The Value of Open Communities

The gestalt of the Internet changes over time - as new technologies and fads come to the fore, of course the user experience and popular spots will change. The obvious joke is “who uses MySpace?” - the changes happen and communities move.

A point to be aware of, however, is the movement of groups towards becoming closed. There are still as many examples of open communities as there are closed, but time shifts the boundary in both directions.

There are many types of non-open communities. Private communities, where the community members always planned to remain closed, aren’t what I’m concerned about; these communities definitely have their place, and there is nothing wrong with private clubs, forums, mailing lists, etc.

Open communities, however, are vital for solving problems and building large-scale projects on the Internet. They’re the extension of open real-world clubs and user groups, where someone can demonstrate a new project, help others solve problems, and generally improve the quantity and quality of knowledge.

User communities have existed basically since the first nodes on the Internet enabled message passing - the first mailing lists started on ARPANET in the 1980s, and public archives of them still exist today. Mailing lists grew into Usenet, which still exists but is disappearing due to spam, lack of user interest, and piracy.

Communities let us build knowledge and answers to common problems, and can steer development of personal projects and of Internet-wide discussions - the first mailing lists and news groups were used for discussing human-network interaction and designing the protocols which built the Internet as we know it today.

For open source (or closed source, to be fair) developers, user communities help understand what the users are looking for, where the pain points are, and can help foster contributions of code and patches. For users, the help forums and groups can provide answers to infuriating bugs.

The problem lies in community forums that appear to be open, but which are structured to retain data in proprietary software, or require logins to participate. This is, I feel, more than a tin foil hat concern about companies profiting from community efforts; when the collective efforts and output of the community are locked into a proprietary format, the lifetime of the community is limited by the lifetime of the company, or the willingness of the company to support that method of communication.

In this instance, I’m thinking specifically of services like Facebook and Google+. They seem open. Anyone can create a group (or page, or community, or whatever the lingo of the site is) and invite others to participate. In general, they seem to do a pretty good job of providing a community service - make the moderators’ jobs easier, allow anyone to participate, and so on. Unfortunately, they also act as gatekeepers, preventing those who aren’t members of the community from posting, or in some cases even viewing the discussion.

This presents a real problem for the utility of the Internet at large: pseudo-open communities set the trap of wasted effort - while the discussion might be lively and supportive, if it isn’t available to the Internet at large, then all the solutions are doomed to being recreated in more open venues, which would seem to be an unnecessary duplication of effort.

A danger, too, is what happens to these groups when the service is no longer provided by the company. While Google allows some export of user data outside the Google system,
it does not appear to have this feature available for Google+ communities. As with many of the services Google marks as “Beta,” there is no promise made that it will continue to be made available, or made available in its current form. Other services such as Facebook are openly hostile to efforts to exfiltrate data from their closed systems, making it nearly impossible to back up community activity or make it available.

One rung away from these pseudo-communities are the forum communities which require logins to view links or downloads. It’s understandable why this happens - spam, server load, and such can cripple forums, but it’s highly unfortunate for those searching for answers.

There are several solutions to the creep of closed communities. Most of them involve returning to the old methods, which never really went away. They just became less flashy and sexy while everyone moved to web-based solutions for everything.

For immediate support and discussion, the great-granddaddy of instant messaging, IRC, is still going strong. There are multiple thriving IRC networks, though the standard for open source projects seems to be Freenode. IRC used to require a custom client, but thanks to modern web browser architecture, it’s possible to use web-based clients (which Freenode offers).

IRC isn’t directly archived, but it is an excellent method for open communication and support, and many logging services and logging bots exist. Importantly in the context of openness, anyone in the IRC channel can perform logging; sometimes messy to read through, searchable IRC logs can still offer a great resource when solving problems.

What should be the most obvious answer for protecting and restoring truly open communities is mailing lists. They’ve never gone away and they’re still popular for many software support groups. With the ubiquity of social networking sites, it’s become less convenient to switch to email for communication, and many individuals who might have started a mailing list if they had their own server capable of doing so no longer have an easy way to create one, so they default to a closed community on an existing site.

The biggest advantage of mailing lists today is that even if they are hosted by a company as a secondary feature (such as Sourceforge or Google Groups), like IRC, any user can create and maintain a searchable archive of the list. Even if the company backing the mailing list server closes up shop or stops supporting the mailing list feature, the posts, answers, and community support remains in the archives and the list can be reconstituted on another list host, an option not available for custom platforms.

On the bright side, there is at least one online community which, despite operating on a closed software stack, understands the value of the communities they enable and have taken steps to provide continuity of the groups they host.

Stack Exchange is a massive combination of forum and answer database. Structured towards providing answers instead of discussion, while they require a login to participate, no login is required to read, and the login system accepts most OpenID providers instead of locking users into their system.

Crucially, Stack Exchange also provides regular exports of the entire database, licensed under Creative Commons. Recreating the experience might be difficult, but the most important components, the answers and communities and effort, can be preserved regardless of future changes in the hosting company.

Other companies may offer similar insurance for preserving the communities they offer, but the majority do not. It may seem, on the surface, like a relatively minor issue, but pseudo-open groups and communities are a symptom of the increasing re-compartmentalization of the Internet.

All should feel welcome to contribute to whatever community or help forum they wish, but try to be aware of what might happen when it’s no longer in the corporate interest of whatever hosting system or social network to keep that form of discussion or that topic alive. It’s happened before, it will happen again, and the only surefire protection against losing the effort invested in building that community is to preserve the data in an open format which can be moved to another platform.