

ccMixer: A study of motivations and emergent creative practices that results from open sharing and remixing

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Introduction:

Open licensing, and the resulting reuse of content, has been argued to be the catalyst for new forms of amateur collaborative creativity and economic activity (Lessig, 2008). However, what motivates an individual to contribute precious time and personal effort to openly share and contribute content in a community without expectation of return? Why do these individuals allow relative strangers to manipulate and reuse their painstakingly created works? How do the open sharing and the reuse of content impact collaborative and creative work practices? These are some of the questions that are not well addressed by prior literature and motivate my research work. Broadly speaking, I am interested in the phenomenon of participation, sharing, and apparently altruistic behavior taking place on the Internet today. Increasingly, users are willing to openly share and contribute their time, effort and even personal information in online spaces - however, there is inadequate explanation for why people openly share, reuse and collaborate with each other. In this reflection, I present a summary of my findings from an ongoing research project analyzing ccMixer, an online community that revolves around the open sharing and reuse of contributed content.

ccMixer is an online music remixing community where users freely share their music creations, licensed under Creative Commons. Based on this open sharing the community revolves around the activity of reusing this open content to create derivative works - more commonly referred to as 'remixes'. The ccMixer community, launched by the Creative Commons as a demonstration project, highlights one of the ideals of Free Culture - that of being able to freely distribute and reuse openly shared content. What has emerged within ccMixer is a vibrant and energetic community of individuals who are actively collaborating with each other, reusing each other's works, and creating 'remixes'. In this paper, I will present preliminary findings from interviews with ccMixer members about their motivations and creative practices. These findings, have the potential to contribute and engage in the broader discussion about the motivations for openly sharing and reusing content. Additionally, the findings also highlight the impact that open sharing and reuse has on creative and collaborative practices amongst individuals on the Internet.

Methodology:

I interviewed a total of 16 ccMixer members (response rate of 59%) from a list of core users identified based on their level of participation in the community. The rationale for speaking to the core users is that they drive most of the contributions

and remixing activity in the community. Additionally, a snowball sampling method was adopted - I asked each interview subject to recommend other ccMixer members that would be relevant to interview for my research project. The interviews followed a semi-structured format and the questions asked revolved around the interviewees' motivations to contribute, share and reuse openly licensed creative content in ccMixer. The interview subjects also broached on the subject of emergent collaborative and creative practices that emerged from this open sharing and licensing of content.

Findings:

Based on the interviews with the 16 ccMixer members, I report preliminary findings that are broadly categorized into two broad themes: the motivations for open sharing and reuse; and the resulting creative and collaborative practices that emerge out of such a "free culture".

1) Motivations to openly share and reuse content:

In general, almost all the interview subjects spoken to revealed that their rationale for contributing openly licensed content and the resulting efforts with "remixing" these shared samples were manifold. Listed below is a summary of reasons why the interviewed ccMixer users were willing to contribute personal time, effort in sharing their samples and remixes with relative strangers in the community.

i) This is not altruism!

One perception of why individuals adopt open licensing is that these individuals are motivated by a desire to contribute to the common good, with no real expectation of benefits to themselves. In general, almost all the interview subjects were quick to dismiss this perception. They emphasized, in the interviews, that the willingness to openly share their work should not be misconstrued as altruism. Interview subject P15 best articulates this view in the following quote:

"Ultimately all activity you see on the site comes down to personal gratification or the hope to receive it, that is at the core of all self expression ... Anyone giving away a sample is hoping to see it used. Anyone posting a remix is hoping to get it heard, reviewed, commented on, etc. people behave altruistically because they hope to get something in return. It may be their own satisfaction in giving, or it may be something that has to come from someone else - getting their own work remixed, getting comments on their work in exchange for having commented on the work of another, etc. " (Email Interview with P15)

Another interview subject, P14, says that he gets more in return by openly sharing his creative work:

'In return I get a lot of things: 1) I learn something about how that mix was put together both musically and technically, 2) I'll derive some pleasure out of hearing it, 3) I'll build or strengthen the bond I have with the other artist. Creating and building those bonds is the most valuable part of the mixing community concept, but I'd say that the really deep bonds are built out of public view. " (Email interview with P14)

While understandably, individuals should not be disadvantaged by their open sharing of samples and remixes, I asked the interview subjects to be more specific about why they are willing to share work that took up a lot of their free time to produce. None of the interview subjects were professional musicians or were making money off their contributions. Based on their responses, I have categorized the specific reasons for openly sharing on ccMixer into the following topics:

ii) Audience-ship

In general, a fundamental reason for being a musician, for creating and playing music, is so that the work can find an audience. According to interview subject P1;

"the single biggest killer of any musician is when there is no audience ... that's how people stop making music ..." (Interview with P1)

This reasoning applies to interview subject P9 as well. P9 contributes acapella samples, or vocal tracks, to ccMixer, and does very little of her own remixing. According to her, getting feedback on her work validates the fact that her vocals have been listened to;

"I contribute for a sense that people are listening to my work. There is a certain satisfaction and validation with the recommend and review portion of the site." (interview with P16)

Besides the useful critiques from an audience of ccMixer members, contributing to the site also allows one's music to be more broadly distributed and find different audiences. This view is corroborated by interview subjects P2 and P10 who highlight that ccMixer draws a variety of audiences in the following quotes:

" ... while the remixers are the most actively participating group (on ccMixer), the biggest group are the casual listeners ... there are people that are filling up iPods with music but don't post to the forums forum or even have an account ... by uploading your work on to ccMixer, people will at least check out your music if nothing else" (interview with P10)

" by contributing my music to ccMixer, I get played on Internet radio stations, featured on animations ... I am able to get widespread distribution of my music at the sacrifice of economic benefit to myself." (interview with P2)

iii) Love of music/ passion for the art of remixing:

In general, all the interview subjects were aged 35yrs old and up, and tended to have day jobs and a strong affinity towards creating music. The demographic of ccMixer is somewhat surprising as it usurps our expectations that the sharing and remix of music would appeal towards a more youthful population. Unlike other youth oriented remixing sites, where there is greater expectation of monetization, the ccMixer members are less driven by the desire to be discovered by the music industry or by an audience. Rather, a common reason for being an active contributor and remixer in the ccMixer community was often related to a strong love for the art of remixing and an admiration for the skills required to create these remixes. According to interview subject P10;

"I do it (share and remix) for the love of music ... no expectation of money. That's the heart and soul of what ccMixer is about."
(Interview with P10)

Likewise, interview subject P12 has "a strong love for the art". However, he sees that his contributions to ccMixer has made him "strive to be better ... to step up my (his) game ... there is a strong sense of community with the art and the level and quality of the art in ccMixer." (Interview with P12)

iv) The Community:

More than a few individuals highlighted during the interviews that one reason why they remain active contributors on ccMixer is the quality of interaction, community spirit and mentorship that they experienced. In fact, users like interview subject P13 have arrived at ccMixer after being members at other sites that promote remixing as well. In P13's view,

" the quality that's missing in those other (social remixing) sites is something that keeps me coming back to ccMixer. This is because the community goes out of its way to be nice to each other. The non-commercial nature and the older inside crowd that sets the tone in ccMixer and sets it apart from the other sites. The age group seems to be a very significant factor. If ccMixer were a 20-something crowd, it would be a very different place." (interview with P11).

Additionally, the ccMixer community has been highlighted by interview subjects as instrumental in providing mentorship and advice about improving the remixing skills of newcomers. According to interview subject P7,

"What I love about ccMixer is the willingness of people to share in a constructive way how they do what they do ... everyone has talents (sic) ... I learned an enormous amount through the criticisms and helpfulness of the members, especially in their reviews of my uploads

... I stumbled across the site (ccMixer) wanting to explore the idea of sampling, and over the course of participation I learnt a lot. I am a lot happier with the production values of my uploads now." (interview with P7)

2) Emergent collaborative and creative practices resulting from open sharing and reuse

While the interviewees talked about their reasons for contributing and remixing each others work, what was also revealed, in the course of the interview, were some of the emergent practices and conventions that resulted from the open sharing and reuse. It is important to highlight these practices as they illustrate how open licensing regimes may be applied and incorporated into the existing routines of a community. Another reason why it is imperative to study the actual emergent practices of ccMixer is that it provides us with a compass for understanding the dynamics of cultural production "in the wild". If anything, this study will confirm or disprove some of the claims about the resulting changes that Free Culture will bring to creativity and innovation. In the interest of brevity, and for the purposes of this workshop, I shall elaborate on only one of the several conventions and practices that emerged from the open sharing and reuse in ccMixer.

i) The importance of Social Currencies:

A surprising finding from the interviews was that there were activities and practices that were valued beyond the contribution of content and the remixing of that content. To be sure, remixing is the central focus of the community, as articulated by interview subject P1;

"if currency is the measure of wealth and value and whatever, then (the currency in ccMixer) it's the number of times your work gets remixed and it's very obvious ..." (Interview with P1)

To the ccMixer members, remixing is such an important and integral activity in the community, the metaphor of conversations is often used when discussing it. As illustrated by interview subject P11 who says,

"remixing someone is a huge deal .. you are indicating to that person that you have not only listened to his music, you are also taking his artistic statement and doing something creative with it. It's almost like a conversation ... a remix conversation where you continue to build on and elaborate someone else's ideas." (Interview with P11)

However, interview subjects also acknowledge that remixing is not the only activity that is valued in the community. According to P1,

".. other indicators of value are number of recommendations, number of reviews ... to me the reviews are like number of friends, they are not really reviews ... " (Interview with P1)

It turns out that, according to several interview subjects, the activity of providing reviews is just as important in demonstrating membership in the community, establishing social and functional relationships with others and also providing mentorship/advice to others. Interview subject P12 succinctly articulates why reviewing is an important social currency on ccMixer:

"if you don't comment on (review) the works of others, people won't comment on you ... just like if you don't remix then people won't remix you (interview with P12)

The act of reviewing someone else's work and commenting on it highlights that you are taking the time to listen their work - a sense of active audience-ship. This idea is reinforced by interview subject P7 who says;

"the currency in ccMixer is not only remixing ... you can certainly sit there and remix, but being an active listener is extremely important! ... if all you do is upload, and don't review anything ... let's say you've uploaded 10 pells (acapella tracks) and 50 remixes ... if you don't bother to review ... after an initial flurry of attention, you will be forgotten. Feedback is highly valued in ccMixer." (interview with P7)

Besides demonstrating interest and audience-ship, reviews are also a way to "pay forward" the benefits that one has received from participating in ccMixer. More than a couple of interview subjects highlighted the importance of a reviewing ratio - i.e. that the interview subjects made sure that they gave out more reviews than they received. The number of reviews one gives or has received from others is conspicuously tracked and displayed on one's profile. This act of ensuring a high reviewing ratio is shown in the following 2 quotes by interview subjects P14 & P9;

"I tried to make sure that the reviews I leave are more than the reviews I receive. I make it a point to make sure I listen to every (newly uploaded) song ... I think in all I've left 700 reviews and have been reviewed 640 times" (interview with P14)

"I make it a point to give feedback to 3-4 others ... people remember you for that ... and chances are, they are going to remix you if you have left a review for them." (interview with P9)

Additionally, the act of reviewing is a way to mentor and ensure that newcomers to the website get the appropriate attention for the community. This is related to the idea that the role of audience-ship is very important to the activity of sharing and remixing in ccMixer. Subject P7 highlights that;

"one of the things that's a core value (in ccMixer) is to keep the memory of someone new to the site ... I love seeing who's new to the site, and I try to go and scan their uploads ... and I try to make a big deal out of them so that they don't get overlooked. I hate to see talent find utter lack of response from the site." (Interview with P7)

Conclusion:

Through this reflection and report of preliminary findings from my project, I hope to emphasize the need for more contextual and theoretically grounded studies of how open licensing and “free culture” tangibly impacts our behaviors and interactions with each other. The present discussion of free culture tends to take place on the level of claims, especially with regards to how open licensing will lead to new forms of creativity and innovation. However, what exactly do these new forms of creativity and innovation look like? Do they conform to or defy our expectations of what the behaviors and practices free culture will look like?

Key challenges for the workshop

1) Need for theory

While there has been much existing and prior work that has been conducted to explain the motivations for users to openly share and contribute, this early research has tended to be too application- and domain-specific. For instance, two common threads of research in the areas looks at participation in wikis (Bryant, Forte & Bruckman, 2005) and Open Source Software development (Roberts, Han & Slaughter, 2006). Less attention has been paid to how the resulting behaviors from open sharing and reuse impact different domains of use and how these behaviors resemble or differ between different communities. There is presently a lack of meaningful discussion about how to compare across the use of open licensing, and the subsequent reuse of content, across different contexts. Additionally, technical platforms and systems that enable these forms of social production are adopted and abandoned at a rate that makes it difficult to scientifically study them with an established framework. What is needed is a generalized understanding, in terms of theories or design principles that can provide practical advice to designers, developers, and managers of systems that encourage open participation, contribution, and elicits sharing from the users.

2) Move away from rational actor models of explaining human behavior

Existing discussions of motivations focus on explanations that tend to be goal-oriented and narrowly self-interested. For instance, Wasko & Faraj’s (2000) study of participation in electronic communities of practice revealed that a basic motivation to contribute is the ability to gain returns for one's participation. The members of these online communities are motivated to contribute when they see that there is value in, or something to be gained from, their contributions – such as access to useful information and expertise or new insights that might help to refine one's thoughts. What these early studies fail to address is the fact that often users are motivated by and respond to a variety of incentives and motivations to collaborate and participate. As computer use becomes more collaborative and social, there are users who transcend narrow self-interest, and who participate for more “social” reasons - that “*I care what you think of me,*” or that “*I care about your*

enjoyment", or that "I am contributing because I think others expect me to". A more complete explanation of motivations for online participation needs to better take into account the context of the users, their goals, and their role as part of the system – a sociotechnical explanation (Ackerman, 2000).

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Author's Bio

I am a doctoral candidate at the School of Information, University of Michigan. Broadly, I am interested in studying the design and use of technology that enables amateurs and even professionals to collaborate with each other across organizational or geographic boundaries. This broad interest in collaborative technologies has led me to study large-scale scientific collaboratories, the use of blogs and social tagging in the classroom and the implementation of wikis in organizations.

Presently, I am working on my dissertation that focuses on participatory behavior in "open contribution systems" - online applications that encourage users to openly contribute and share content in a "public" networked environment. I am interested investigating what motivates individuals to contribute, share and collaborate with relative strangers in these systems. What drives individuals to contribute personal effort and time on open contribution systems such as Wikipedia? What makes the users of these systems collaborate with each other towards collective goals? In order to begin answering some of these questions, I employ a mixed methodological toolkit - combining social network analysis with ethnographic work to better understand the motivations and dynamics of the participatory behavior exhibited

by both the individual as well as the community of users as a whole. The findings generated by this research endeavor will inform interventions and design recommendations that help develop systems that encourage participation, cooperation and sharing.