

SXSW: Of Tech, Nerds, and New Media

March 15, 2010

It's the last day of our SXSW jaunt, and I thought I'd share some of the interesting bits of information and innovative ideas I've been hearing here.

I'm a big open-source advocate. There are those who suggest that open-source software is far clunkier than its commercially developed counterparts, and that might be true, but there are distinct benefits to the tech community and the Internet as a whole to use open-source software. There's a lower barrier to entry in writing code to make open-source technology better, and but there's an even greater benefit in having code that can be deployed anywhere.

At a panel I attended on Friday entitled "Selling Your Milk When the Cow is Free," which was meant to explore how companies can make a profit developing open-source software (and honestly didn't do a spectacular job of it), I learned about an open-source Twitter-like microblogging API called [StatusNet](#) [1]. While I didn't really care about how to sell a StatusNet hosting service, I explored some existing deployments of the API and found that it's being used overwhelmingly by Internet users in countries like China and Iran - places where governments traditionally clamp down on any speech they deem "subversive."

By its open-source nature, StatusNet can be deployed just about anyone with some technical savvy. Here's an example of how this sort of practice makes it possible for Internet users to provide each other with vital services. After the 2009 Iranian election, there was a mounting call for technically-minded Internet users to start their own Tor proxies. [Tor](#) [2] is a fantastic anonymity network that is also fantastically slow, but the more people who use it, the faster it gets. This enables Internet users in free countries to do a little bit to help create an anonymous network for oppressed peoples. StatusNet could be used in much the same way. Inevitably, a burgeoning StatusNet deployment could be compromised by an overzealous government - but if there's another deployment right around the corner hosted by any old Joe in any old country, there's always safe harbor.

I also had a lot of conversations about privacy. danah boyd's [keynote](#) [3] got the ball rolling for people to talk about how they manage their online privacy. Adam and I did a little location-enabled app [exposé](#) [4] the other day as they're the apps du jour at SXSW. Adam has been doing a lot of connecting with social networking gurus, who use these apps obsessively, while I've been talking more with nerdy developer sorts who are not as enthralled with the technology and its privacy implications. At a developer meet-up at the Salt Lick (a Texas BBQ powerhouse and vegetarian nightmare), I heard many developers say that they aren't using these applications at all because they are viewed as a "sacrifice" of privacy for negligible gain. These people are generally extremely concerned about their privacy being invaded by companies and governments. Meanwhile, CDT New Media Manager Adam Rosenberg, who's at SXSW with me, has been getting [a far different response](#) [5].

Now you can find just about anyone on Twitter. When the "next big thing" hits, you can bet it'll be the "next big thing" for everyone. Americans, it seems, are willing to compromise privacy just to be where everyone else is. It isn't necessarily a bad thing to want to be where your friends are online, but because we tend to collectively shift to the same social networks, there isn't as much incentive for companies to develop the privacy controls we want. This just means we have to push harder for our rights - and maybe consider that just because everyone is using a particular site doesn't mean that we have to as well.

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