

**Web Poetics and the Gift Economy: nzepc, PennSound and UbuWeb**

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Suddenly, the idea of ‘radical distribution’ is notched up: UbuWeb is not *the* resource but instead, we’re just another *source*; our ‘radical distribution’ might not be so radical after all. It’s apparent that our function has changed. Our authority has become undermined by our own process. UbuWeb is now positioned on a two-way street. Imagine these altered files returning back to the source from which they came, clothed and housed momentarily before being sent back out into the world again. Like the files themselves, UbuWeb is becoming less stabilized in its identity as a center.

— Kenneth Goldsmith, ‘The Bride Stripped Bare: Getting Naked with Nude Media’

**1. It must be free and downloadable.**

— Charles Bernstein, PennSound Manifesto

**Introduction**

The phrase ‘poetry community’ brings up 88,300 hits in 0.22 seconds when searched on Google. Thankfully, this essay will explore only three: the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre (**nzepc**), PennSound and UbuWeb. Although each of these projects has its own areas of particular interest, they share a commitment to what is known as ‘the gift economy’. This essay seeks to explain the principles underpinning the gift economy as

applied to certain web-based poetry communities. Particular comparison will be made periodically to the open source movement, and the discussion of each community will be followed by an examination of one question regarding the sustainability of these projects, namely the opportunity costs incurred by the maintainers. At the heart of this economy is a desire to utilise the accessibility of the internet to bring poetry to a modern audience. **nzepc** looks to preserve and distribute New Zealand poetry to an audience of new and established readers, PennSound archives a vast supply of audio poetry readings in order to tap into contemporary mp3 usage and UbuWeb opens itself up as a hub for a variety of hard-to-find avant-garde art and poetry. UbuWeb is the oldest of the three (November 1996), **nzepc** has been in operation since July 2001 and PennSound since January 2005. All three projects have connections back to the Electronic Poetry Center (EPC), founded in 1995 at SUNY Buffalo and closely aligned with the graduate Poetics Program there.

## **I The Gift Economy**

Wikipedia, itself a gift economy, defines the gift economy as ‘an economic system in which the prevalent mode of exchange is for goods and services to be given without explicit agreement upon a quid pro quo’. A gift economy distinguishes itself from a market economy in that it does not provide the impersonal exchange of commodities for monetary value. It is not simply a child’s Christmas dream of receiving continuous gifts with no concurrent obligations. Typically a gift economy occurs within a ‘cultural context where there is an expectation of reciprocity’ – such as the patron-client relationship of Ancient Rome or the food distribution networks of indigenous societies. Despite the general expectation of reciprocity, this does not form a necessary premise for a gift economy; indeed one of the functions of the gift economy is to ameliorate a state of poverty and provide for the needs of those who are without. This point is recognised by UbuWeb founder Kenneth Goldsmith in his article ‘The Bride Stripped Bare’. He begins by quoting an email thanking him for the wealth of materials UbuWeb provides. As Goldsmith points out, it is highly unlikely that his correspondent Meredith would find these things at her local library. Her words are worth repeating: ‘i really enjoyed your

site. it made me think about different cultures other than the ones i experience daily living in a small texas town’.

While reciprocity might not be available directly, it is always an ideal to aim for. As Lewis Hyde states, ‘The only essential thing is this: *the gift must always move*’ (Wikipedia).<sup>1</sup> And in so moving the gift creates what Marcel Mauss calls a ‘feeling bond’ (Wikipedia). The ‘feeling bond’ taps into the construction of a community. For instance, Jordan Hubbard describes how open source volunteer software engineers are ‘far more likely to help those who have demonstrated their commitment to the success of the overall open source software development process’ (Wikipedia). Open source software is perhaps the best-known example of a gift economy of the modern age. In completely reductive terms, open source software is software that discloses its source code (the building blocks of a program) for public use. It is, as a matter of principle in the hacker community,<sup>2</sup> software that is freely redistributable and amenable to evolution or modification to fit changing needs. Commitment to the overall success of an open source endeavour has been crucial to the development of the hacker community. Seeing the power of progress made by the open source movement, hackers came to adopt by way of custom or taboo, and as a matter of principle or pragmatism, what Eric S Raymond termed the ‘hacker ethic’ (Abramson 172):

The belief that information-sharing is a powerful positive good, and that it is an ethical duty of hackers to share their expertise. ... Huge cooperative networks ... both rely on and reinforce a sense of community that may be hackerdom’s most valuable intangible asset.

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<sup>1</sup> See also Bollier (38) discussing the work of anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski who studied the Trobriand Islanders in the western Pacific. Malinowski was ‘stunned to discover that ritual gifts such as shell necklaces made a steady progression around an archipelago of islands over the course of ten years. People “owned” the cherished gift object for a year or two, but were socially obliged to pass it on. That constant circulation of gifts helped sustain the islanders’ sense of connection and obligation to each other.’

<sup>2</sup> Abramson (171, quoting *The New Hacker’s Dictionary*) defines a hacker as ‘A person who enjoys exploring the details of programmable systems and how to stretch their capabilities ... [or] One who programs enthusiastically (even obsessively) or who enjoys programming rather than just theorizing about programming’.

Ideals and pragmatism form two interwoven threads of the gift economy discourse. For open source software, there is the practical reality that software designed under the open source paradigm is often superior to any marketed competitor.<sup>3</sup> But there is also the element of the radical, who believes wholeheartedly in the power of a gift and the idea that freedom of access to ideas is fundamental. Parallels abound with web poetry communities. In practical terms, the gift economy of web poetics is born out of the absence of a market alternative. But as an ideal, it is geared to community-building, the freedom of ideas, and the potential sharing of poetry on an unheard-of scale.

## **II Information, Intellectual Property and the Community**

Information, directly analogous to poetry, forms an important commodity in the gift economy exchange. It constitutes a non-rival good. When shared, the giver is not deprived of the information; instead giver and receiver have enhanced the welfare of others in the community.<sup>4</sup> Gifford Pinchot argues that this is the fundamental basis of the scientific community, integral to its development. In the realm of information and literary or artistic works, this sharing raises issues of intellectual property rights. Works can easily be ‘passed off’ as ‘originals’ and so our law has developed a system of copyright that can be inimical to the gift economy enterprise. Richard Stallman, one of the founders of the hacker movement, realised the problems posed by copyright to open (free) source. Stallman saw that the threat for that community lay in a person or corporation gaining access to an open source product and then pursuing copyright by removing it from the commons and altering it slightly.

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, Abramson notes, ‘A free-software project called Apache dominates the back rooms of the Web; roughly 60 percent of all Web servers worldwide use it today’ (181). ‘Free-software’ is the alternative and original name for what is now known as ‘open source software’. The history and reasons behind the shift in terminology are discussed in Raymond 65, 68-69.

<sup>4</sup> ‘The peculiar power [of an idea is] that no one possesses the less, because every other person possesses the whole of it. He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lites his taper at mine receives light without darkening me’: Thomas Jefferson, quoted in Bollier 38.

Thus the General Public License (or GPL) was born. Otherwise known as ‘copyleft’, programs that contain the GPL can be freely accessed, modified and redistributed by anyone, so long as the distribution terms remain unaltered for the ‘original’ product *and* any derived program (Bollier 28-29; Abramson 177-78). The language of the law shifts to accommodate the ideals or needs of the relevant community. The presence of copyright in poetic gift economies can be placed in a wider context: the negotiating of legal rights as part of a general reliance on the inter-personal bonds of literary or artistic communities (relationships built over many years). What this envisages is a collective commitment to what Loss Pequeño Glazier calls the ‘subject village’:

Central to the success of electronic poetry is the notion of a ‘subject village’, a site of access, collection, and dissemination of poetry and related writing.

With this comes a proviso: the primary mission of the subject village should be the circulation of texts, not the quest for totality. Or as Charles Bernstein puts it, the electronic ideal is ‘a library without walls, a very open system’ (Zheng).

### **III    nzepc**

Five years old, **nzepc**’s stated purpose is ‘to coordinate existing archival and publishing information, and to present some full-text electronic publication of poetry and commentary’ (**nzepc** ‘about us’). It provides a hub or meeting place for those New Zealand poets who are personally willing and whose publishers (where applicable) are open to the idea. This presents a hurdle for **nzepc** that has required its founders, Michele Leggott and Brian Flaherty, to undertake a series of personal communications to ensure access to a poet’s work. The materials are publicly accessible and therefore easily ‘pirated’. **nzepc** accordingly publishes the following: ‘All **nzepc** material is copyright. It is made available here without charge for personal use only’. The threat of copyright on the internet looms large. It must be argued however, that copyright comes to resemble a respect for the gifting. For instance, in my own experience, making use of a Mary

Stanley photo already posted on **nzepc** was acceptable so long as the sources were acknowledged in my online assignment. This is nothing new in itself, but under the banner of the ‘feeling bond’ engendered in a subject village, the user of information gifted to the community is more likely to respect that usage and the reciprocal ‘feelings’ of the gift-giver. Comparison can again be made to the open source movement.

Raymond writes (85-86):

One’s reputation can suffer unfairly if someone else misappropriates or mangles one’s work; these taboos (and related customs) attempt to prevent this from happening. (Or, to put it more pragmatically, hackers generally refrain from forking or rogue-patching others’ projects in order to be able to deny legitimacy to the same behaviour practiced against themselves.) ... Surreptitiously filing someone’s name off a project is, in cultural context, one of the ultimate crimes. Doing this steals the victim’s gift to be presented as the thief’s own.

Because **nzepc** is a valuable resource for many purposes (the joy of the find, educating, keeping up to date, access to the otherwise inaccessible), I would argue, by analogy to the open source experience, that any disrespect for the gifting it depends on is likely to fall hardest on the ‘thief’ precisely because the ‘thief’ is probably someone who has or would like to have affiliations to the community.

**nzepc** has begun to branch out, reflecting the ecology described by Pinchot. Typically it organises and archives readings locally and in April 2006 held its third symposium, this time in Bluff, Southland, a place as far from home base in Auckland as it is possible to get but very close indeed to the country’s best Oyster Festival. As with previous symposia the archival record of the event has been posted online and the retrospective, virtual audience will far exceed the one for whom the assembled poets read and talked. There is also an initiative at **nzepc** for a sister Pasifika network, replicating the history of **nzepc** which itself was based on the model provided by SUNY Buffalo’s Electronic Poetry Center, and further promoting the goal of dissemination. EPC was the brainchild

of Robert Creeley, Charles Bernstein and Loss Pequeño Glazier and implements Creeley's commitment to 'the locating company,' a term Glazier's 'subject village' translates for the internet age.

#### **IV PennSound**

PennSound's manifesto begins with a numbered proposition in bold print: **1. It must be free and downloadable.** The idea of a 'manifesto' is worth exploring. Discussing the use of manifestos historically, especially the use of the Communist Manifesto of 1848, Martin Puchner writes, '[T]he modern revolution must somehow invite the future'. The manifesto acts to 'create a genre that must usurp an authority it does not yet possess, a genre that is much more insecure and therefore more aggressive in its attempts to turn words into actions and demands into reality' (Kennedy). Comparison with the open source movement is again irresistible. Bruce Perens and Eric Raymond developed the open source 'manifesto' otherwise known as Open Source Definition (OSD). Strikingly similar to PennSound's Manifesto, it opens with the following declaration (Abramson 182):

1. Free Redistribution

... The license shall not require a royalty or other fee for such sale.

Of course, the two manifestos diverge in content, focusing on the specific needs of each community, but what I like about each one is the 'constitutive' (Puchner) form it takes. In setting out the terms of engagement, the manifesto provides a touchstone for identity – the 'feeling bond'. It is also aspirational in its desire to use the internet as a means of increasing the subject village.

PennSound founders Charles Bernstein and Al Filreis expand on their first declaration:

One of the advantages of working with poetry sound files is that we don't anticipate a problem with rights. At present and in the conceivable future, there is no profit to be gained by the sale of recorded poetry.

This notion of 'free' raises a question in relation to the gift economy. While certainly free in a neoclassical market sense, the gift economy posits a desire for reciprocity. The question could be asked: how does PennSound ask for reciprocity from its viewers/listeners? Two possibilities are apparent. First, PennSound explicitly asks for any bibliographical information its users may have about materials they access; that is, a request is made for direct reader (or listener) input ('About PennSound'). Second, as a more esoteric idea, reciprocity also comes about through proliferation of the 'message' and dissemination of poetry readings as a social enterprise.

Negotiations with authors are again done via a personally interconnected network. Bernstein in his essay 'Close Listening' emphasises the need and importance of an exchange network of pairs where everyone is a poet: 'the activity of isolated individuals writing monological lyrics' is transposed into an act of community. Ironically, Bernstein writes that its importance can in part be measured by its resistance to commodification, 'It is a measure of its significance that it [the poetry reading] is ignored'. Which brings us to Manifesto point number 2: **It must be mp3 or better** and number 3: **It must be single**, emphasising Filreis' comment to *The Pennsylvania Gazette* that 'we're seizing on a popular technology and a technological habit that a lot of people who don't normally associate with poetry are involved in' (Stoltzfus). On the face of it, this appears to represent a partial shift towards a realisation of the power of commodification and consumer-orientation. Alison Stoltzfus of *The Pennsylvania Gazette* pitched Filreis' vision as follows:

Picture this: The kid in front of you in the checkout line is seriously grooving, engrossed in whatever sounds are coming from the milk-white earbuds sprouting from his head. In his hand is an iPod, one of those ubiquitous portable music players that everybody under the age of 25

seems to have, and he's still fiddling with it when you finally tap him on the shoulder to indicate that he's up at the counter.

'Sorry,' he says, flashing a smile and sliding the earphones off, 'I couldn't hear you over the Robert Creeley I had playing.'

While I use the phrase 'commodification' to refer to the medium of the message, it must be borne in mind that this sits in tension with the message itself. Poetry has been historically, and still is, an oral art form. Bernstein in 'Close Listening' writes:

[W]hile performance emphasizes the material presence of the poem, and of the performer, it at the same time denies the unitary presence of the poem ... Performance also allows for the maximum inflection of different, possibly dissonant, voices: a multivocality that foregrounds the dialogic dimension of poetry.

The message itself remains impermeable to total consumption – bringing the listener back to gain more with each re-hearing. Complexity and multivocality need not be feared in this bold new enterprise of mp3 poetry. One need only look at the success of the 'sampling' genre of music to understand that listeners enjoy the provocation of dissonant voices.

A final comment on PennSound's negotiations that applies also to **nzepc**: both remain firmly affiliated with the institution that supports them (University of Pennsylvania and University of Auckland respectively). While this affiliation means that legal requirements are more strenuous (as compared to UbuWeb), Filreis characterises it as the university fulfilling its traditional role of making art and culture available through its (publicly funded) resources.

## V UbuWeb

UbuWeb has no direct affiliation with a university (declares Kenneth Goldsmith proudly). One of the greatest concerns for Goldsmith was the corporate desire for screen ‘real estate’, but it can also be said that UbuWeb’s materials do not pander to corporate literary or academic tastes. Its focus is on providing ‘a distribution point for out of print, hard-to-find, small run, obscure materials, available at no cost from any point on the globe’ (Goldsmith). While sharing some editorial personnel with EPC and networked to PennSound (placing it within the wider framework of sympathetic web poetics), UbuWeb is stridently independent in its negotiation of IP rights. In its FAQ section the correspondent asks for permission to use UbuWeb materials. The response is piratical: ‘if something is in print, yet absurdly priced or insanely hard to procure, we’ll take a chance on it’ (and therefore, ‘you should too’). This ‘taking a chance’ spreads to its treatment of materials once they become part of UbuWeb’s distribution networks. As Goldsmith notes, UbuWeb has undergone a process of decentralisation. Most strikingly of the three web-based projects discussed here, Goldsmith’s site undertakes the production equivalent (rather than the ethical equivalent) of open source software. As he observes (with reference to Duchamp’s iconic/iconoclastic sculpture), ‘It’s free or naked, stripped bare of the normative external signifiers that tend to give as much meaning to an artwork as the contents of the artwork itself’.<sup>5</sup> Set loose from bibliographical moorings the art/work of UbuWeb has given rise to a community of ‘compositions, remixes, or the process of stitching several tracks together that’s come to be known as bootlegging or smushing’ (Goldsmith). Is this the den of thieves feared by Raymond in his open source musings? Or is it a logical consequence of entering Bernstein’s library without walls? Goldsmith uses a metaphor of wine without the bottle to characterise the process of utilising UbuWeb as a source of building blocks for new art. The technology may be new but the impulse is perhaps perennial: *How can the mind help being amazed at pictures without walls?* (Tawney 2:56)

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<sup>5</sup> By contrast the PennSound Manifesto requires mp3 identification as part of the site’s ongoing cataloguing project with UPenn libraries: ‘**4. It must be named ... 5. It must embed bibliographic information in the file**’.

A distinction can be made between the reciprocity shown by **nzepe** and PennSound (respect for the gifting by agreeing to terms of usage) and that shown by UbuWeb, where reciprocity is more or less characterised as the generation of new gifts via the original gifting. However, as Goldsmith points out, UbuWeb's 'original giftings' are in fact often takings without any approach for permission being made to the author-creator. To ameliorate this Goldsmith points to two things. First, most authors are happy to find their pieces on UbuWeb; and secondly, where an author is unhappy with the appropriation (a rare event), the piece is removed. Furthermore, despite its pirate-like theoretical underpinnings and with a measure of self-conscious irony, UbuWeb issues a legal warning to its navigators: 'All right(s) belong to the authors'. We can safely assume that the origins of the notice lie with the repurposing of copyright as copyleft.

## **VI Sustainability (or, 'How bazaar!')**

John Tranter, publisher and editor of the online poetry magazine *Jacket*, begins his article 'The Left Hand of Capitalism' in the following way:

I think they're right when they say that middle-aged men shouldn't have children: they're too old to manage the sleepless nights and the effluent disposal problems.

And so we have an issue of sustainability in relation to these web-communities: the sheer time and effort required. Money does not appear to be a problem. First, there is no substantial financial gain to be had. Tranter goes as far as to measure the success of his journal on the internet in terms of expenditure being greater than revenue. The gift economy is born out of a theory of gifting, but it is also sustained by the lack of a market alternative.<sup>6</sup> Tranter speculates that if he were to start charging his readers, they would

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<sup>6</sup> Another open source analogy comes to mind. Abramson writes (172): 'Linux is a powerful operating system developed under the open-source model. Linux defines a translation frontier that allows humans and microprocessors to communicate without passing through Microsoft's platform bottleneck.' Alternatives arise out of necessity as well as ideals. In response to Microsoft's increasing market power

be likely to go elsewhere: ‘There’s plenty of free stuff out there’. Secondly, even allowing for variations between different online publications (*Jacket* for instance is staffed solely by Tranter and fellow poet Pam Brown), the cost of production is relatively cheap. Writing in 1999, Tranter estimated that he paid around \$1,000 per year, instead of upwards of \$100,000 for an equivalent printed publication. Adopting economic terms, the problem lies not in capital costs, but in opportunity costs. Jennifer Ley quotes John Kusch of the American site *Bluff Quarterly*:

Our concerns have become less about money and more about time.  
Regularly publishing any kind of web content is an investment in time,  
energy, and creativity.

And Tranter concurs: ‘The main cost is my time; which means I don’t get much poetry written these days’. No doubt this is replicated also in the poetry communities introduced in this essay. So the question remains: why? Why put in the effort? Why sacrifice your time and creative energy? Eric Raymond, discussing the open source movement, characterises the gift economy as a response to abundance. In this context, the notion of a market exchange of value is ‘an almost pointless game’ (81). He continues:

In gift cultures, social status is determined not by what you control but by what you give away. ... This abundance creates a situation in which the only available measure of competitive success is reputation among one’s peers.

To Raymond, the only way to attract attention in a gift economy is through prestige – being known for generosity, strategy, fair dealing, or leadership. Altruism becomes an unacknowledged form of self-interest. Becoming a hacker is dependent on being

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with Internet Explorer, Netscape decided to release Mozilla, an open-source equivalent of Navigator (Abramson 186-89).

*acknowledged by the community* as someone with the technical skill to deserve the name. The same principle applies in scientific communities. Bollier writes (34-35):

A scientist's achievements are measured by recognition in academic societies and journals and the naming of discoveries – Halley's Comet, Tourette's Syndrome – not by salaries, stock holdings, or market share. Papers submitted to scientific journals are considered 'contributions.'

In *The New Hacker's Dictionary*, Raymond sets down several insights into hacker culture and language. Reputation gains<sup>7</sup> in hacker communities eventually result in 'demigod' status (a privilege Raymond himself holds within the community). A demigod is:

A hacker with years of experience, a world-wide reputation, and a major role in the development of at least one design, tool, or game used by or known to more than half of the hacker community. To qualify as a genuine demigod, the person must recognizably identify with the hacker community and have helped shape it.

But humility is the other side of what looks dangerously like a cult of personality. Raymond continues (91):

Yet another reason for humble behaviour is that in the open source world, you seldom want to give the impression that a project is 'done'. This might lead a potential contributor not to feel needed.

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<sup>7</sup> It is this idea of 'reputation gains' that Raymond sees as the basis of what he conceives of as an entirely Lockean based ethic within the hacker community. While I have adopted the reputation gains approach (and its relationship with humility), the use of Locke by Raymond evokes a tradition that sits uneasily with the 'commons' of the gift economy. Locke's central argument concerned removing property from the state of the commons through labour: 'If being removed by him from the common state nature has placed it in, it has by this labour something annexed to it that excludes the common right of other men' (Quoted Howard 79).

Tranter unintentionally sums up what I am describing as a tension between reputation gains and humility, evoking the image of the elder statesman when he writes:

I feel I've enabled a lot of writers to find a wider international audience for their work, especially younger poets. I received a lot of generous support and assistance when I was a young writer, and it's good to be able to give something back.

Discussing the development and management of Linux, Raymond writes of the shift away from cathedral-building, to 'a great babbling bazaar' (21). While cathedral-building is reliant on hierarchical management structures, with building occurring within a 'top-down' or architect paradigm, the bazaar model is in Abramson's words, comparable to the 'organised chaos' of an Arab souk (184). In the bazaar model, the architect's role is cut in half and renamed the 'maintainer' (185):

Whereas an architect disseminates a holistic view of the completed project and then watches its pieces coalesce, the maintainer is only in charge of coalescence.

Leadership and reputation are therefore required to engage poets, as well as those technically minded for the task, in a kind of gravitational pull towards the project. But it is also through humility – valued I would argue as a democratising principle that engenders the 'feeling bond' – that people are made to feel welcome, stick around and build a home, creating an 'inverse commons' where 'the grass grows taller when it's grazed on' (Bollier 37, quoting Raymond).

### **Concluding Statement**

Web-based projects form a distribution point. The hard to find is discovered. The avant-garde is marketed. Artists and poets are seen and heard. As gift economies, these

projects are in continual expansion. The curators occupy the position of editors having to choose what to place on the network to occupy what is technically limited storage space. However, although limited individually, taken as a collective each project forms a member of the growing subject village. In the internet age physical space is transcended by clicking a mouse and the gifts of different artists worldwide are transported to the home or classroom PC. It is this that forms the ultimate end-goal for the poetic gift economy: the continuous dissemination of texts.

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