

Clearing the Roadblocks to Create a Free Digital Society

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How to Identify Roadblocks on the Way to Free Digital Society

I write this short note as an activist's guide to determine whether a specific action by a social agency is a hindrance or facilitatory towards building a free society. What kind of actions are to be maximized to bring in social change? And how do we cope with mighty systems along the way.

Few Words of Introduction

Though the title of this note talks about road blocks to free *digital* society, I will argue that as long as we are talking about human society, the basic nature of the hurdles remains the same. Once we understand the nature of the roadblocks erected by the enemies of a free society in the digital world, it can be easily extended to other road blocks of a free society. Understanding the nature of the roadblocks will also help us to know how to clear the road blocks as well. Therefore we will talk about how to introduce the roadblocks to begin with.

How to introduce roadblocks on the way towards a free digital society?

The best way to cope with the proprietary systems is to learn to think like the people who promote that social system, so that we can not only respond to their actions, but make proactive steps instead of being defensive all the time. One way of doing this is to find an answer to an inverted question: How to introduce roadblocks on the way towards a free digital society?

One of the slogans that we hear frequently from the seers of proprietary systems, and sometimes from people who argue for creative commons, is that *knowledge is power*. For them it means the same as *knowledge is wealth*. Whether implicitly or explicitly they take this very seriously. Consequently, those who believe that knowledge is power or wealth will obviously try to seek *it* and once sought they try to *preserve* it, *accumulate* it and withstand actions that disseminate it. We will see later how mistaken they are.

Myth: Modern Society is a Knowledge Society

Having exhausted most of the depletable resources, proprietary systems are now focussing on the non-depletable knowledge. Therefore, they would want us to believe that we currently live in a *knowledge society*. Having experienced the revolutionary impact of the information and communication technologies of late, most of us tend to believe what they want us to believe. But all human societies, whether tribal, agricultural, or industrial, have always been knowledge societies. In fact, human animal is often distinguished from other animals for an unparalleled capacity to interpret both symbolic and non-symbolic part of the world around them.

The leap that we took recently due to information and communication technology is because of *digitization* of knowledge which the artificial agents (computers) could interpret. Digitization therefore is the *key* descriptor of the current society. Therefore I would suggest that we should call the current society as *digital knowledge society*, rather than merely *knowledge society*. The advantages of masking digital society under knowledge society might make us ignorant of the role played by the key factor, digitized knowledge, which is transforming the society, often disruptively.

I will be using the following interpretation of knowledge: To know is to have an ability to interpret. An ability to decode the symbolic and non-symbolic world around us is the key of being a human being.

So if we want to prevent someone from not accessing what they think is the most powerful, they have to block the means of accessing knowledge or the process of making knowledge. This can be best achieved by first separating symbols, the code, from the decoder, the interpreter. Let me elaborate this basic point.

It is all about encoding and decoding

Symbolic life is the essence of being a human being. And is also the essence of human culture. What is happening nowadays is they are discretizing this whole symbolic life by this new means of digitization.

One of the significant aspects of any of the cultural facets of human life is about *making meaning*. We make meaning by creating a cultural artifact. Creating a cultural artifact almost always involves *encoding*, that is adding an intension or meaning. A cultural artifact could be a gesture, word, song, poem, dance, drama etc. When other persons access them, they understand them by decoding (interpret). Much of the initialization of any cultural process happens by making meaning and asking others to guess it. We may not always get it right. That makes our life challenging. Much of the socialization process (one may want to call this education) is mostly spent in learning one form of decoding ability or the other. Whether it is mathematics or mime, it is all about encoding and decoding or simply writing and reading.

However, once we learn a highly conventional cultural form like mathematics, we mostly get its interpretation right. Excluding ambiguity is one of the goals of formal disciplines like mathematics. On the other hand, informal human expressions like drama, poetry etc. would deliberately make room for multiple interpretations. However, the game is same. We make meaningful artifacts and we interpret them. I will call the meaning making action as *encoding*, and meaning guessing action as *decoding*.

Telling how to encode and decode in the case of Computers

When we program a computer, we do one of the two things: we tell the computer something, and we ask the computer to do something. Often we ask the computer return what we told, or to return it after performing other manipulations. We may call the latter process information processing. The term “information processing” or “computing” are technical jargon that conceal the underlying simplicity. That is why, I want to rephrase the description in terms of telling and asking, so that we can talk in a more transparent way.

When we tell the computer, using a programming language, the computer interprets our instructions exactly in one and only one way and returns us a response when we ask for it. Not having multiple interpretations distinguishes programming languages from natural languages. So as you see, even

in the sophisticated computing world, at the very core the two operations that are happening are reading and writing, and our interaction with computers happens by telling and asking using a language or pressing prerecorded keys. That is why, even as Turing created a model of the modern computing machine, he interpreted it as a machine capable of reading and writing on an infinite memory space (a tape of infinite length).

Thus, what is basic to human symbolic life as well as digital life is *encoding*, namely writing, and *decoding*, namely reading.

The Principle of Discretization

Now let us turn our attention to politics of code, which is about who can read and write, and how do we control these processes.

If you want to start a proprietary software company do the following: Invent a new language. New code, new rules of interpretation, new syntax and semantics etc., that is with a new artificial grammar. Then rewrite the available wisdom of the commons in the new language. Subsequently, restrict the commons from accessing it. Create a restricted class of people who can read and write the new language. Unless the person belongs to the group that agrees to abide by the restrictions do not provide access to the knowledge. This new language can be Sanskrit, or a programming language.

This is the form of the simple game which can be translated to all political space, whether that involves computing or human life in general. Let us call this the principle of discretization.

So in the current example of digital society, software is one such artificial language. These days we are digitizing almost our entire life. The new digital documents include all the cultural artifacts, or poems, essays, books, paintings, videos, dance, music, conversations and so on.

Since, the proprietary software companies delink the code, in which our cultural artifacts are encoded, from its interpretation, decoding method, they spread the code all over, but will create an artificial scarcity of decoder. They withhold decoder and enhance the value.

Unknowingly, most citizens are getting are allowing their works to be discretely written in a private/proprietary language. And this is how proprietary companies are stealing the knowledge of the commons. This is how they are stealing citizen's work, and indirectly their time and their life.

We should all realize that digitization should not lead to discretization. But, most proprietary companies do precisely this. They first invent an artificial language, which is just a cheat. I say this because conventions are

at the end arbitrary, and we do not have to be innovative. Digital Rights Management (DRM), or Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) are the new instruments the proprietary companies are seeking with help from Government bodies and international agencies to steal our right to interpret.

We should never allow the delinking of code from the interpreter.

To prevent them from this “criminal” practice, we need to ensure that the interpreter will not become a scarcity. The grammar of all the artificial languages that we create must be published in every nook and corner of the society, and preferably code should always go hand in hand with its interpretation.

By ensuring that we all use software that encodes in a free and public standard, we will be able to allow digitization happen. *If not, digitization is dangerous to society.*

This is precisely what Richard Stallman did by starting the copyleft movement, and invented an instrument for doing this called the General Public License. I will ask you now to solve a problem: deduce the four freedoms (the defining criteria of free software) authored by Richard Stallman from the freedom to read and write.

So in a modern digital society we need to ensure a new form of fundamental rights. Right to encode, which includes writing, expressing and creating; right to decode including reading, understanding and interpretation; right to re-encode, modifying mixing and blending; right to re-decode, to interpret and re-interpret, and right to copy and imitate, the right to replicate, reproduce and distribute etc. If we are not granted these fundamental rights by the civil society, the proprietary corporations who are in nexus with the Governments will control the process of encoding and decoding of all the cultural processes.

This right is at once basic as well as general that it will ensure non-digital cultural freedom as well as digital freedom or in some future form of “figital” freedom.

So the politics of code is centered around controlling the media where encoding takes place. Claiming the ownership of the media or the code or both, controlling the production process, modification process or the reproduction process. Imposing restrictions on who can decode and who can copy. But of course as I told you this is not a new game. Human history can be written or rewritten as a history of how this whole principle of discretization

has been applied. This is how I understand the story of politics of code.

Politics of Code

So, who should keep the control of code is a question that arises. Should it be the Government, should it be the industry or should it be distributed among the people. I prefer the last option, for Government and Industry are not excluded from the set of all people.

Who is stopping us to enjoy these fundamental rights. Obviously the proprietary software companies. and also the Governments and big multinational agencies which protect such companies. However, by various forms of appropriations, and signing private or what they sometimes call bilateral free trade agreements on who can read and who can write e.g. TRIPS, DMCA DRM etc. These are the instruments that often become the road-blocks. All these are introduced in the name of changing shape of the society and the need to bring in new legislations all around the world.

Copyleft Tactics

So what do we do, we are so tiny, the systems that we have to fight against are so mighty. So I suggest let us use the *copyleft tactics* to bring this social change.

Explore an action that cannot be considered by people as bad. That is by good people as bad, such as sharing, loving, helping etc. And do them transparently, do them collaboratively, and do them inclusively. No civilized society prohibits these actions. In case they do, use *civil disobedience*. Amplify these actions as much as possible for your cause, whatever that be. This is what I call copyleft tactics.

Civil Disobedience

When necessary use civil disobedience. For example, be the change you want to see. Next time when someone sends you an UltraHard Rockument, this is my pun for the Microsoft Document, send the following message:

“I refuse to read digital documents sent and written in a private language. So I request you and your organization not to send such attachments in such formats. Please use open standards for all your digital communication. Text documents encoded in ASCII, Unicode, HTML, RDF, PDF or ODF are open standards. Similar open standards exist for all other multimedia

formats. Please join us to cleanup the already polluted digital environment for a greener digital society.”

Let us keep on walking, talking, sharing ...

So let us keep it going. keep on talking. Keep on walking. Keep on sharing. By maximizing these virtues we can win this often invisible war against freedom. Last word. Building a free society is an uphill task. We have to spend enormous energy, our resources, most importantly our time in this process. We will not win, if we think this is difficult. So do not drain your energy. You will be frustrated, stressed and strained. Since sharing is enjoyable, you will not feel stress even if you over do it.

So just keep on sharing, and resist the attempts when others restrict you to share. Never let the right to read and write be taken away by any one.

Freedom is the most expensive and most desirable wealth you can aspire for, run for it at any cost. Knowledge is neither power nor wealth. Freedom is the real power and wealth, another name for the right to live.

Granting others to read and write is your duty. And claiming this is your birth right.

To read a longer essay that connects the idea of freedom to internet to free software movement and copyleft movement, please read my essay “An Introduction to Copyleft Movement” from <http://gnowgi.org>, where I publish other essays as well.

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