

PERFORMING CULTURES OF OPENING PRODUCTION

ANNA SERAVALLI

MEDEA – MALMÖ UNIVERSITY

ANNA.SERAVALLI@MAH.SE

LUCA SIMEONE

MALMÖ UNIVERSITY

LUCA.SIMEONE@MAH.SE

ABSTRACT

This paper aims at exploring different ways in which cultures of opening production can be performed by comparing two events (two Hackathons) organized by two Swedish labs oriented towards opening production.

INTRODUCTION

Opening production refers to an emerging modality of understanding and organizing processes of value creation, where openness and collaboration play a central role. This mode of production originated in the software field, where open-source programming has proved the sustainability of production processes relying on horizontal structures, where value is generated through collaboration and by sharing resources (Benkler 2006). This model is rapidly spreading in other realms: from the cultural sphere to consumer goods, from the market to the public realm. This diffusion is supported by political and ethical stands but also by the profitability and innovation potential of these practices. On one side, participation and sharing are understood as a possibility to exercise freedom and the opening of production is looked upon as an option to explore alternative modes of production relying on commons and collaboration (Bauwens 2009). On the other, the economic success of open software has led to the emergence of paradigms such as open and democratic innovation (Chesbrough 2003, von Hippel 2005), which are showing the benefits of fostering collaboration among diverse kinds of stakeholders (companies, NGOs, public sector, private citizens) even from a market perspective. The opening of production therefore represents a phenomenon where diverse and sometimes contrasting understandings co-exist and are interwoven with each other, where words like openness and collaboration can assume diverse meanings and stand for different worldviews.

This paper aims at exploring how cultures of opening production can be performed by comparing two events

organized by two Swedish labs oriented towards opening production. Both the labs have been initiated by MEDEA¹ - a design led research centre for collaborative media at Malmö University. The first lab analyzed is Fabriken, a public workshop placed in Malmö, where citizens have free access to tools and machines to explore different kinds of technology and processes by sharing competences and skills. Fabriken originated from a collaboration among MEDEA, a Swedish interaction design company and a local NGO that runs the premises where Fabriken is hosted. The second (newer) lab is Connectivity Lab, located inside MEDEA premises and run by MEDEA itself. Connectivity Lab aims at being an arena where companies, students and innovators develop new products and services in the realm of Internet of Things according to logics of co-production and open innovation. Even if both Fabriken and Connectivity Lab embrace the culture of opening production, they perform it differently. More specifically, Connectivity Lab has been developed in order to respond to Fabriken inadequacy in being a space for establishing collaborative processes with local players (including large corporations) around the theme of Internet of Things².

This paper focuses on the first public events of the two labs, both modeled on the format of a Hackathon³, and on the organizational cultures behind the events. The concept of 'culture' and, more specifically, the concept of 'organizational culture' has been extensively discussed and elaborated in scientific literature. This paper draws upon the symbolic-interpretive theoretical framework as presented by Mary Jo Hatch: the main focus of organizational culture studies is the investigation of "how people give meaning and order to their experience within specific contexts, through interpretive and symbolic acts, forms and processes" (Hatch 2006, 14). The organizational culture is seen as a complex and animated ensemble of (overlapping and

¹ MEDEA: <http://medea.mah.se> accessed 17 February 2013.

² Internet of Things is a term that refers to the extension of Internet to physical object and locations that are identified through networks of interconnected sensing capabilities.

³ Hackathons developed within the hacker culture as 24-48 hours events where participants gather for collaboratively developing software or building things.

conflicting) socio-material and cultural codes and practices shared by the organization stakeholders (e.g. the lab's directors, members, researchers, external collaborators, groups affiliated with the lab...) ⁴.

We consider the two Hackathons as specific ways of performing cultures of opening production. We rely here on a broad understanding of performativity (Halse 2008) that implies that organizational culture continually comes into being through its social and material performances. Adopting this idea of performativity, the Hackathons can be looked upon as two events where the cultures of the labs emerge from the interactions between the organizers, the participants, the programs and the material elements.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

In the last few decades, the investigation of the cultural dimension of organization has been an important element in organizational studies (Hatch 2006). More specifically, in the symbolic-interpretive theoretical framework we decided to apply it is quite common to find studies that rely on data collected across long periods of time - typically using ethnographic participant observation – and where the collected material is explained by the researchers through interpretative processes (Schultz 1995). The application of an ethnographic approach with the direct involvement of researchers in the field has proven to be a common element of a good number of recent studies on organizational culture (Czarniawska 2012). In operational terms, we followed the two events, observing and interacting with organizers and participants. The findings reported here draw upon data collected through direct observation, our experience as participants, unstructured conversations, email exchanges. Field source data mainly consisted of notes, photographs, video-audio recordings and sketches. This source data was edited and organized in a single profile document; photographs were positioned in sequence with relative caption. Notes from direct observation were placed in a loose thematic narrative structure. Photographs were organized accordingly to coincide with this narrative. All this resulted in a concise textual and visual documentation of all source data. This source data was then elaborated to write the draft of the final report.

The authors belong to MEDEA - which has initiated both Fabriken and Connectivity Lab. One of the authors has been deeply involved in setting up and in the everyday running of Fabriken (Seravalli 2012). We are aware that our internal positioning at MEDEA strongly influenced the way we interpreted the two events and the resulting ethnographic account.

⁴ As in Freeman and Reed (1983), we consider a wide definition of stakeholders as all the actors that affect or are affected by the organization.

AN ACCOUNT OF THE TWO HACKATHONS

DATE, LOCATION AND DURATION

The Fabriken Hackathon (**FH**) took place on a weekend between the 18-20 February 2011. This Hackathon marked the opening of Fabriken, even though the lab was not yet in place. In the process of designing Fabriken (Seravalli 2012) a great concern was related to how to involve users in the design and setting up of the lab and FH represented a first step in this direction.

The Connectivity Lab Live Hackathon (**CLH**) was significantly shorter (24 hours) and took place across two days (7-8 December 2012). Like in the case of FH, this inaugural event marked the beginning of the public activities of Connectivity Lab and aimed at gathering a potentially interested audience and at trying to establish an initial network of connections.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO LOCATIONS AND THE SCENIC STAGING

At the time in which FH was organized, Fabriken premises were not available yet, therefore it was held in a warehouse located just in front of the future facilities. The warehouse was roughly furnished with some second hand tables, chairs and sofas. Some basic equipment for building things (such as hand tools and gears to work with electronics) was made available to participants who also brought their own materials and tools. Moreover, a local shop of electronics provided a delivery service for people in need of materials and components during the weekend. The cold played a central role in the staging of FH: the premises were not heated and that weekend was one of the coldest of the season. Initially, some heating fans were used, but they overloaded the electric system that shut down several times. The solution was to move in smaller offices inside the warehouse, which were warmer. However, some of the participants remained in the main space working for the entire Hackathon at a temperature of 5-10°C.

CLH's staging was significantly different. The event took place in the main premises of MEDEA and was articulated across a large room and some of the other smaller rooms attached. The space was accurately prepared for the event and organized in several corners and areas, where parallel events happened at the same time. In the larger room, a DJ / VJ corner provided music and motion graphics animations; special organic coffee and liquorice were offered at a dedicated corner and people who served coffee also provided a detailed explanation of its distinctive and special quality; a small area at the entrance was equipped with freely available Lego pieces; some students of the MA in Interaction Design provided demonstrations of their Kinect and Arduino-based projects; in another area, some small-scale commercial services were showcased (a student with his 3D printer offering printing services, a start-up with a special prototyping material made of synthetic sand). Coloured lights (orange, red) created a visual

atmosphere in line with MEDEA's official branding. Big post-it notes and paper table clothes were positioned in several places together with pens and markers. Origami cranes and white orchards sat on the tables here and there. A Japanese fan laid on a stand up desk. Free beers were provided on Saturday afternoon (8 December) together with some sandwiches served with a nice paper package and made of ingredients such as olive pâté with garlic, organic cheese, fennel. The overall impression was that of a very curated space: hip and sexy. A comment gathered from a participant ("I'm very surprised, this is not academia") gives the idea of the staged dimension of the event.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE PROGRAMS OF THE TWO EVENTS

The program of FH was quite open: beside the opening and the closure the only fixed events were lunches and dinners, when a NGO of immigrant women provided food. A workshop with Otto von Busch – a well-known craft artist/hacktivist - focusing on creating objects with an open-source building system, was scheduled during the Saturday morning. After the opening on the Friday evening a matching session was organized for the people coming without a defined project or group to work with. The closure on Sunday afternoon consisted of a session where the participants got 5 to 10 minutes to present their work. Even though the event was mainly targeting the local hacker community, some additional elements were added (craft workshop, matching session) with the aim of fostering a wider participation.

The Hackathon at Connectivity Lab was the central part of a wider event called Connectivity Lab Live ("a two-day creators event exploring innovative prototyping in the field of connected devices and social media"⁵). The Hackathon itself was therefore wrapped up within a wider program that was articulated across some open talks (with invited international speakers from BBC, Arte, Georgia Tech, FabLabs...) and some workshops open to the general public (Arduino, 3D in fashion design, mobile and game design...). The Hackathon started after an initial panel of talks with a challenge kick-off given by Mads Høbye, an interaction designer both affiliated with the studio Illutron⁶ (DK) and with MEDEA as a PhD student. The Hackathon went on for 24 hours and at the end a jury selected and awarded the best projects.

THE UNFOLDING OF THE TWO EVENTS

In the unfolding of FH a main aspect was the blurring of roles between participants and organizers. The problems with the heating and the electric system opened the possibility for some participants to actually play the role of organizers, spending time in understanding why the electric system was shutting down. This interplay between participants and organizers is a pattern that is

⁵ <http://connectivitylab.mah.se/> accessed 17 February 2013.

⁶ Illutron is a Danish collaborative interactive arts studio (<http://www.illutron.dk/> accessed 17 February 2013).

still present in Fabriken where a core group of skilled and committed participants is basically in charge of the technical aspects of the space. The event became the occasion to prototype a direct involvement of the users in the everyday management of Fabriken.

Another interesting aspect to notice is the central role played by the laser cutter during the two days. The machine was placed in the future Fabriken premises (it was too heavy to be moved). Some of the participants stated that they attended the event only because they wanted to use it. The laser cutter was an attraction also for the people passing by, which often took an additional walk from the event premises to Fabriken just to have a look at it. This pattern is still present in Fabriken; even if other fabrication machines have been bought, the laser cutter still represents the core of the space.

When it comes to the participants the main group was the local hacker community. A group of students from the Interaction Design Master's program joined as well. In addition there were also other participants such as: a retired professor working with electronics, an amateur ceramist, a dad with his 10 years old kid, two musicians who build their own instruments. Around 30 people participated to FH and 20 more just stopped by. Collaboration between the participants and the organizers developed well during the two days and most of the participants are still part of the core group of Fabriken. The event got covered pretty well by media (three local newspapers came by), however FH did not engage the general public as hoped.

In CLH, the Hackathon was part of a wider event where the audience was invited to engage through workshops, open talks and tech demonstrations where it was possible to try prototypes and devices brought by both students and external companies. The Hackathon was launched with a kick-off meeting open to all the audience and ended with a public presentation of the projects and with a prize ceremony followed by a closing party. The Hackathon itself was accurately planned, since Mads Høbye together with some other components of Illutron - all people skilled in prototyping (programming, design, Arduino, sensors...) - led the entire process moderating the initial brainstorming session, facilitating the formation of groups and helping the groups when needed.

In the end, about 350 people attended to CLH and about 60 people registered for the Hackathon. The event was not only attended by the participants to the Hackathon, but also by many other people who were just mingling up, drinking beers, chilling out and enjoying the club-like atmosphere. Students from Malmö University were a big component of the audience, but there were also kids playing with Lego, and couples and friends who were hanging out there because - as one person told us: "I didn't know about the event but came because a friend invited me out".

A big effort was put in the recruitment phase of the Hackathon to communicate the event to a large audience such as artists, small interaction design companies, people working within creative industries. Not all the registered people showed up for the Hackathon. Even though some companies registered, not many of them attended to the Hackathon, where the participants were mainly students.

Both Hackathons developed interesting projects. During FH a range of things were created: an ambient lamp that reacts to sound by changing colour, an on-line multiplayer game, a manual clay-press to build 3d models. Some experiments with an interface controlled through body movements were carried out. The most advanced project was *Kiwidrive*, an omnidirectional robot that can be controlled through a website. In CLH, six concepts/prototypes were presented, ranging from the *The Divafler 5000* (that got the first prize from the jury), a spotlight equipped with some sensors to detect people moving on the stage of a disco and to follow their movements, to *Insulting Watertap*, a tap that insults you if you consume too much water.

DISCUSSION AND FINAL REMARKS

The differences and similarities between the two events and the way they unfolded give us some hints about the organizational cultures of Fabriken and Connectivity Lab and more specifically about their approach towards opening production.

Both the events were organized following a Hackathon format. Hackathons are generally characterized by horizontal and self-organized patterns, intense collaboration between participants, sharing of tools and materials with the final aim of creating something. Hackathons can be performed as gatherings of people exploring alternative production modalities, but also as events used by start-ups, companies, venture capitalists as a way to locate new areas for innovation and funding. FH was somewhat positioned along the first line, being a first step to gather communities of makers in Malmö⁷. A shortcoming of FH was the quite homogeneous participation and the difficulties in involving other communities beyond hackers. In this sense, CLH was more successful in reaching a broader audience. CLH can be looked upon as a way of performing a culture of opening production which is closer to market perspective, where the Hackathon is cleaned up from the counter-culture elements and open and collaborative processes are understood as yet another source for commercially viable innovations⁸.

⁷ As one of the organizers told us in an interview, FH was “a way to start creating awareness of Fabriken in the city”.

⁸ As it emerged during an interview with one of the organizers, CLH’s main goal was to set up “a 42h inspirational and experimental event located in the borderland between the digital and the physical reality with challenges, talks, makers tables and live development at the site”. Another interview with the director of MEDEA confirmed this borderland dimension as a way to engage industry and show a tangible example of the expertise of MEDEA and Malmö University.

Our analysis of these two events raises some questions on how different cultures of opening production influence ideas on open organizational models.

The first issue is related to the notion of accountability and how the staging and unfolding of the same event, the Hackathon, can be radically different due to the visions and expectations embraced by the organizers and the audience. What kind of accountability and what kind of social dynamics are played out through the Hackathon? For some people the Hackathon carries critical social and political stances. How are values such as sharing, freedom and openness performed within a Hackathon if the market is one of the faculties to account for? And how does this influence its performance?

The second issue is strictly related to the previous one, as different accountabilities also claim for different expectations towards what has to be produced during a Hackathon. In both events it is possible to see a tension between keeping the process open for serendipity and fluid collaboration and the need of some guidance and framing in order to drive collaborative processes towards the expected results. Is it possible to rely only on pure self-organizing mechanisms? On the other hand, what is the price to pay in terms of losing potential openness when clear organizational mechanisms are put at play in advance?

The third issue is related to the expected and the actual participation to these events. Both of them aimed at gathering diverse communities, but in the end they had limited and homogenous participation (mostly hackers at FH and students at CLH). What strategies and tactics can be used to engage a wider set of stakeholders?

These questions are something that will be interesting to look more closely at in a further work.

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