

Free Culture Gets Political

Digital commoners of diverse stripes get serious about public policy.

By [David Bollier](#)



For years, the free culture world was resolutely focused on building its eclectic array of commons projects — free software, open-access journals, wikis, and pools of creative works using Creative Commons licenses. History may record that the free culture reached a turning point in Barcelona, Spain, in November 2009. At the [Free Culture Forum](#), a conference that just concluded this week, free culture activists from about twenty countries came together to assert a shared political and policy agenda.

What was notable about the Forum was its complete independence from the three leading transnational free culture organizations – the Creative Commons (and its dormant affiliate iCommons), Wikipedia and the Free Software Foundation. Perhaps because it is European-based, the event was more frankly political and diverse than the gatherings usually hosted by those organizations. (Though to be clear, the Barcelona Forum was building on top of the innovations of these groups, and was not averse to them or their work.)

As a result, the conversations went beyond this or that project, and had a bit more of an edge. People had a deeper, more combative engagement with politics and a readiness to saddle up. The end result will be a formal “Charter” for digital culture, to be released early next week. (I will provide a weblink at the end of this post after the Charter is released.)



The Forum featured a dazzling array of brilliant and committed free culture folks. There was Jamie Love of Knowledge Ecology International, the fierce, relentless advocate for the public’s access to knowledge and affordable drugs, and Eddan Katz of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, who is battling

an international treaty that would eradicate many basic rights now enjoyed by Internet users.

Jamie King, director of “Steal This Film,” described his ongoing adventures as an activist-filmmaker, and [Isaac Hacksimov](#), the playful name of a hacker/activist collective, described some of their street-theater campaigns against enemies of the sharing economy.

There was Hilary Wainwright is a British activist/sociologist who works at the Transnational Institute and is editor of a popular political magazine, *Red Pepper*; Jose Murilo, a minister of culture for digital affairs for the Brazilian government, which is instituting some fascinating new forms of government-citizen conversations using Web 2.0 technologies; and Michel Bauwens, the prolific and insightful head of the P2P Foundation who is always on the frontier. (After the Forum, Bauwens was headed to Manchester, England, for a conference that he co-organized on collaborative platforms for physical production — i.e., open source meets consumer product manufacturing.)

I was also thrilled to encounter some cutting-edge actors like Dmytri Kleiner, who is exploring the “broad revolutionary possibilities” of digital technology through his group Telekommunisten, and Amelia Andersdotter, a member of the Pirate Party in Sweden, which now has a seat in the European parliament. The Pirate Party is starting to remake the political dynamics of free culture in Europe by running candidates who actually win elections. Even a few successful candidates can alter the public conversations about copyright, the Internet and the anti-social behavior of the film and music industries.

If this all seems political, it is because politics was a key reason for convening the Free Culture Forum in the first place. The EU Presidency is moving to Spain in 2010, and the event’s organizations, Simona Levi and Mayo Fuster, were eager to convene the free culture community as a political presence.

The first day saw a crowd of 250 people listen to ten hours of public presentations. It was exhausting. The second and third days were working sessions for free culture “insiders,” especially invited participants — which was also exhausting. But the three days had some useful outcomes. First, publicity: eight Barcelona newspapers covered the event, and a number of politicians and government envoys showed up.

Second, a political seriousness. Over the course of two days, the Forum workgroups produced a series of rigorous policy statements and proposals that are now being edited into a single Charter. The document, still unnamed, will outline the basic principles and values that the free culture world regards as indispensable to freedom in the digital world. Thus, it will address such things as copyrights and patents, free expression, cyber-security, Internet policies, consumer rights, the economics of commons-based business models, among other things.

I was the chief author of a section on the commons, which reflected the discussions of my workgroup. I also delivered some plenary remarks to the audience on the first day (posted on OTC [here](#)). I urged the commoners to see the diverse free culture work constituencies as belonging to one movement, and a movement that needs to get more political.

What is the character of this “movement”?

Some people had trouble with the idea of calling it a “movement” in the traditional sense. Someone suggested, usefully, was that the free culture movement is more like a public square: people can enter it from any number of paths, and be headed in very different directions. But for now, they share the same space and same general values. At least for now, this “movement” seems to occupy a defined space but it has many centers and different trajectories.

After the Barcelona conference, I flew to Madrid for a speech at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, which is a very prominent museum of contemporary art that is trying to reach out

to the public, artistic communities and cultural folks. My lecture was apparently intended to be part of that effort. Sharing the stage with me, as a respondent, was an Amsterdam-based Italian academic, Matteo Pasquinelli, who recently published a book, *Animal Spirits: A Bestiary of the Commons*. A Madrid newspaper reporter from *Publico* interviewed me. Here's [a link to her story](#), along with a wild-eyed photograph of me.

While in Madrid, I connected with a new friend, Marcos Garcia, who works at the [Medialab Prado](#), an independent cultural/tech organization that is financed by the Madrid city government. The Medialab produces exhibitions, hosts lectures and convenes collaborators from around the world to work on public-spirited projects. Garcia described the Medialab as a “commons-based institution” that works with partners to advance the public good in all sorts of project-specific and improvisational ways.

One of its five programmatic tracks is “The Commons Lab,” which is working with a number of partners to explore the commons paradigm. One project, for example, is looking at commons-based business models (aka, open business models). Another is the development of a commons ontology using Semantic Web tags. The top four categories for commons, by their reckoning, are “nature,” “city,” “body” and “digital.”

In Spain, the commons is on the march. While it has not registered in most precincts of mainstream politics and culture, that is about to change. Free culture could be said to be entering Stage II, moving beyond its individual projects and creative sectors, to assume a more public, collaborative and political role. This development could not be more timely. Given the diversity, creativity, political imagination and sophistication of the free culture world, this augurs a promising future.

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