

# Social Infrastructure for Virtual Flash Mobs

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In 1998, I founded Minciu Sodas, an open laboratory serving and organizing independent thinkers. In order for independent thinkers to find and support each other, we have innovated in open economics, intellectual property law, and social organization.

In my workshop, I presented - in rambling fashion - our laboratory's theoretical ideas and practical experience in organizing "virtual flash mobs" and the economic value that we see in them. I spoke of the social infrastructure that we have found crucial or helpful in organizing ourselves.

Most importantly, I invited and involved others at the conference to work together. I argued with many about the importance for social networking that our venues be, by default, in the Public Domain, rather than copyright, copyleft or Creative Commons. George Pleger of Creative Commons was most encouraging that I present an alternative "decision chart" that might address my needs and those of others. I share my ideas on this. Thank you also to Franz Nahrada, George Dafermos and others for stimulation, support and encouragement.

## **Support for each other's projects**

My central question is: How might we organize ourselves to support each other for our projects? At our lab, we have recently been guided by the vision of a "virtual flash mob", which we might suddenly declare to bring us together online to support one of our causes, perhaps by spreading news about an upcoming event, seeding a wiki for a new project, developing a new idea, appearing for an online chat, or looking for partners for a new proposal. In a sense, what we are developing is a project management system for openly working together - a vision that Bala Pillai of MindEcos, Joy Tang of OneVillage.Biz and Franz Nahrada of ERDE have all described the need for.

## **Assembling people**

In practice, social networking is a long term investment, and depends on involving a wide variety of people over a long time. In a conversation - as short as five minutes, or as long as an hour - it is possible for a person to learn enough to decide if they might be interested. I have found it very effective to ask people to allow me to sign them up for one of our discussion groups - in English, German, Lithuanian or some other language - as a good way to keep in touch. I let them know that I keep the volume of letters under control, so that they do not go over an average of five letters a day. In the group, the subscribers are exposed to a few letters each day about our topic, which is "caring about thinking" and supporting independent thinkers. This is quite an open topic, and difficult to get a feel for. Typically, after three months or more, they may feel inspired to write, and I can respond and be supportive, knowing that I am investing my energy in the people who are ready for that.

Therefore, my purpose in a first conversation is to know if we can and should stay in touch. I simply need their email address and their permission, based on their clear understanding of the volume of letters they will receive, and their ability to unsubscribe. Often, I try to bring out their personal interests, so that I can show how they might relate to "caring about thinking", and they can decide if such a broader outlook might be of interest to them.

## Questionnaire

When a participant first speaks up in our group, then I know that they might participate more actively, and so I try to encourage them, support their projects, and draw them out. We might think of this as a process of helping each person openly present themselves.

In working openly, we focus our attention on the information that they wish to share publicly, rather than privately. As a social networker, I may think of myself as presenting others with a questionnaire. What questions are most important? We need to ask the questions that best help people to work openly. These questions should help people get things done right away. I share my experience regarding that.

### A) Agreement to work openly

As a social networker - and social hacker, my main idea is that we give priority to working openly. I organize our laboratory's discussion groups so that all may view the archives. Furthermore, our rule is that every letter sent to our groups enters the Public Domain except when the letter explicitly states otherwise. We make this rule prominent in our welcome letter, each group's website and in the footer of each letter.

My first priority, in investing in a new participant, is that they agree more broadly to such a rule. Official members of our laboratory agree that all of their correspondence with our laboratory, including private correspondence, is Public Domain except where the letters explicitly state otherwise. Also, our members agree that our laboratory may work to build relationships on their behalf. This allows us to circulate content vigorously and broadly so that we might find unexpected partners and integrate our efforts. We eliminate the overhead of asking for permissions. I have also found this rule to serve as an effective filter that lets us invest ourselves in those people who know how to "work for free" and "give freely".

In order to leverage a wider network of partners, I have organized an Open People Network that is based on this same principle. Participants declare that the original content which they contribute to the venues they specify - particular discussion groups, wikis, or even the entire Internet - is in the Public Domain except as noted. They then confirm their agreement by stating it some place on the web, preferably a place that they control, so that they may change it as they wish. The fact that their statement stays on the web is a confirmation that they continue to agree to it. It also helps in contacting them, or learning of their interests or wishes.

The "except as noted clause" is very important because it acknowledges that typically material is mixed. We may not be able to freely share all of it, either for our own reasons, or because it belongs to others. In November 2002, I set up the website <http://www.primarilypublicdomain.org/> to encourage material to be declared Primarily Public Domain, which is to say, Public Domain except as noted.

A person benefits from such an agreement in that it enables me, and other such organizers, to invest ourselves in them, respond to their letters, monitor their work and reach out to them.

### B) Self-presentation

The next most important questions have to do with how a person wishes to be presented. What is their name, by which they want to participate? What is their web presence: their websites, blogs, their projects? In the Internet, links and references are the atoms of promotion. In our correspondence, I

mention individuals and link to their projects as a most basic way of being helpful. We can also offer free services, especially for projects generating content in the Public Domain, so that our participants may have a stronger web presence and be able to share more original content.

We also ask, what organizations do they represent, or are affiliated with? We consider how we might work together.

### C) Interests

I think the most exciting questions have to do with people's interests. For our official members we phrase this as: Topics of interest regarding which I want to be contacted by others.

We've collected and posted answers from more than one hundred official members of our laboratory. Most people list several interests, and so we have about three hundred in all. I have sorted through them, and found it helpful to organize them in the following matrix of twelve categories:

X	Why are we motivated?	How do we respond?	What forms does that take?
Practical issues	Endeavors. Bold goals that may be achieved, such as: bringing peaceful self-determination to the Middle East.	Activities. What we do that is open ended, such as: banking, online activism, web design.	Projects. Branded activity we support and associate with, such as: Art of Linux, Advaita.be, Mind Colonies.
Personal issues	Social challenges. Issues that we can address together, such as: mapping environmental ontologies, business communications problems, thinking tool scalability.	Social solutions. Strategies that can be attempted and perfected, such as: change management, ontologies, open economies.	Technologies. Tools as the expression of their own logic, such as: concept mapping software, object technology, wireless telecom.
Social issues	Personal challenges. What we personally take up and address for ourselves, such as: becoming a teacher, doing God's will, taking care of family.	Self-improvements. Ways that we can amplify our faculties and ourselves, such as: accelerated learning, emotional intelligence, flow states.	Arts. Personal talents that we may cultivate, such as: humor, music, poetry.
Philosophical issues	Life concepts. Themes to ponder, such as: happiness, life, the universe.	Investigative questions. Questions to explore and find answers to, such as: How can a person be true to themselves even under unfavorable conditions?	Sciences. Bodies of knowledge to study and advance, such as: anthropology, parapsychology, quantum relativity.

Our complete list of interests can be accessed at:  
<http://www.primarilypublicdomain.org/36.html>

Our interests are the fountain of energy by which we are able to "work for free" on what we care most about. They are vital for us to understand each other, and meet each other halfway to support each other's projects, and to respond to opportunity for work for pay.

## **D) Channels**

Next, we ask people for the means of communication by which they want to be contacted by others, and which will be posted publicly. Email is almost essential, although we do try to include those without email access. But it is important to work through all manner of channels: telephone, instant messaging, wikis and other websites. Travel - and physical meeting - is the channel that most intensely integrates all of our senses. Even more intense is our accountability towards each other through shared moral experiences.

We customize our own social infrastructure, and allow it to unfold as needed. Our minimal resources for organizing ourselves effectively have forced us to find value in every step that we take to leverage the content we are generating. In particular, we have avoided the trap of enclosed, lifeless, centralized databases. Instead, we've taken a dispersed, multi-site, multi-brand, multi-channel, multi-verifiable approach. We have found wikis helpful for registering ourselves, but have needed to combine that with confirmation pages at sites under our own individual control. We have used chat to flesh out our interests and arrange "virtual flash mobs", and have then posted the transcripts to multiple discussion groups to get the word out. Our next steps are to use Wikis for planning and scheduling virtual flash mobs. We have created an online navigation system WOW (Working Openly WOW) for amalgamating the scattered web pages of our participants. We will further build open databases to point to pages on the web where we find thank yous, kind words, helpful actions, and wishes regarding our participants. We have set up a server dedicated to projects in the Public Domain except as noted, and will be archiving materials that our participants are generating, and presenting them on the Web and with RSS, so that we can monitor our activity and respond. We hope our server to become an "incubator" for such projects, and make use of the ability to freely share data files. I wish to find useful ways to exchange data with participants of other online projects, and explore how we might further build infrastructure for our social networking, relying on a distributed, minimalist approach.

How might we best share information about the venues where we are active, the information streams that we monitor, and the presumptions that others can make about our behavior?

## **E) Help with self-sustainment**

These last two years, I have searched for ways for private interests to benefit from sponsoring work that adds to the public wealth. This is especially difficult in poorer countries, where we do not have the luxury to separate our life goals from our chores of making a living. How can we pursue both at the same time? This is complicated even further when we pursue goals from which it is not appropriate to make a living: "Money can bring people together, but you can't pay for people to care". And we do not want to compromise our life goals, or lose any creative rights to our work. Our solution is that "wealth is relationships". If we work openly towards our life goals, then we can at the same time build relationships with other people who are likewise self-directed, self-educated, self-managing, understanding-of-others. In this way, at no cost we are able to build a network of people who know each other in terms of what they care most deeply about. These people are then ready to organize

themselves opportunistically for all manner of work. I would share these results from our paper *An Economy for Giving Everything Away* [<http://www.ms.lt/en/workingopenly/givingaway.html>], as well as subsequent ideas, such as large and small fractal teams, and virtual flash mobs, and our practical experience in our work for various clients. Our general outlook is that an "alternative economy" can be organized one person at a time, by changing our behavior within the current economic system to find ways to "work openly" within it, and I wish to find the widest variety of people who work with this in mind. At our laboratory's server, we are offering free hosting for qualifying projects in the "Public Domain except as noted". We expect to host sites for people of variety technical levels: blogs, wikis, databases. We will also serve software developers who are developing software or practicing new programming languages. We will organize ourselves to help each other in these projects, and to do this fairly, we plan to develop a "point system" for rewarding those who help, and for taxing those who use extra resources. We will likewise include the activity of our OpenPeople network, so that we know who to reward, and who to tax. Our intent is to have an internal mechanism, an internal economy, for rebalancing our efforts as optimal. I will report on how this is working. To the extent that we can organize ourselves as a community to respond, as we are with our virtual flash mobs, we can as a group serve clients. One idea is to set up "corporate mirrors", open spaces where customers, shareholders, employees, suppliers, partners might show, in the spirit of The Cluetrain Manifesto, how they consider the corporation's vision and how they might best participate in that. Our group could earn money, which would then go to cover shared costs, and also those who have done the most work would have the option to cash out their points. In this way, we would have an alternative economy that is multi-dimensional, and reducible to money only for certain clients, and only in large aggregates. Who are ideal clients, what services might we offer, and how might we engage them? In terms of sharing information, these questions are only relevant when we are seriously investing in each other, for example, helping each other find work. We list the services that we offer, our skills and capabilities, - our resume or CV, our availability and desire to participate - and where that might be found on the web, our preferred work type and work conditions. What are the services and resources that we desire, aside from money? These can fuel our alternative economy.

## **F) Decision-making**

Our virtual flash mobs most simply reflect our ability to organize ourselves. We have organized them, with greater or lesser success, to:

- o help Robin Good seed and stimulate the [URL:<http://www.kolabora.com> discussion boards
- o help Josef Davies-Coates spread the word about the WTF event in London, and encourage online participation
- o help Joy Tang of OneVillage.biz reach out and encourage the youth who are organizing themselves for the AIDS conference in Bangkok, Thailand in July, 2004
- o help Tav spread the word about the WTF 2 event in London, and encourage online participation

Currently, we don't have any real way of declaring virtual flash mobs. What happens is that one of our members of the Open People Network asks for one, and I declare it. If we're lucky, then a few people will respond to our call.

However, the very notion of a virtual flash mob makes it easier to spread the news. It helps make our desire real.

More importantly, this activity has drawn us together, making more concrete who would like help, and what we find helpful. Our laboratory involves 800 supportive participants who are subscribed to our

discussion groups, and 80 active participants who correspond or attend meetings. Our virtual flash mob activity helps me focus my attention on the roughly 16 participants of our Open People Network. They are the ones who are generating inexhaustible streams of content, are willing to place some of those streams into the Public Domain. This means that we can invest in them as people who are "working for free" and are self-directed. But also, these people typically are surrounded by communities which they help attract and energize. We are finding that the Open People Network and our related activity is attracting, self-selecting, developing and promoting - in an open and inclusive way - the natural and constructive leaders for our online society.

As we further develop our ability to organize ourselves we need to consider how we might decide - clearly, effectively, definitely - on our actions together. For this we need to share information about our obligations that we take up for each other and our network.

### **Set of Individuals, or Commons?**

At the Oekonux conference, I personally engaged others in an issue that helps us consider our decision making. When are we acting as a set of individuals, and when are we acting as a commons?

This question grew out of my ongoing desire that the Oekonux discussion groups and wikis be venues that are Public Domain except as noted. Currently, the materials are copyright by default, and that taxes my participation as a social networker. As a social networker, I seek to show the viability of "working openly" so that all may integrate themselves into work-in-progress, both for free, and for pay. I encourage participants of Minciu Sodas <http://www.ms.lt/> to build relationships with each other, and my efforts depend on their providing ample content that all may circulate without restriction. I therefore establish discussion groups, wikis and other venues in which the content is, by default, in the Public Domain, unless it explicitly notes otherwise. I encourage our laboratory's partners and colleagues to likewise place their venues in the "Public Domain except as noted" and have established <http://www.primarilypublicdomain.org/> to make this simpler. Many people don't understand why I need to work in the Public Domain, and why I do not find Copyright, Copyleft or Creative Commons helpful as a default. Each of these has its advantages. At Oekonux, Georg Pflieger of the Creative Commons Austria pointed me to the Creative Commons license selection process and encouraged me to try to improve on that. At heart, the question is, When we work together, are we thinking of ourselves as a "set of individuals", or as a "commons"? Let us consider the two extremes. If, as an author, I think of myself as one individual among many, then my work which I share is my finished "product". My wishes will be definitive. I will be held accountable for my content. I will fix the boundaries of my work. I will share with those who share as I do. If my work has any value, then I will require compensation. The law will protect my rights as an individual, as affirmed by Copyright. Alternatively, as an author, I may think of myself as a participant of the commons. I share my "work-in-progress" so that I might involve others. My wishes defer to the commons, except where my content states clearly otherwise. I am not held accountable for my work, and I do not insist on attribution. My work has no set boundaries, and is modifiable. My work is for all, for those of every culture, not only those who share as I do. I give without expecting anything in return. Morality protects my work, and I declare it Public Domain. What the GPL, Creative Commons and others have done is to show that we can actually consider mixed modes. I've put together a list of questions to help us consider our wishes as authors, and decide the extent to which we are a "set of individuals" or a "commons".

	Set of Individuals	Commons
Who is the author?	Express your wish definitely, simply, purely.	Express your wish as a default "except as noted".
Who is accountable?	Insist on attribution.	Do not insist on attribution.
Who sets the boundaries of the work?	Prohibit modifications.	Allow modifications.
Who should the work unite?	Share alike = Share with those of the same culture of sharing.	Share with all (of every culture).
Who should the work sustain?	Require reciprocity, negotiation.	Presume nonreciprocity, giving.
Whose rights should be protected?	Rely on laws. License as Copyright (or Copyleft, Creative Commons, etc.).	Rely on morality. Declare as Public Domain.

The crucial point here is that I'm thinking of the "commons" as more than just a "set of individuals", or even all individuals. A "set of individuals" consists of participants who may assume of each other that they are all conscious, accountable, independent, equal, free, able to negotiate, subject to legal rights, and able to form a "social contract". A "commons" lets us care on behalf of others, those beyond us - people who will come after us, and those who came before; those who are not aware, mature, sane, conscious, responsible; our shared culture, and even those outside of humankind, animals, plants, and all of nature. I'll consider a few important examples of licenses/declarations which interweave the viewpoint of "sets of individuals" and of "the commons".

- o GNU Public License (GPL) <http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/gpl.html>
  - o AUTHOR: Set of Individuals
  - o ACCOUNTABLE: Commons
  - o MARKS BOUNDARIES: Commons
  - o UNITES: Set of Individuals
  - o SUSTAINS: Commons
  - o PROTECTS: Set of Individuals
  
- o Creative Commons <http://www.creativecommons.org/>
  - o AUTHOR: Set of Individuals
  - o ACCOUNTABLE: Set of Individuals OR Commons
  - o MARKS BOUNDARIES: Set of Individuals OR Commons
  - o UNITES: Set of Individuals OR Commons
  - o SUSTAINS: Set of Individuals OR Commons
  - o PROTECTS: Set of Individuals
  
- o Primarily Public Domain <http://www.primarilypublicdomain.org/>
  - o AUTHOR: Commons
  - o ACCOUNTABLE: Set of Individuals OR Commons
  - o MARKS BOUNDARIES: Set of Individuals OR Commons
  - o UNITES: Set of Individuals OR Commons
  - o SUSTAINS: Set of Individuals OR Commons
  - o PROTECTS: Commons

## Organizing for Disintegration

Copyright and Public Domain both have their advantages. If our work is a "finished product", then it makes sense to copyright that, as a way for us to continue to participate in the life of our work. However, more and more, our work is never finished, and what has value is the work process itself, as it allows us to integrate others and create together a shared framework for the coevolution of all of our projects. This is the point of working openly. Here, Public Domain is most helpful, at least as the default.

At Oekonux, it became apparent to me that the main argument against the Public Domain is a concern that our material may, at some point, or in some way, fall into copyright, and be lost to us. Thank you to Franz Nahrada, Edward Cherlin, Marcin Jakubowsky, Stefan Meretz and others for raising this question.

I think the way to answer this is to consider more broadly, how may we act responsibly regarding the future of our work?

If we think of our work as standing by itself, then if we place our work in the Public Domain, it stays there. Somebody may modify our work and copyright their new work, but our original work continues to be in the Public Domain.

Instead, it is more realistic to consider our work as existing within some broader initiative. For example, if a piece of software is actually used, then it is continuously developed further, because the needs of users and the technological environment do not stand still. Software is released in new versions, and it also has a community under whose attention the software develops.

Software likes to clump. It does not like to fork. A community wants to gravitate around the best product. What can happen is that a product in the Public Domain can be further modified and copyrighted by a proprietary developer. That developer may win the hearts of the community. The Public Domain version continues to exist, but the community moves on. And so, the Public Domain software dies. If the only survivor is the proprietary software, then people find themselves forced to use it. In this way, the proprietary software takes over the Public Domain software, which is especially frustrating for the original developers. This is the reason that Richard Stallman created the GNU Public License, so that if a software is modified or incorporated by another, then the latter must also be under the GNU Public License, and satisfy certain basic expectations of openness.

However, content behaves very differently than code. Code is meaningful to the extent that somebody can understand exactly what it is doing. Content, however, is often most meaningful precisely when we don't understand why it works. Classics like The Bible or Plato's Republic or Confucius' Analects are handed down with care through the generations because we respect that they say more than we may claim to understand. We don't yet have such expectations for code! - and we won't so long as alternate programs can be used for the same purpose. Furthermore, content likes to disintegrate. It is only with great effort that content stays unchanged. Very often we may find less than 1% of content relevant to our purpose, and we are able to use it out of context, unlike most code. It is useful to reassemble micro-content for all manner of projects. It is vital to circulate micro-content without restriction as a way to mark, find and strengthen relationships and help us integrate each other.

Content-based and code-based projects are therefore different with regard to their vitality. In a code-based project, a minor enhancement can make the old software obsolete. In a content-based project,



even the most brilliant addition can be re-expressed, and the prior content remains valuable as a source of micro-content. There is therefore no real risk that Public Domain content will become trapped in a proprietary variant. The primary risk is that, as a society, we do not have the consciousness or simply the habit to dedicate our works to the Public Domain. This is our current situation, and we move away from it with each conscious dedication.

Most importantly, we should always consider what will happen to our creative work when the current projects come to an end. We have so many examples of abandoned projects. In the case of old software, there is perhaps nothing to be saved. But when we have created content that expresses our life interests, then surely that has lasting value. If we want to share with those who live beyond our project, then we must not think as a "set of individuals" but as a "commons". The others in the commons will most likely have their own cultures of sharing (their own licenses!). They will need to integrate those parts of our work that they find useful, and ignore the boundaries that we have set. They will decide for themselves what ideas, if any, to attribute to us. We can't expect them to negotiate with us, but should give openly so they might sustain themselves and their work. The legal system will not help us, and we can rely only on morality that our wishes may be respected.

I conclude with my wish that we appreciate the power of morality in our work together. Legal systems are established to protect the rights of individuals, but never directly the commons. Gandhi said, "there is no morality without community", and it is the moral system that serves to turn our minds to our shared responsibility for the "commons" that goes beyond any particular individual. The legal system, and the court system, is of so little practical use for most people, as it offers its equal protection only in large cases. It is surprising, therefore, why people run to it for defense of copyrights that are of so little practical value that they would never actually go to court over them. The moral system is a much sounder investment of our energy. Morally, our wishes must be respected not only on those who know of them, but even on those who come to learn of them only later, or who are linked to us indirectly. But morality also allows for each person's best judgment, thus building a true commons. We can mix our moral appeal with particular wishes that we have as a "set of individuals". Our moral maturity, our growth in awareness and consciousness, our thoughtful action - these are the foundation for a social infrastructure for virtual flash mobs.

My paper is in the Public Domain 2004.