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OpenUK launches The Open Manifesto

Three asks of the new government to support open-source technology to boost economy

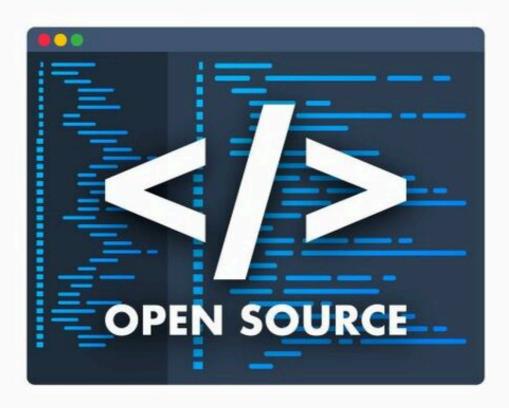**Penny Horwood**
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The manifesto launched last week at an event at Kings College, London and brought together a host of speakers including economist and journalist Will Hutton and Neil Lawrence, Deepmind Professor of Machine Learning at Cambridge University and author.

Last week, OpenUK launched it's new report, State of Open: The UK in 2024, Phase 2: 'The Open Manifesto'.

The report has been timed to coincide with the election of a new government, and centres on three asks for the new government to best support open technology and so empower it to help shake the economy out of its current malaise.

Amanda Brock, OpenUK CEO commented:

"The Open Manifesto is a rallying cry to develop skills that will enable jobs in our left-behind rural communities. It's also a call to seize our late-mover advantage in the public sector, to build the next generation of open-source skills and management across the UK public sector. Only by doing this will the digital infrastructure we all rely on today be allowed to flourish. This will both revolutionise the UK's public services and bolster our already strong homegrown community."

Amanda Brock

"Finally, The Open Manifesto report is a reminder that there is no AI future in the UK without it having an open heart. The UK could be the next Silicon Valley – if our new leaders unlock this potential."

Skills

The first ask concerns skills. OpenUK thinks that the new government should support the development of open-source skills across the UK to create jobs that will fill the skills gap, bring jobs to the rural economy and stem migration. .

Dr Jennifer Barth, OpenUK Chief Research Officer, using data mined from the 3.6 million GitHub accounts registered in the UK, introduced some of the key findings of the report relating to skills. One finding of note was the potential for open-source skills based in all sorts of areas of the country that are typically overlooked in discussions about technology, to attract international employers seeking talent.

Another interesting statistic is that, whilst the UK is not home to the highest number of GitHub accounts (eclipsed as we are by the US and India) when the figures are cut per capita, the UK has the highest proportion of contributors in the population – around 5% of the total population.

Public sector

OpenUK's second big ask is to build the next generation of public sector open-source engagement, using the UK's late mover advantage to leapfrog the Open Source Program Offices of other countries such as France. This was the topic of a keynote delivered by the economist and author Will Hutton.

Central to Hutton' analysis (and contained within his new book, *This Time, No Mistakes*) is what could have been. The UK *could* have been populated with dynamic tech companies but those companies have mainly ended up in America, attracted by a business and financial climate more agreeable to scaling businesses.

So what's gone wrong? According to Hutton, it's not that capitalism itself in inherently flawed, but when left to its own devices it benefits fewer and fewer people.

"Capitalism is organised around individualism," he explained. "It's organised around the view that individuals, companies, consumers, workers, and free markets will self-organise for the best outcomes."

The question then arises – best outcomes for who? And that's the problem. Unchecked capitalism has created power imbalances, inequality and instability.

"The less you superintend capitalism, with regulation and management guardrails and institutions that actually represent public purpose, it degrades, it goes rogue."

So what do we do? And how does open source fit the narrative?

"We have to reassert our core values of fellowship and mutuality," argues Hutton. "The sweet spot of capitalism is a blend individual agency and ambition, but also to deliver that with a sense of fellowship, a sense of the' we' as an essential corrective. Those two philosophies brought together represents the sweet spot.

"Most founders of digital tech companies team recognise that they have a shared purpose. They commit to a purpose to make the world better with the technology at hand and, they're going to lean into open-source, because of course, you can't do open-source without that sense of fellowship."

Hutton also laid out just how unfriendly an environment the UK is for tech entrepreneurs. He would like to see reforms to pension funds which currently have only 2% of their overall value invested in UK firms. This represents a flight from risk and an ossification of the once mighty UK stock market which now casts a pall across any tech start-up or scale-up because there is simply no market for venture debt and they can't raise the funds they need.

AI

The third area of OpenUK's manifesto is AI openness. The organisation makes the case that AI algorithms should be open to bring trust through transparency and enable the economy through innovation using AI to its full potential.

This was the subject of the keynote delivered by Professor Neil Lawrence, author of *The Atomic Human*, and Deepmind Professor of ML at Cambridge University. Lawrence framed what is arguably the key challenge of the AI era – the asymmetry of knowledge.

Where asymmetry of knowledge historically existed, going right back to the first scribes, responsibility grew to accompany the power. When lawyers, accountants and doctors for example make decisions about us they have obligations associated with their profession. The same does not apply in technology.

"We've constructed a world where the people who control the modern information infrastructure no longer have the responsibilities that go along with construction," he said. "Software engineers are not burdened by the responsibilities that lawyers, accountants, civil administrators are, they're not burdened by these additional moral duties that we impose on society."

According to Lawrence, the three principal pillars of the OpenUK manifesto are part of the fix for this asymmetry, but the invisibility - what Amanda Brock, CEO of OpenUK refers to as the submarine-like nature of open source, powering the digital economy – is a problem.

"The problem we're facing at the moment is that we [the open-source community] are an unpriced externality. We seem to be free. There doesn't seem to be any investment in us just like the you don't have to invest in the atmosphere. You can suck it up and blow out carbon dioxide and no one charges you. You can suck up the open-source community and blow it out.

"You're not even mentioned by those tech CEOs when they're all celebrating the great achievements of their companies which are all utterly founded on open-source software. We have to change that way of thinking within the people who are making those decisions. And if we do that, everything else will follow.

"You just have to stick to what you're trying to achieve which is building software to solve the problems you're interested in. And we're all working together to construct a foundation on which the sort of society Will Hutton was talking about can be constructed."

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