Governance Norms In Volunteer Driven Open Source Communities

A Qualitative Study

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An Inside View On Social Norms In Communities
Governance And Community Management

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- FSFE Code of Conduct debate: May 2016 - October 2017, 200 emails in two weeks of October 2016, indecision for 12 months, finally adopted in October 2017 without further changes.

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Evolving governance norms appears to be a particularly difficult problem for communities.

Governance norms illustrate community culture, and represent the behavioral expectations towards individual community members, the community as a whole and outside parties.

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However...

An Inside View On Social Norms In Communities
Relevance

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However...

– Employees with relevant experience expect FLOSS-like behavioral norms in corporate culture ("open organisation").

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- Employees with relevant experience expect FLOSS-like behavioral norms in corporate culture ("open organisation").
- Intrinsically motivated engagement is the foundation for the innovativeness of FLOSS.

Outline

Governance In Communities With Voluntary Participation

The Open Source Way
Governance In Communities With Voluntary Participation

The "Open Source Way" - a social process for the production of common information goods:

- – knowledge-intensive
- – inputs: labor (contributions of time) and capital (funding)
- – output: information goods distributed under a FLOSS license

What is an FLOSS Community?

A FLOSS community produces *common information goods* based on *voluntary participation* of contributors.

Case Study Criteria
Governance In Communities With Voluntary Participation

Communities in this report:

- – volunteer-driven (amateurs as opposed to professionals)
- – mature and comparatively large (between dozens and hundreds of contributors)
- – successful (leading in their field)

The Need For Community Govenance
Governance In Communities With Voluntary Participation

Specialization, Division of Labour

The need for community governance results from the necessity to coordinate the work of a diverse group of volunteers to create the community product.

Product-based Prestige and Contributor Fluctuation

With regard to the interaction with the outside world, the need for community governance results from the necessity to maintain and grow the contributor base that forms the community.

Growth Stages Of Communities
Governance In Communities With Voluntary Participation

Social groups behave differently depending on their size.

- – initial stage: ad-hoc coordination, identical individual and group goals
- – medium stage: consensus-focused auto-organisation
- – late stage: functional differentiation, more pronounced formal structure

Businesses and individuals participate in FLOSS activities for different sets of reasons.

Community Composition
Governance In Communities With Voluntary Participation

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C.p., social norms develop depending on community composition.

Software is free if it is licensed freely. The governance of community processes define their openness. These issues are orthogonal.

- – preference for openness in governance correlates with community composition
- – volunteer driven communities prefer their governance open and transparent

> **Authority from Within**
>
> The question for the purpose of a FLOSS community is self-referential, similar to sovereign states.

- Communities exist to serve the interests of the participants, who also are the community.
- States resort to postulating a constitution which then justifies regular acts of government.
- Communities develop governance mechanisms based on voluntary participation and meritocracy.

Study Design And Method
Governance In Communities With Voluntary Participation

The report is based on a qualitative embedded multiple-case study of the inside view on social norms in three communities.

- only few communities exist that match the criteria
- interpretive: don't expect simple, final answers
- 16 interviews, over 36h of recordings, interviewees combine over 200 years of contributor experience

The Mindset Behind Community Governance

First part of the interviews. Focuses on the expectations contributors have regarding how their community should operate.

Engaging In A Community Of Makers
The Mindset Behind Community Governance

> "come for the technology, stay for the people"
>
> Participants want to contribute to the community's main product.

- To create that product needs to be a positive, creative challenge to be motivative.
- Growing to be a part of the social group becomes important over time,
- ...because the community mission is something "worth fighting for".
- Most limiting factor to own contributions: time.

"doing" over "talking"

Contributors earn their prestige or even the right to participate in debates within the community through the contributions they make. This translates to an expectation of equality of opportunity, but not of an equality of rights.

Equality Of Opportunity Among Peers II
The Mindset Behind Community Governance

- The need for more than grass-root meritocracy develops in medium and late stage.

- Subgroups form "little villages with chieftains" to maintain a sense of productivity.

- Productive contribution opportunities are expected to match ethical convictions.

Makers And Community Builders I
The Mindset Behind Community Governance

Friends and family in a virtual home

Over time, being a member of the community becomes a goal in itself, where previously community membership was a means to facilitate contributions to a product.

Makers And Community Builders II
The Mindset Behind Community Governance

- In medium stage, differentiation emerges between makers and community builders.
- Dilemma for community leaders: merit is linked to product contributions, community management competes for time available.
- Administrative entities grow to be counterparts to the community of makers, makers and organisations diverge.

An Ambitious, Productive Meritocracy Of Equals
The Mindset Behind Community Governance

Contributors develop strong loyalty to their community.

What contributors expect from their community:

- a welcoming, inviting culture
- meritocracy
- equality of opportunity
- they want their communities to be useful and productive
- ...and ambitious

Individual ethical principles are considered an outside variable. Community governance norms need to reflect them.

Principles contributors apply to their community are:

- working code/code first (actions over words)
- meritocracy
- solidarity
- transparency

Case Studies

Case Studies

Second part of the interviews. Matches contributor expectations against how their communities developed as they grew.

Community aspects considered:
- mission, foundation and history
- formal and informal organisational structure
- decision making and conflict resolution
- community membership, roles and privileges
- structural reforms and outlook

FSFE - a lobby for FLOSS

FSFE represents the wider FLOSS community on a political level. It combines community representation, political influence and legal expertise.

– FSFE e.V.: charitable legal entity, about 25 individual members

– general assembly: permanent highest decision making organ composed of all individual members

– president, executive director, staff

– "team": staff and influential contributors, losely defined

Influential informal structure:

- – "luminaries"
- – under-documented/dormant norms and processes
- – decision making and conflict resolution: consensus-driven, fall-back to president, sensitivity towards minority opinions, no defined rules and partly circular rules of appeal
- – many "old norms" present but not understood, organisational change very difficult

Hand-picked circle of formal members:

- – on purpose not representative of wider FLOSS community
- – selective, invite-only access to full membership
- – no clear path for contributors to ascend
- – activities concentrated in Berlin head office

Attempts at organisational reform stuck since 2007.

– organisational change very rare

– reform attempts ran into indecision

– threat scenarios ("hostile takeover") did not materialize

Building a user-centric computing experience

The KDE Community is a free software community dedicated to creating an open and user-friendly computing experience, offering an advanced graphical desktop, a wide variety of applications for communication, work, education and entertainment and a platform to easily build new applications upon.

Formal And Informal Organisational Structure
Case Studies: KDE

Strict separation of community management and influence on technical direction:

- – KDE e.V.: charitable legal entity, about 150 individual members
- – minimal, meritocratic formal structure (board, working groups, members)
- – averse to authority or representation
- – manifest, code of conduct in place

Decision Making And Conflict Resolution
Case Studies: KDE

Auto-organisation in large group:

- – consensus-driven debate culture
- – almost no community level decisions
- – community working group moderates according to community norms
- – beyond that conflict resolution mainly absent
- – indecision common, no mechanisms for debate shaping
- – undefined rules of appeal

Open Doors, if only for code:

- "open-doors-policy" for newcomers - trust extended, easy access to commit rights
- invite-only formal membership
- working group membership practically requires formal membership
- easy to contribute to products, social processes less accessible

Structural Reforms And Outlook
Case Studies: KDE

Shift from technical focus (the desktop) to becoming an umbrella community for FLOSS:

- – organisational change rare
- – structure mainly unchanged even after transition to umbrella community
- – deviation between norms codified in vision and manifest and processes applied in formal organisation

> **The wisdom of the world, in one open place**
>
> The vision of Wikipedia it to create "a world in which every single human being can freely share in the sum of all knowledge". Wikimedia is the community that builds it.

(very simplified)

Formal And Informal Organisational Structure
Case Studies: WMDE

Disconnect between community of authors and representative legal entity.

- – US-based Wikimedia Foundation as "far removed sovereign"
- – Wikimedia Deutschland e.V.: charitable legal entity, 80 staff
- – does not influence, manage or represent the community of authors
- – separate grass-roots organisation in regions along language boundaries
- – no formal structure for support of authors, very informal community structure

Decision Making And Conflict Resolution
Case Studies: WMDE

Separate community and staff processes:

- – mediation committee
- – arbitration board, region/language specific
- – strong focus on bettering the product
- – processes within formal organisation and community of authors separated and independent

Fluent contributor base and community membership:

- all contributing authors considered part of the community
- admins and reviewer roles
- all contributors are equals
- meritocratic, merit closely related to software or content contributions
- disconnect between staff of WMDE and community

Does "the community" need to "take back control"?

- – organisational and process changes rare
- – WMDE recognises community disconnect
- – reconciliation difficult as bridging is needed between social and market frames of reference
- – perceived pent-up need for reform across community of authors

Observations

Entry barriers are not just for newcomers. Every status change within the social group incurs transitional cost.

- "some of use have lost the trust that newcomers will do good things"
- "open doors policy" for new contributors, but not for higher up status groups
- ease of access to information hindered by long established informal structure

Product Contributions Vs. governance Processes
Observations

In all three communities, becoming a contributor or author is simple, well-documented and encouraged. Access to governance structures is more difficult, depends on support from insiders, is under-documented and hindered by largely informal organisation.

There are no automatic instruments (like markets or elections) that ensure that supportive organisations (the e.V.s) support their communities in the long term by constantly adapting to their needs.

Some communities thought a lot about their structure and processes when they started, others not at all. They all end up in the same place: a formal organisation partly disconnected from their community. It is not the initial design that counts, it is the regular maintenance.

Transparency
Observations

Self-identification is one foundation of peer-production processes. It is the basis of feeling productive as a contributor. Hence, transparency is necessary for effective community processes.

Our communities are less effective in areas where they are less transparent.

Authority
Observations

Communities are averse to authority and decisions. At the same time, they are their own highest authority. This is a contradiction.

Our decision making processes should be well-defined. The highest level of escalation should be the community as a whole. Conflict resolution mechanisms should mirror the lines of decision making.

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We don't need to be dictators, though.

Are we re-inventing the wheel?
Observations

Our communities lack instruments and correctives that make sure our structure and processes support the overall community goals.

Such instruments have been developed in politics (elections) and organisationals (e.g. supervisory boards that represent investor interests).

Thanks!
Questions?

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