-2ea737f1b5ad> [accessed Oct 20, 2015]

Söderberg, Johan (2011) *Free Software to Open Hardware: Critical Theory on the Frontiers of Hacking*, University of Gothenburg, PhD-thesis, Available at: <http://www.johansoderberg.net/sub02/sub02.html> [accessed Oct 20, 2015]

Unger, Roberto (2005) *The Left Alternative*, London: Verso