Minds & Machines (2008) 18:297–299
DOI 10.1007/s11023-008-9101-y

Samir Chopra, Scott D. Dexter, Decoding Liberation: The Promise of Free and Open Source Software

Routledge Studies in New Media and Cyberculture, Routledge, New York, 2008, ix–211 pp, $95.00, ISBN 978-0415978934

Benjamin Mako Hill

Published online: 7 May 2008

The last half-decade has seen scores of scholarly papers and several books from a wide variety of academic disciplines attempting to explain the significance of free and open source software (FOSS) and the communities that create it. Samir Chopra and Scott D. Dexter's *Decoding Liberation* offers a unique, important, and sympathetic examination. Its descriptive work is especially relevant, well supported, and refreshing. Building on this strong foundation, it offers a set of thought-provoking, if at times controversial, arguments in favor of software freedom and openness that challenges both supporters and opponents of the free software and open source movements.

Decoding Liberation unpacks the history, ethics, political economy, and aesthetic practice of free software production. Chopra and Dexter examine FOSS as a philosophically inspired social movement built by hackers and wrought through the creation of technology. There is a philosophy and politics to all technology, as the authors repeatedly point out, but FOSS practice makes these more explicit and more visible in ways that make it an ideal target for their interdisciplinary analysis. A technologically grounded and philosophical evaluation of technical practice and artifacts, Chopra and Dexter's approach is an effective and deeply appropriate fit for FOSS.

Decoding Liberation opens with a broad history of computer software. It focuses on the emergence of the free software movement, the GNU system, and the Linux kernel. It appropriately contextualizes these in a description of hacker culture—itself a product of a diverse and rapidly changing software development environment. Free software, as articulated by Richard Stallman in the 1980s, is accurately treated as a philosophical movement rooted in the control of technology whose instantiation has brought with it profound effects on the practice and political economy of software.

B. M. Hill (✉)
Center for Future Civic Media, Sloan School of Management, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 77 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02139, USA
e-mail: mako@mit.edu

The second half of the first chapter examines the effects on political economy of proprietary and free software development models.

Chapter 2 is concerned primarily with the ethics of FOSS and focuses on the core "constitutional" documents at the heart of FOSS. In particular, the book discusses the schism between free software and open source in the late 1990s and the way that this schism is reflected in the documents, practices, and licenses advocated by the Free Software Foundation and, as the authors describe it, the fundamental divergent and, at times, adversarial and antagonistic positions of the open source camp.

Decoding Liberation's third chapter is perhaps its strongest and most convincing. In it, the authors look at the aesthetics of programming practice and make a convincing and important argument for the aesthetic nature of computing and code. The authors unpack these ideas through a look at how concepts of "beautiful code" are constructed. Others have engaged in similar analyses but *Decoding Liberation*'s is particularly broad and concise—and thus powerful. This exploration is tied back into a discussion of FOSS practice with a focus on the nature of aesthetics in collaborative creative production. The chapter ends with a compelling argument that the artistic freedom provided by FOSS has the potential to produce code that, on programmers' terms, is aesthetically superior to what is possible through proprietary development models.

Chapter 4 looks to scientific and computer science practice. Computer science, the authors argue, is increasingly compromised by "proprietary models" and by the use of black boxes in the forms of proprietary software itself. The chapter describes the "proprietarization" of computer science along several axes and describes how, philosophically, FOSS embodies and supports broader ideals of scientific pursuit, provides an important source of philosophical inspiration for computer science, and provides a development practice that can and should be adopted immediately.

The fifth and final chapter builds on Donna Haraway's concept of cyborgs—a hybridization of machines and organisms that technology is increasingly realizing in our daily lives. Quoting Haraway, the chapter opens with the question, "What is to be done?" The answer, Chopra and Dexter argue, is simple. It is FOSS. Insofar as our lives are technologically mediated and constrained, power in the cyborg world is deeply connected to questions of control over technology. Democratization of this control, the authors convincingly argue, is an argument in favor of FOSS philosophy, practice, and artifacts. In analysis that is deeply philosophical but grounds itself in the concrete example of e-Government, the chapter levels the book's strongest and most impassioned argument in favor of FOSS and its philosophy.

The first two chapters of *Decoding Liberation* that attempt to unpack and explain FOSS form the weaker half of the book. While its history is adequate, accurate, and appropriate, its description of the schism between free software and open source is ultimately unconvincing. The main problem is that the authors equate free software with copyleft licensing and the GNU General Public License (GPL) and open source with more permissive MIT or BSD-style licensing. While the authors admit that the differences are more nuanced, their position is a controversial one within FOSS communities and they do not convincingly explain why a large majority of open

source advocates use copyleft style licenses created by the Free Software Foundation and why the FSF embraces permissive licenses.

Free Software Foundation president Richard Stallman likes to describe the split between free software and open source as unlike religious schism. While in a religious schism groups diverge over very small differences in opinion or liturgy, free software and open source has split over fundamental differences but FOSS developers display no trouble working together as a cohesive group. Certainly, there are different public organizations involved on each side. Certainly, free software and open source leaders' relationships are less than totally harmonious. But my personal experience as a FOSS developer implies that FOSS is less about this particular type of philosophical wrangling and more about tactics.

I have seen open source defined by self-proclaimed "open source" advocates with near-verbatim reiterations of the FSF's Free Software Definition. One might also point out that the Open Source Definition is, after all, a verbatim copy of the Debian Free Software Guidelines. *Decoding Liberation*'s philosophical analysis of constitutional documents does not adequately address these facts. Instead, the authors play up philosophical differences between free software and open source that might be better explained as tactical, social, or political differences.

Developers might use different language and present themselves in different ways for tactical reasons and to communicate appropriately with different groups. These sorts of tactical differences are deeply important to free software developers, but they receive very little discussion in *Decoding Liberation*, whose focus on philosophical positions as opposed to the practice of FOSS production may cause the authors' analysis to fall short in this case.

But any shortcomings in the first half of *Decoding Liberation* are more than compensated for in the second. The chapter on programming aesthetics and FOSS was the highlight of the book and its most important contribution. Providing a different voice than the literature in management science, anthropology, and economics, the philosophical take on FOSS in the second half allows Chopra and Dexter to advance strong and important normative arguments and they do so lucidly and convincingly. In the process of explaining why FOSS is philosophically, aesthetically, scientifically, and politically powerful, *Decoding Liberation* explains that FOSS is important—even imperative.

The controversial nature of some of *Decoding Liberation*'s analysis of the free software and open source split should not detract from the important and compellingly argued position at the center of the book that is expressed most clearly in the final chapter. The book's closing pages are beautiful and convincing, referencing Orwell and Foucault. Technology is political and FOSS offers a real alternative to opaque, inflexible power. In the words of the authors, "to free software is to free ourselves."