

The Digital commons: a gift culture

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Since its widespread adoption in the mid 1990s, the internet has grown to become a significant part of popular culture. This paper examines one of the main social effects of the internet- namely, how it allows individuals to form and maintain large collectives that can challenge and change social and economic models, attitudes, and even policy. This paper discusses about information and artifacts shared via an online *commons* that has made tool such a powerful one.

I present here this idea that for the first time since the ancient *direct democracies*, people are engaging in large scale *peer-to-peer* political activity, sans the interference of a formal governing body. To this end I have chosen to examine the virtual culture of the *Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) movement*, a worldwide network of users who develop and distribute software that is free from the restrictions found in proprietary software.

By analyzing the online discourse of this sphere, I will develop the concept of the *Digital Commons*, a virtual culture in which the notion of *intellectual Property*, and the ownership of ideas as they are widely understood today, is severely challenged.

I will build upon the work of Richard Stallman, Lawrence Lessig and Eric Raymond, who pioneered concepts such as FOSS, shorter renewable periods of copyright and *open content*. This paper will also discuss the role of the individual contributor in this movement, and show how he or she helps maintain what Raymond calls a *gift culture*, and thereby support a fully functioning social organization that stands in complete opposition to the dominant social and economic norms of today.

Key words: Internet, Culture, Software, Freedom, Property