

*From Publishing with Free Software to
Free Publishing*

Perro Tuerto

2019

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Last edition: October 7, 2019

This text is a blog entry from
Publishing is Coding: Change My Mind
www.perrotuerto.blog

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FROM PUBLISHING WITH FREE SOFTWARE TO FREE PUBLISHING

This blog is about “free publishing” but, what does that mean? The term “free” isn’t only problematic in English. Maybe more in other languages because of the confusion between “free as in beer” and “free as in speech.” But by itself the concept of freedom is so ambiguous than even in Philosophy we are very careful in its use. Even though it is a problem, I like that the term doesn’t have a clear definition—in the end, how free could we be if freedom is well defined?

Some years ago, when I started to work hand-in-hand with Programando Libreros and Hacklib, I realized that we weren’t just doing publishing with free software. We are doing free publishing. So I attempted to define it in a post but it doesn’t convince me anymore.

The term was floating around until December, 2018. At Contracorriente—yearly fanzine fair celebrated in Xalapa, Mexico—Hacklib and I were invited to give a talk about publishing and free software. Between all of us we made a poster of everything we talked about that day.

The poster was very helpful because in a simple Venn diagram we were able to distinguish several intersections

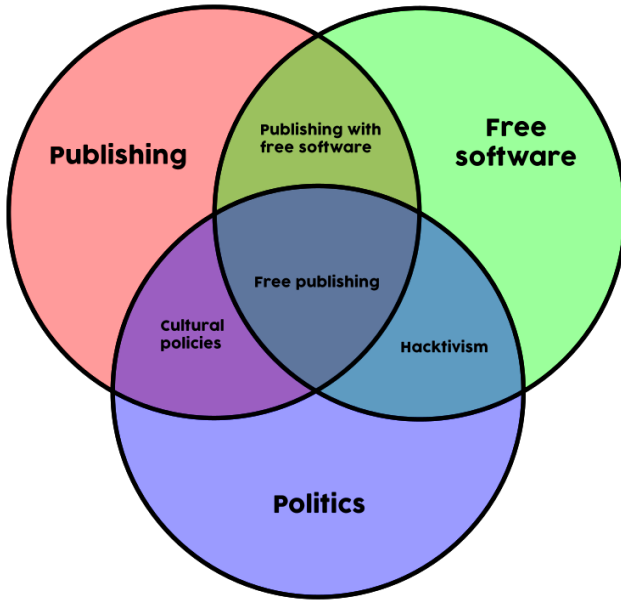


Poster made at Contracorriente, nice, isn't it?

of activities that involve our work.

So I'm not gonna define publishing, free software or politics—it is my fucking blog so I can write whatever I want xD and you can duckduckgo it without a satisfactory answer. As you can see, there are at least two very familiar intersections: cultural policies and hacktivism. I dunno how it is in your country, but in Mexico we have very strong cultural policies for publishing—or at least that is what publishers *think* and are comfortable with it, no matter that most of the time they go against open access and readers rights.

“Hacktivism” is a fuzzy term, but it could be clear if we realized that code as property is not the only way we can define it. Actually it is very problematic because property isn't a natural right, but one that is produced by our



Venn diagram of publishing, free software and politics.

societies and protected by our states—yeah, individuality isn't the foundation of rights and laws, but a construction of the self produced society. So, do I have to mention that property rights isn't as fair as we would like?

Between publishing and free software we get “publishing with free software.” What does that imply? It is the act of publishing using software that accomplishes the famous—infamous?—four freedoms. For people that

use software as a tool, this means that, first, we aren't forced to pay anything in order to use software. Second, we have access to the code and do whatever we want with it. Third—and for me the most important—we can be part of a community, instead of treated as a consumer.

It sounds great, doesn't it? But we have a little problem: the freedom only applies to software. As a publisher you can benefit from free software and that doesn't mean you have to free your work. Penguin Random House—the Google of publishing—one day could decide to use or Pandoc, saving tons of money and at the same time keep the monopoly of publishing.

Stallman saw the problem with manuals published by O'Reilly and he proposed the GNU Free Documentation License. But by doing so he trickily distinguished different kinds of works. It is interesting to see texts as functional works, matter of opinion or aesthetics but in the publishing industry nobody gives a fuck about that. The distinctions work great between writers and readers, but it doesn't problematize the fact that publishers are the ones who decide the path of almost all of our text-centered culture.

In my opinion, that's dangerous at least. So I prefer another tricky distinction. Big publishers and their mimetic branch—the so called “indie” publishing—only cares about two things: sales and reputation. They want to live *well* and get social recognition from the *good* books they publish. If one day software communities develop some desktop publishing or typesetting easy-to-use

and suitable for all their *professional* needs, we would see how “suddenly” the publishing industry embraces free software.

So, why don't we distinguish published works by their funding and sense of community? If what you publish has public funding—for your knowledge, in Mexico practically all publishing has this kind of funding—it would be fair to release the files and leave hard copies for sale: we already paid for that. This is a very common argument among supporters of open access in science, but we can go beyond that. No matter if the work relies on functionality, matter of opinion or aesthetics; whether its a scientific paper, a philosophy essay or a novel and it has public funding, we have already paid for access, come on!

You can still sell publications and go to Messe Frankfurt, Guadalajara International Book Fair or Beijing Book Fair: it is just doing business with the *bare minimum* of social and political awareness. Why do you want more money from us if we've already given it to you?—and you receive almost all of the profits, leaving the authors with just the satisfaction of seeing her work published...

The sense of community goes here. In a world where one of the main problems is artificial scarcity—paywalls instead of actual walls—we need to apply copyleft or, even better, copyleft licenses in our published works. They aren't the solution, but they are a support to maintain the freedom and the access in publishing.

As it goes, we need free tools but also free works. I already have the tools but lack the permission to publish

some books that I really like. I don't want that happen to you with my work. So we need a publishing ecosystem where we have access to all files of a particular edition—our “source code” and “binary files”—and also to the tools—the free software—so we can improve, as a community, the quality and the access of works and its required skills. Who doesn't want that?

With these political strains, free software tools and publishing as a way of living as a publisher, writer and reader, free publishing is a pathway. With Programando Libreros and Hacklib we use free software, we invest time in activism and we work in publishing: *we do free publishing, what about you?*

*From Publishing with Free Software to Free
Publishing* was composed on October 7,
2019. Document made with L^AT_EX.