

*Understanding Participation in Webmaker:  
Practices and Identities Spanning Communities*

**i. Context: “Creating a Generation of Webmakers”**

Mozilla, creator of the popular open-source Firefox browser, has recently decided to “go big in learning” (Surman, 2011), with a focus on promoting web literacies<sup>1</sup>. In talking about the new initiative, titled Mozilla Webmaker, leadership at the organization has made clear that they intend on doing so “in a Mozilla-like way, with a P2P pedagogy and a strong focus on making” (Surman, 2011).

Working off of an open source ethos that has built a strong pre-existing community that successfully supported development of Firefox and other products over the years, Mozilla is entering into this project by engaging, among others, a base of people identified with many of its ideals around open-source software. Indeed, it has positioned Webmaker as *both* a new product *and* a new community, seeing the two intertwined in the process of creating a movement around the Webmaker vision.

These individuals and groups, distributed across the globe, are bringing to life this vision of “peer to peer” pedagogy in local educational events and initiatives. In the process of doing so these individuals are both bringing to bear pre-existing identities and commitments to make sense of their participation in the new Webmaker community, and at the same time are extending these identities by engaging in new practices associated with education.

In this analysis, I share two cases of Mozillians (Mozilla affiliated volunteers) participating in Webmaker. In the first, an email introduction to the Webmaker listserv, I aim to show how existing identities are woven together to make sense of participation in the project. In the second, a Webmaker event put on by volunteer Mozillians, I show how the sorts of hybrid identities at play in the first case are enacted in practice, and how they shape how Webmaker as an initiative is experienced by others on the ground. Throughout, I hope to complicate how we understand the ways that participation, identity and membership play out in large scale collectives.

**ii. Participant Identities: “I am a Mozilla Rep”**

In drawing from the existing Mozilla volunteer community as it develops, Webmaker is actively engaging one existing volunteer program in particular, Mozilla Reps. The Mozilla Reps program, according to the group’s website, aims to “support volunteer Mozillians who

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<sup>1</sup> As part of the initiative, Mozilla has engaged in an iterative public process to define what it means by “web literacies”. See, for example: <http://dougbelshaw.com/blog/2012/10/26/mozilla-web-literacies-v0-9-mozweblit/>

want to become official representatives of Mozilla in their region/locale.” (reps.mozilla.org, n.d.). It might be easy to presume that these individuals are simply the classic “super user” within the broader Mozilla community, but a look at the way one REMO (as they’re called) introduces himself to the Mozilla Webmaker listserv shortly after its inception reveals a more complicated picture from the perspective of identity and membership.

Galaxy, a REMO from Bangalore, India, posted to the listserv shortly after it was created in an “Introduce Yourself” thread. In the excerpt below, he uses numerous “I” statements that can be understood from an identity perspective:

- Who are you and where do you live?

I am Galaxy, and I live in Bangalore, India (The Silicon Valley of India!). I am a software developer (It is just 6 months now, I am done with my academics!). I love open source and open source products. I am a Mozilla Rep and I love conducting events and promoting open source awareness among people. I have been contributing to several projects like DemoParty, Firefox Flicks, Software Freedom Day and now Webmaker.

In this paragraph, Galaxy presents a number of interconnected identities. We can notice that he first establishes his identity as a technology professional, stating that he lives in “The Silicon Valley of India!” and is a software developer. Following that, he states his commitment to open source software. Only after this does he mention his affiliation with Mozilla as part of the Reps program. And in a way that ties many of these commitments together, he closes the introduction by collectively listing participation in projects affiliated with Mozilla (Firefox Flicks, Webmaker) as well as ones that are associated with the free software/open source movement (Software Freedom Day) and technology development (Demoparty) more generally.

While I don’t believe that the order in which he wrote his email necessarily indicates the *primacy* of any identity, the email shows how Galaxy has commitments to numerous identities and communities. Alternatively, it could be postulated that he is maintaining a single identity in which several commitments (software development, open source culture, Mozilla, Webmaker) are interwoven as part and parcel of a coherent self-narrative he sees as relevant to share publicly within the context of the Webmaker listserv.

### **iii. MozFest Pune: Appropriating Webmaker within Existing Fan Practices**

In the second case, I briefly share an event that evidences how the multiple interwoven commitments on display above are enacted within the context of participation in Webmaker.

A key engagement strategy of the Webmaker initiative in the Summer of 2012 was to encourage people around the world to host “Summer Code Party” events, where people are taught webmaking practices, and were encouraged to use emerging software such as Thimble, Web X-Ray Goggles and Popcorn Maker being developed by the initiative. In a post to the

Webmaker listserv in July 2012, a REMO named Faisal from Pune, India, shared documentation of one such “MozParty” event that he and other REMO’s ran. Appendix A includes the full text of the email, a condensed schedule of events appears below.

	Activity
1	Introduction to Speakers
2	Mozilla Summer Code Party
3	Rock with Firefox HandsOn
5	We want Urdu Firefox
6	Break for Lunch
7	Hands-On URDU Localization
8	Mozilla, FOSS and Awesome Softwares for NewBies
9	Fennec - Android
10	Wear X ray Goggles and Play with Thimble(Hands On)
11	Joomla: New Generation CMS
12	Quiz and rewards and How to Get involved with Mozilla

Table 1 – The activities outlined in the MozParty Pune Documentation Email.

The most notable aspect of the event is how the schedule of activities reflects a similar range of commitments that were observed in the “introduce yourself” email Galaxy posted to the listserv. Of ten core activities on the schedule (excluding the event introduction and lunch break), only two explicitly mentioned ideas or tools explicitly associated with the Webmaker Initiative (“Mozilla Summer Code Party”, “Wear X-Ray Goggles and Play with Thimble”). The email details how in the first activity “[Sayak] explained about webmaker tools like thimble, X-ray goggles and popcorn”, and later in the afternoon “Participants had created very beautiful and creative Remixes” with the aforementioned tools, engaging in the digital production practices central to Webmaker.

Other activities were related to Mozilla tools and its broader mission (#’s 3,4,7,8,9,12). For example, in the portion titled “Rock on with Firefox Hands On” Faisal describes how he “took the session in my hand and started a Fascinating hands "Rock with Firefox". I explained how to use awesome features of Latest Firefox like personas, add-ons, private browsing.” This and other activities in this category displayed both enthusiasm for the use of Firefox (“Rock with Firefox”), practical how-to’s associated with understanding software features (“personas, add-ons, private browsing”) and positioning Mozilla within the open source movement (which occurred in the “Mozilla, FOSS and Awesome Softwares for NewBies” activity).

Finally, some activities aimed to expand awareness and capacity around free and open source software more generally (#’s 8 & 11). As mentioned above, the “Mozilla, FOSS and Awesome Softwares for NewBies” linked Mozilla to the broader open source movement and “explained the Mozilla story”, and additionally shared free and open source software that could be used by event participants. Similarly, the activity “Joomla: Next Generation CMS”, which is an open source content management system (CMS), described

“how to install and configure Joomla. He showed how to create a cool blog and website in just few clicks.”

A number of these activities that were not explicitly Webmaker “branded” certainly could be considered thematically connected to production of web content or tools (eg – activities relating to browser localization and content management systems), and I would imagine that the organizers of the Webmaker initiative would see these activities as supporting their mission of promoting web literacy and web making practices. At the same time, many of the activities did not involve any sort of digital production on the web and focused more on usage of Firefox, the Mozilla community, and open source culture, and are representative of the fact that the Mozilla Reps running the event saw Webmaker as a project that had room for all of the above. In fact, nothing in the email indicates that the distinctions I’m making here were present in their minds. In this way, I see the event as one where participants bridged multiple affinity spaces in a seamless manner.

#### **iv. Conclusion: Problematizing the Boundaries of and Identities within Affinity Spaces**

These complementary cases illustrate that participation in the Webmaker initiative is mediated and made sense of within the context of existing identities, practices and communities related to Mozilla, the free and open source software movement, and software-oriented professionals. Webmaker tools and branding were appropriated within the context of these pre-existing commitments, and in turn, those pre-existing commitments shaped the unfolding of the Webmaker initiative and what is considered appropriate engagement within that project.

To me, this raises questions about the nature of the definitions of and boundaries between affinity spaces, as well as our conceptualizations of identity and membership.

In terms of definitions and boundaries of affinity spaces, should we consider the participation of these individuals within the broader affinity space of free software? Is Mozilla understood as within that space, or apart from it? Are Galaxy and Faisal separately members of the Webmaker community, simultaneously participating in the REMO community? Such blurring of boundaries might push us to refine our theories of how these communities and spaces operate, for me making the case that understanding them in terms of flows within and among inter-linked networks is a productive lens for investigation.

With regards to identity and membership, the case here raises two important questions. As alluded to at the conclusion of section ii, one relates to whether we should best understand participation here in terms of multiple identities or in terms of a singular identity. Are participants leveraging a priori identities in the context of forging a new one associated with Webmaker? Or is there simply one identity at play the whole time, one comprised of linked and interwoven practices that are shifting and in the process extending that identity? What are the implications for either of those stances on a theoretical and practical level? The second question concerns membership, namely, how does the process of becoming a member of a community effect the unfolding of that community and its constituent

practices? Just as Devane (2012) explored how becoming a member of an affinity space has profound implications for what that individual learns, I argue that the cases I shared here imply that the process of becoming a member has important implications for a broader affinity space.

All of these questions have similar themes and concerns that underlie them: they point to the larger need to understand the borderlands between affinity spaces, the flows of histories into and out of them, and effects these have at both the individual and collective levels.

## References

Devane, B. (2012). Whither Membership? Identity and Social Learning in Affinity Spaces. In E. R. Hayes & S. Duncan (Eds.), *Learning in Video Game Affinity Spaces* (Vol. i). New York, Peter Lang.

Surman, M. (2011, September 30). Making Mozilla Big in Learning. Retrieved from: <http://commonsense.wordpress.com/2011/09/30/going-big-in-learning/>

Mozilla Reps (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://reps.mozilla.org/>

## Appendix A – Post to Webmaker Listserv about MozParty Pune

\*MozFestPune at Allana Institute of Management Sciences Pune Maharashtra India

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Date and Time : Saturday 7 July 2012 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM

Venue : Qwerty Lab ,AIMS, Azam Campus Pune Event

Organizer : Faisal Aziz

Sponsored by: Mozilla and Allana Institute of Management Sciences,Pune

\*Event Brief:\*

Hi Fellas, I am Faisal Aziz REMO from Pune, On 7 July 2012 we had a great event here at Allana Institute of Management Sciences Pune India. We celebrated it as Mozilla Festival Pune(MozFestPune).Event has a number of educative and interactive activities. With around 80-100 participants and with a cool team of remos from Pune,we organized it as one of the rocking events of Pune.We did interactive quizzes,handson and presentations. We had participants from other colleges also.

A well said quote "First Impression is the Last impression" ,yeah i am talking about one of the very awesome showcases of the event. MozFestTeam had created two giant Mozilla Firefox Logo and Mozilla Summer Code party logo in the college hub. The logos are created with India's traditional "Rangoli" colors. The logos are created to spread awareness about Mozilla and Its Mission.

Event had started with the introduction of Remos by Sara Khan, she introduced the speakers to the crowd. We conducted following activities throughout the day.

\*•Mozilla Summer Code Party:\*

The session handed over to Sayak, Sayak made the audience familiar with summer code party. He explained about webmaker tools like thimble, X-ray goggles and popcorn.

\*•Rock with Firefox HandsOn\*

After Sayak's session, I took the session in my hand and started a Fascinating hands "Rock with Firefox". I explained how to use awesome features of Latest Firefox like personas, addons, private browsing.

\*•We want URDU Firefox:\*

After me Rajesh Ranjan and Aman got the crowd for localization sprint. They both showed about localization process. They motivated participants to come forward URDU Firefox Localization. We got a team for localization of Urdu language. Meanwhile quizzes were asked from participants, this excited the participants and made the event more interactive.

\*Lunch Session:\*

All of the attendees enjoyed the delicious food and got their energy back for some more Mozilla Action.

\*•Hands-On URDU Localization:\*

Rajesh and Aman took a very interactive hands-on on how to localize Firefox. They explained about POOTLE tools and how to set your machine for your regional language. They guide attendees to translate in URDU language.

\*•Mozilla, FOSS and Awesome Softwares for NewBies..\*

Ankit Gadgil in his session beautifully explained the Mozilla story and Awesome Foss Softwares available in market like Latex. Participants enjoyed his session.

\*•Fennec:\*

We got Soumya Deb(Debloper), he got the crowd's attention and introduces the all new Fennec browser for android. He list out some of the exciting features of Fennec to audience.

\*•Wear X-Ray Goggles and Play With Thimble Hands-on:\*

Party Time, Summer Code party started by Sayak and Me. Sayak and me described the new tools of web maker to audiences, Participants learned how to use X-ray, Thimble and popcorn. Participants had created very beautiful and creative Remixes. we also had a competition for Best Remix, we declared three best remixes as winner and they got Firefox t-shirts and other swags. Participants loved the tools and experiments.

\*•Joomla:-New generation CMS:\*

Saurabh shah gave us his time from his busy schedule. He showed audience how to install and configure Joomla. He showed how to create a cool blog and website in just few clicks.Participants enjoyed he Hands On.

\*Quizes and How to Get Involved:\*

Farhanaaz and Sara Khan conducted a very informative quiz for participants. Participants enjoyed the quiz and enhanced their knowledge. Last but not least I explained how to get involved with Mozilla. We got a number of student representatives from Allana Inst of mgmt Sciences who pledged to contribute in Mozilla. At end of the event participants were full of Mozilla Spirit, enthusiasm and zeal for learning more about Mozilla Community and spreading the words about Mozilla and Its Mission. They left with lots of good memories, fun and knowledge.

\*Event Schedule:\* [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QHddv6I3kYYsyUOw\\_6-bwJ01lJAubwSkhRKSikY6SDE/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QHddv6I3kYYsyUOw_6-bwJ01lJAubwSkhRKSikY6SDE/edit)

\* Event links:\* Twitter Hashtag :#mozfestpune

Facebook Group:<https://www.facebook.com/events/313778335373733/?ref=ts> \*

\* \* Presentations:\*

\*Rajesh Ranjan\* : <http://kramashah.blogspot.in/2012/07/blog-post.html>

\*Soumya Deb\*:<http://code.debs.io/talks/FirefoxMobile/#>

\*Faisal Aziz:\*\*<http://www.slideshare.net/faisalazizniit/rock-your-firefox>

<http://www.slideshare.net/faisalazizniit/rock-your-firefox>

\*Sayak:\*[http://www.slideshare.net/sayak\\_sarkar/mozfest-pune](http://www.slideshare.net/sayak_sarkar/mozfest-pune)

\*Ankit Gadgil:\*\*<http://www.slideshare.net/ankitgadgil/the-mozilla-story>\*  
\*Sourabh Shah:\*

\*Video Links:\*

A Mozilla Story [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmk43\\_2dtn0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmk43_2dtn0)

Personas: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBCAmHWQbN8>

Gary Korvacs Tracking the trackers: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f\\_f5wNw-2c0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_f5wNw-2c0)

\* Pictures: At Flickr\*

<http://www.flickr.com/x/t/0091009/photos/80098219@N07/sets/72157630466737858/>

\*BlogPost:\* <http://blog.thecyberspark.com/> <http://www.thecyberspark.com/?p=6>

<http://kramashah.blogspot.in/2012/07/blog-post.html>

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\*Faisal Aziz\* [<https://reps.mozilla.org/u/FaisalAziz/>](https://reps.mozilla.org/u/FaisalAziz/)

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Webmaker mailing list

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