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Exploring corporate boundaries in the collaborative creation of open source software

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Open source software is a digital artifact that individuals and corporations collaboratively develop. Open source started as a way for individual developers to "scratch their own itch" by building and fixing software that they used (Raymond, 2001). As open source has matured, corporations have become participants, and through this participation, open source has evolved into a more organized, corporate-driven activity (Germonprez et al., 2018) where individuals, as well as corporations, contribute to large, critically important projects such as the Linux kernel. Today, 99% of corporations use open source in their software development (Black Duck, 2020). Further, to take advantage of open source, corporations have started forming open source communities (Germonprez et al., 2013). In doing so, these corporate open source communities produce software that every member corporation can use, modify, enhance, and monetize.

In creating open source software, tensions arise for corporations on deciding what features to contribute to open source that everyone can use and what features to keep proprietary to remain competitive (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008). This research aims to explore how corporations manage boundaries in their engagement with open source communities to decide when to collaborate and when to compete. To understand this phenomenon of collaboration and competition in open source, our research will use boundary work (Langley et al., 2019) as a framework to explore the purposeful action and strategies corporations take to manage collaboration and competition. As open source software has become a de facto part of corporate software development, knowing how corporations participate with each other in these open communities is vital to know where the future of software development work is headed.

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