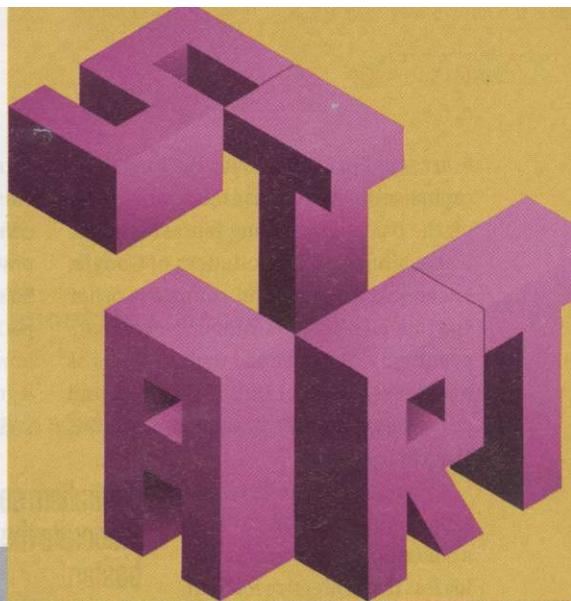


# The Overlords of Open Source

Why are people-powered projects ruled by tyrants?

BY MATT SCHWARTZ

**F**or Julian Assange, it's personal. When the German magazine *Der Spiegel* asked the WikiLeaks founder why he didn't parlay his entrepreneurial spirit into a Palo Alto home with a swimming pool, he replied, "I enjoy creating systems on a grand scale, and I enjoy helping people who are vulnerable." Then he added, "And I enjoy crushing bastards." It's a prescription for happiness that lines up roughly with Conan the Barbarian's, complete (if Swedish prosecutors are to be believed) with the lamentations of the women. ¶ A certain amount of megalomania is a prerequisite for any entrepreneur. You can't believe you're the world's best answer to an important problem without at times coming off like an ►



• arrogant prick. But over the long haul, capitalism tends to act as a moderating force on the bastard-crushing fantasies of the web's pioneers. The founders of Google, Facebook, Twitter, and countless other startups all went the swimming-pool route eventually. They defined their projects as businesses, sought outside money, and accepted the constraints and expectations that came with it.

Assange, by contrast, isn't after a million dollars, or even a billion dollars. He wants nothing less than a literal revolution, with himself at the center of it, borne aloft by his activist army of amateur spies. As such, he's a particularly extreme example of a different class of web entrepreneur, a class one might call the overlords of open source: leaders who leverage massive outpourings of unpaid labor to maximize the impact, not the profit, of the enterprise.

As indispensable as these people-powered projects can be—think everything from Jimmy Wales' Wikipedia all the way back to Richard Stallman's GNU—the paradox is that they're often more authoritarian, even autocratic, than the most tightly controlled for-profit firms. The volunteer model makes them almost feudal in structure: an enormous mass of unpaid serfs, kept in line by a small group of paid manager-nobles, in turn serving at the pleasure of the kingly founder, whose authority is more or less absolute.

Capitalism can moderate the bastard-crushing fantasies of the web's pioneers.

After all, when you create a dominant website but eschew the vast wealth that could come with it, conventional checks on your power no longer apply. You have no shareholders or paying customers to mollify. Competitors don't bother challenging you, since how can they beat a market leader when that leader is unbound by market forces?

So the overlords of open source are left to their regal eccentricities. Craigslist (see Gary Wolf's story on the company in issue 17.09) has resisted giving its users traceable identities—a move any serious for-profit concern would have made long ago—because Craig Newmark sees anonymity as a test of the inherent goodness of people. Jimmy Wales' Wikipedia user page, in introducing his statement of principles for the site, reads like a motto graven on an imperial arch: "I should point out that these are *my* principles, such that *I* am the final judge of them." Assange, similarly, has said that he alone makes the final call about what WikiLeaks will post. To this list of digital sovereigns we might someday add two young barons: CouchSurfing's Casey Fenton and 4chan's Christopher Poole.

Like WikiLeaks, these sites tend to have crude, utilitarian designs and opaque inner workings. (Wikipedia, admittedly, has a certain degree of transparency built into its editing system, which is open and traceable; this has led to multiple Wikipedia dons, includ-

ing Wales, being exposed for making unprincipled edits.) By keeping their organizations in a state of minimalist adolescence, the founders are able to keep the control they crave and use their sites—and the massive user base that powers them—as tools to pursue world-changing agendas.

What the open source overlords need to remember is that revolutions succeed, almost by definition, only when they outlive their charismatic leaders. Wales, for his part, has taken positive steps toward this end, establishing a foundation with bylaws and a board, some of its members chosen by the Wikipedia community. Newmark has brought in an ownership group. But Assange, for the time being, appears to be going it alone, forming brief collaborations but dissolving them when they no longer please him.

The man Assange really ought to emulate is, ironically, the revolutionary founder of his chief adversary, the US government. George Washington could have been president for life, but instead he chose to retire after his second term, warning in his farewell address of "cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men." It's a phrase that today could be readily applied to Julian Assange—who, by putting himself above his own revolution, seems destined to become just another bastard for someone else to crush.

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