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Governance in Peer Production Communities: the Case of Debian Project Leader Elections

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to explore the Debian Project, which is a peer production organization, and to answer the main research question of what topics were discussed in Project Leader candidates' program statements.

One of the organizational solutions, voting for the Project Leader, was subjected to detailed analysis. According to the usual practice, candidates for the leadership position each publish a program declaration. The study collected all such declarations from 1999–2020 and analyzed them using quantitative text analysis methods. As a result, it was possible to define the most important topics appearing in the declarations, and to track changes in their proportions over time. It was found that management has always been an important topic for candidates. In turn, analysis using Structural Topic Modeling showed at a detailed level which sub-topics related to management were discussed, and how their share changed over time.

Keywords: text mining, virtual community, quantitative approach, management practices, FLOSS (free/libre and open source software), commons-based peer production

Introduction

In the literature on management, including sociology of management, there are numerous publications on peer production (see Czetwertyński 2016; McMahon, Johnson, & Hecht 2017). Peer production is defined as "a way of producing goods and services that relies entirely on self-organizing, egalitarian communities of individuals who come together voluntarily to produce a shared outcome" (Tapscott & Williams 2008). Organizations of this type have existed since the 1980s and have been studied and described from various perspectives. Studies examine, among others, what models of such activity exist (Haythornthwaite 2009) and how can they be managed (Kostakis, Niaros, & Giotitsas 2015; Ziolkowski, Miscione, & Schwabe 2020). Due to the fact that this type of business model has been functioning for about 40 years, some organizations implementing it have existed long enough to deem them as mature.

One such organization is the Debian Project,[1] which was established in 1993. It has been the subject of many studies (cf. E.G. Coleman, 2005; Gerlach, Wu, Cunningham, & Young, 2016) in which it is described, for example, from the perspective of existing institutions (Mateos-Garcia & Steinmueller 2008) or the approach of community to management

[1] Hereinafter, the term "project" is used interchangeably with the term "organization."

(Sadowski, Sadowski-Rasters, & Duysters 2008). This text presents a detailed analysis of one organizational solution, which is the annual election of the Debian Project Leader (DPL). Since the first DPL elections, it has become accepted practice for candidates to publish, either on the project website or on the mailing list, a declaration known as the "platform," in which they describe their motivations, goals and plans for the leadership role. Referring to the concept of organizational culture in terms of Schein (2004), it can be said that these platforms are a visible artifact of organizational culture.

By 2020, elections had been held 21 times. The goal of this article is to answer the main research question of what topics were covered by leader candidates in their platforms. In addition, 2 specific questions were formulated:

1. How the raised topics changed over time?
2. What were these changes caused by?

Theoretical Background

The development of the Internet meant that from the 1980s, virtual communities began to emerge around specific ideas, which operate in order to create the so-called "knowledge commons." As noted by Hess and Ostrom (2007) the term knowledge commons refers to an approach to creating a specific resource category. Commons are resources owned by a group of people that cannot be assigned one specific owner. They are therefore managed jointly (community governance). The community can be considered at the micro level (e.g. family), but also more broadly, for instance, at the level of the local or international community. Commons may have clearly defined physical boundaries, or none at all, such as knowledge. An important issue here is the problems that these communities face when managed in this way. Such problems stem from the nature of the resource, the community itself, and from external factors. In turn, knowledge can be defined as all kinds of intangible resources that we use, develop and pass on to subsequent users.

Frischmann, Madison, and Strandburg (2014) mention "patent pools," open source software, and Wikipedia as examples of knowledge commons. The important fact is that the existence of this resource category does not depend in any way on the level of technological development. For example, patent pools already existed in the early 1900s—US aviation companies struck an agreement whereby all signatories had access to the patents of other participants.

Traditionally understood, common goods are finite. This means that if they are not replenished, the resource will run out. This is the case, for example, with natural resources. However, in the case of knowledge commons, the situation is quite different. First, knowledge is a resource that can be used simultaneously by any number of people. There is no risk here, as in the case of material resources, of it becoming unavailable due to the large number of users. Secondly, a characteristic feature of knowledge is that the more it is used, the more its volume increases and its usefulness grows. It is a practical illustration of the so-called network effect (Bollier 2007). In this case, there is no phenomenon referred to as the "tragedy of the common pasture," that is, a situation in which the common resource is exploited by one person seeking additional benefits, or alternatively, the resource is used by too many people (Hess & Ostrom 2007).

In the last 30 years, advances in the field of the Internet have taken the development of knowledge commons to a higher level. The ease of contacting others and exchanging information, and the ability to reduce the negative impact of physical distance on the cooperation of individual people has contributed to the creation of many projects operating in the knowledge commons sphere. This phenomenon has been referred to as Commons-Based Peer Production (CBPP) (Benkler & Nissenbaum 2006) and was heavily inspired by the achievements of Free/Open Source Software (FOSS) movement (B. Coleman & Hill 2004). However, this does not mean that this model can only be used in the area of software-related ventures. It can be applied to virtually any project using the open innovation approach (Hilgers, Müller-Seitz, & Piller 2010).

Benkler and Nissenbaum (2006) described in detail Commons-Based Peer Production and pointed several characteristics of this phenomenon. It was defined as a social production which is decentralized, and where the emphasis is placed on motivation instead of on commanding. Additionally the product or object that is developed in this manner needs to have three specific features: modularity of the object, granularity of the modules, and ability to accept variable size of contributions. It's important to note, that the concept of CBPP focuses on the way the project is organized, rather than on the product or any outcome of the project itself. Thus, the focus is on the process rather than on the organization as a physical entity (Tsiavos & Whitley 2009).

Projects implemented in the peer production model can be referred to as organizations. They are separated from the environment, and have specific resources and members performing specific roles and carrying out specific tasks (see Bittner 1965). Volunteers are involved to a large extent, as entry barriers to projects are usually very low. This does not mean, however, that commercial entities do not participate in their development. In recent years, analyses have been carried out to investigate who is developing the Linux project. Based on the analysis of source code changes[2] it can be ascertained that about 70% of the changes were made by developers employed in IT companies, who were paid for their contributions (Corbet, Kroah-Hartman, & McPherson 2012; LWN.net 2007, 2019, 2020). On the other hand, Rychwalska and Roszczynska-Kurasinska (2017) argued that CBPP community members in general are usually motivated by personal values, and not by monetary incentives.

This is an interesting issue from a management perspective, because Linux is developed largely by companies that compete with each other on the market. The contribution of one of them therefore benefits all other market players and may cause changes in the areas of their competitive advantages.

The related issue is the structure of the contributions of project members. It's worth noting that organizations implementing peer production model, which by definition emphasizes the collaborative effort, might look completely different when investigated in details. As Chełkowski, Gloor, and Jemielniak (2016) discovered, the development of many open source software projects heavily relies on contributions of few individual developers, and not the community as a whole. This conclusion is in line with research conducted by

[2] Source code—instructions written by programmers in one of the programming languages. It is human readable. During the compilation process, it is changed to machine code, which can be understood by the computer.

others in the field (Demil & Lecocq 2006; Healy & Schussman 2003). Similar outcomes were also drawn by Klincewicz (2006), who studied open source software projects hosted on Sourceforge.

Research on peer production organizations revolves around many topics, including organizational dynamics (Chełkowski, Jemielniak & Macikowski 2021; Lerner, Pathak, & Tirole 2006), innovativeness (Klincewicz 2006; West & Gallagher 2013), or economics (Langlois & Garzarelli 2008; Lerner & Tirole 2003, 2005). A large portion of the studies covers motivational aspect of involvement in such projects (Bitzer, Schrettl & Schröder 2007; Lakhani & Wolf 2003; Li, Tan, & Teo 2012; Yunwen Ye & Kishida 2003).

The related field of research covers governance. As peer production projects mature, various institutional structures emerge, that help with the governance of these complex entities. The process in this case is mostly internal, as almost all the institutions are designed by the community itself. It's worth mentioning here that, in general, their development is usually much easier than their implementation. In case of the specific type of organization described in this paper the process of building institutions is relatively easy, as all these entities start small-scale and grow organically (Ostrom 2015).

Governance-related institutions in peer production projects range from non-formal rules and policies, to semi-formal bodies and formal positions. Two good examples of organizations that implement a wide variety of such structures are Debian Project, which is described in this paper, or Wikipedia. The Internet-based encyclopedia implements e.g. informal discussions, semiformal communication via IRC channels, formal voting (Jemielniak 2014). As Rogiński (2011) noted, some of the institutions in Polish Wikipedia were created by the community itself, but some were adopted from the outside. The overall governance of this project may give the impression of chaos, as apart from obvious advantages, flat governance structures have some drawbacks (Jemielniak 2016).

This topic is of great significance, because commons are "becoming ever more central to the infrastructure and operations of a huge array of social and economic processes" (Mansell & Berdou 2010). Two notable examples are FOSS, which is the infrastructural foundation of the Internet (*MIT Technology Review* 2021), and Wikipedia being the largest online encyclopedia (Jemielniak 2019).

The research question described in section "Introduction"—together with the focus on the issue of governance in peer production communities—was directly inspired by few "Wikinomics" design principles formulated by Tapscott and Williams (2008), specifically:

1. Take Cues from Your Lead Users
2. Build Critical Mass
3. Collaboration Starts Internally
4. Finding the Internal Leadership for Change

Research Design

The described research is an exploratory in nature. A mixed methods research approach was used here: quantitative and qualitative. The single case study method was used, an approach that has been successfully used in the field of organizational research (Pan &

Scarbrough 1999; Yeh, Lai, & Ho 2006). The main data source were the platforms of the Project Leader candidates.

The study was inspired by papers on topic analysis in organizations (Chen, Amiri, Li, & Chua 2013; Huang 2019; Pak 2019). It was based on the analysis of DPL candidates' program declarations. Two main parts can be distinguished in the research process, relating respectively to:

1. quantitative analysis of collected data,
2. defining the topics that were discussed in the platforms along with an estimate of changes in the significance of individual topics over time (dictionary-based analysis and Structural Topic Modeling).

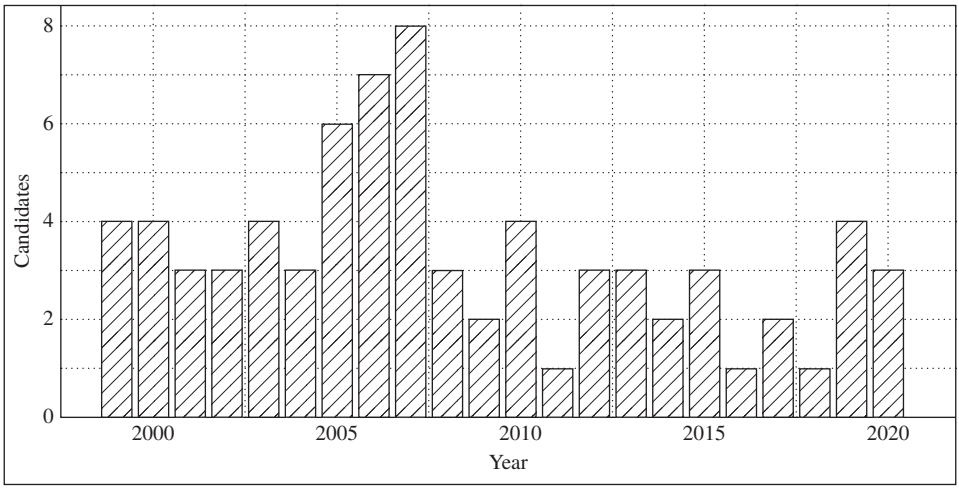
All the data analyzed were of a textual nature. The text mining approach is not particularly common in management sciences. However, it provides a means of answering questions that would be impossible with the use of other methods (Kobayashi, Mol, Berkers, Kismihók, & Den Hartog 2018) and it was used for this purpose.

Corpus

The initial stage of the entire research project was to collect data, all of which are publicly available on the Debian Project website. The links were collected manually and the platforms of all those who have ever applied for the position of DPL were downloaded using the tool Wget. From the first elections in 1999 to 2020, a total of 74 documents were published. A total of 75 people were voted on, but in 2001 one of the candidates did not publish his platform. Additionally, there was a situation in which a candidate withdrew from voting twice and the platforms were also not published. Figure 1 shows the number of DPL candidates in consecutive years.

Figure 1

The number of Debian Project Leader candidates voted for



The 74 documents collected constituted the material to be included in the text corpus, which was the foundation of the study. Before inclusion in the corpus, however, it was necessary to standardize and clean the data. At the outset, all headers and HTML tags were removed using a program sed, which is a popular Unix utility to process text files. In addition, the so-called rebuttals—which are sections at the end of some platforms where candidates refer to their opponents' published platforms—were removed. As a result of these operations, a dataset of 74 text files—each containing one platform—was created.

All the next data transformations were performed using R programming language. The first step was to transform the text into the corpus, which involved the decision to remove stop words, punctuation marks, and numbers. A second important decision in this part of the analysis was not to stem words, which involves the reduction of words to their root form. As the research shows, stemming does not necessarily provide benefits from the point of view of models created on the basis of a corpus prepared in such a way (Schofield, Magnusson, Thompson, & Mimno 2017; Schofield & Mimno 2016). The most important R packages used in data processing were quanteda (Benoit et al. 2018) and stm (Roberts, Stewart & Tingley 2019).

Quantitative data analysis and dictionary-based topic model

The analysis began by determining the quantitative characteristics of the data set and quantifying the text. Apart from describing collected data, this part of the analysis allowed to answer the following questions:

1. What were the most common issues raised on the platforms (broken down by would-be DPL candidates and people who were elected as DPL)?
2. How has the "popularity" of predefined topics ("management," "technology" and "people") changed over time?

After creating the corpus, the author proceeded to build a list of the most common words. Then, the list of the most popular words used by all candidates for DPL in consecutive years was analyzed. Initial investigation showed that "Debian," "project" and "DPL" topped. From the point of view of the conducted analysis, their value was relatively small. Their use seemed obvious, given which documents were included as the source. Next, an attempt to assign the most common words to the topics "management," "technology" and "people" was made. Finally changes in their "popularity" over time were analyzed.

Structural Topic Model

The aim of the second part of the analysis was to answer three questions:

1. What topics were most relevant to the DPL candidates?
2. How has the "popularity" of these topics changed over time?

The Structural Topic Modeling (STM) method was used here, which made it possible to "discover" themes from the collected data (Roberts et al. 2019, 2014). This stage started with appropriate preparation of the Document Feature Matrix (DFM). This was based on the previously created DFM from which the words "Debian," "project" and "DPL" were removed, because—as they refer to the name of the organization and the role that the

election concerned—their presence could significantly distort the results. In addition, the DFM was reduced to words that do not appear very rarely and very often.

Governance in Action: a Case Study of Debian Project

The Debian Project aims to develop the distribution[3] of the GNU/Linux operating system. The vast majority of systems of this type are created using the peer production model—by self-organizing teams of volunteers.

Debian today can be considered as a big IT project, with approximately 980 developers (Debian 2021) involved. Along with the increase in the number of its members and the degree of complexity of the operating system being developed, it was subject to formalization processes. In their course, other institutions were created, which can be described as governance solutions. These activities were initiated by the founder of the project—Ian Murdock. Today, however, they are implemented not by individuals, but by the entire community. As Scheetz (1997) noted:

> By the fall of 1994, an overloaded Ian Murdock, now coordinating the efforts of dozens of people in addition to his own development work, transferred responsibility of the package system to Ian Jackson, who proceeded to make many invaluable enhancements to it and shaped it into the system it is today.
> (…)
> With the release of 1.1 the project began to snowball and by the time of the release of Debian 1.2 in December 1996 it had grown to nearly two-hundred volunteers. This massive growth created management problems for the group.
> As a result of the discussions that ensued, several subgroups were formed within the development group. These smaller teams took on specific issues and by the release of 1.3 there were teams in place to deal with documentation, publicity, quality assurance, testing, and most important, the Deity team.

Due to the fact that the organization was developing rapidly, it was necessary to develop certain solutions that were to ensure the stability of its operations. This resulted in the Debian Linux Manifesto, the Debian Social Contract and the Debian Constitution, described below.

The Debian Linux Manifesto

In the first public release of Debian, version 0.90 (Ibiblio.org 1994), its founder—Ian Murdock (1994)—included a document called "The Debian Manifesto." From a management point of view, this manifesto can be viewed in terms of the vision and mission of the organization. In it, the author expresses the desire to create an operating system using the model of fully open cooperation, in which it is important what is done, not who does it. The goal of the project was ambitious, as Debian was to become an operating system capable of competing with commercial products. The emphasis here was on distribution and not on the system as such, because in the first case, the user receives a finished product that does not need attending to in order to work. In line with the assumptions, it was to be created modularly, where a person who knows the given issue is responsible for each component.

[3] The distribution is the kernel of the operating system and its accompanying software, which in its entirety constitutes a usable operating system.

This did not mean transferring "absolute power" to individual developers. The adopted model assumed the wide participation of "outsiders" who could submit their suggestions and proposals for improvements at any time.

From the point of view of governance, the Manifesto is extremely important. It refers to the foundation on which the organization was built, that is, the peer production approach. It is not acquired through evolution (e.g. under the influence of organizational actors or other market players), and its sources are drawn from the conscious decisions of the founder made when creating the project.

The Debian Social Contract

The Debian Social Contract is a set of rules that took the form of a document in 1997. These are community-developed guidelines on what the nature of Debian should be. Currently, version 1.1 of the contract, developed in 2004, is in force (Debian 2004). It is divided into two parts:

1. referring to a "contract" with the free software community, and
2. including Debian Free Software Guidelines (DFSG).

Just as "The Debian Manifesto," referring to the concept of strategic management, can be described as the vision of the organization, so the Debian Social contract can be considered in the category of mission. As a document it is much more specific and embedded in the project environment, describing its goals on a more operational than strategic level. It proclaims that Debian will be a completely free operating system, that is, it will be covered by a license that will not restrict users in any way. Additionally, it emphasizes the transparency of the organization itself (at least in the technical dimension) by declaring that the entire database of bugs found in the software will be unconditionally available to the public.

The second part of the Contract is entitled Debian Free Software Guidelines (DFSG) and addresses the requirements that software must meet in order to be considered free and thus included in the Debian distribution. The guidelines were developed in parallel with the Contract and are closely related to it. They contain a definition of free software around which the entire project is to be built (Sadowski et al. 2008).

The Debian Constitution

An important governance solution that emerged during the early stage of project development is the Debian Constitution (Debian 2016). It describes institutional solutions aimed at facilitating the achievement of the goals of the Social Contract (Pollei 2013). The idea for the Constitution was born in 1998. Work on it was initiated by Ian Jackson—the then DPL—who, after discussions with one of the developers, decided that it was necessary to standardize the decision-making processes in the project (Amin & Roberts 2008: 265). The first draft was released to the public in March 1998 (Jackson 1998), and the community-approved version came into effect in December of the same year (Debian 1998).

The position of DPL after Ian Jackson was taken over by Wichert Akkerman. As he noted in his platform (Akkerman 1999):

This also means the role of project leader is now very different: most functions have been delegated, leaving the leader to act as a kind of benevolent overseeing person who nudges the project in a good direction.
(…)
I do not think we need to change anything in the organizational structure of the project. We have just ratified the constitution and it will be interesting to see how it works out. It introduces a bit of official rules and politics, but I think it will allow us to work as a the sort of organized anarchy that we have always used while adding some much needed safetynets.

In the case of Debian, formalizing the rules of how the organization operates was necessary, but—interestingly—the organizational culture created in the project simultaneously contested power as such (Michlmayr 2006).

Empirical Findings

Since the adoption of the Debian Constitution, major project decisions have been taken by vote. The only one that takes place regularly is the Spring Project Leader vote. First held in 1999, a total of 21 elections had taken place by the time this survey was conducted. As noted in Section "Corpus," 77 candidates participated in all DPL selection procedures. In 2014 and 2019, one candidate withdrew from voting. In total, 75 candidates were voted for in the history of the project.

A custom that has existed since the first election of the Leader is the publication of a kind of "proclamation" by each candidate, in which they describe their assessment of the project and vision of its development, as well as declaring the time that they will be able to devote to fulfilling the new role. During the lifetime of this selection mechanism, only once—in 2001—did one candidate omit to publish this statement.

Quantitative data analysis and dictionary-based topic model

In the first part of the study—done primarily using quanteda R package (Benoit et al. 2018)—a quantitative description of the material was made as described in Section "Research design." In order to answer the question about the most common issues raised on the platforms after the corpus was created, a list of the 200 most common words was compiled. According to the results, the three most frequently used terms were "Debian" "project" and "DPL." Further analysis was carried out without them.

Based on the content of the platforms, it can be concluded that, apart from the project itself, people and topics related to them were at the center of attention of all candidates taking part in the elections. In addition, work-related issues were important—both in the organizational dimension (including the words "work," "time," "team," "done," "make," "community") and technical (e.g. "developers," "release," "distribution"). The lists of the most common words broken down by people who won the DPL elections and those who were not elected are shown in the form of wordcloud in Figure 2. The larger a given word, the more often it appeared in the source material. Additionally, in order to improve the legibility of the graphics, words of the same size are marked in the same color.

A comparison of both groups reveals that they do not differ in terms of the words used (in general indicating the issues raised). The most important topics are people, work

Figure 2

Most commonly used words on platforms (not including "Debian," "Project," and "DPL")

(a) Not elected as DPL

(b) Elected as DPL

and tasks. Technical issues relating to the software, as well as users and associated topics (including support, problems, needs) are also quite important.

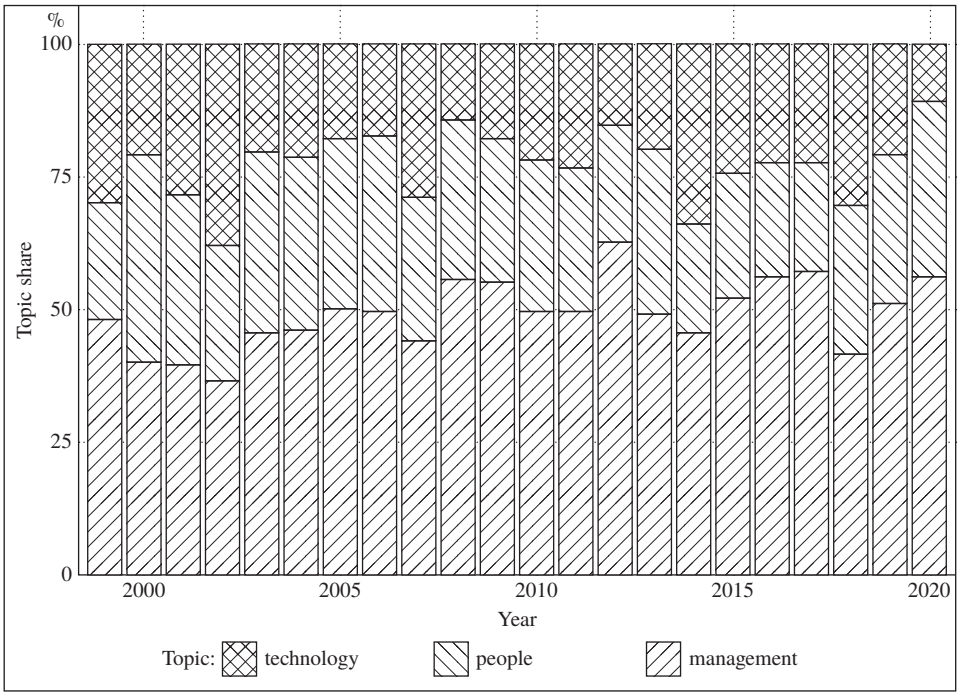
Next, an attempt was made to determine how often topics related to management and organizations were discussed in all platforms. The first step was to take the list of the 200 most common words that appeared in platforms and assign them to one of three predetermined topics: management, technology and people. A separate dictionary was created for each topic and used to analyze the collected data. By this means, it was possible to track the "popularity" of individual topics over time, as illustrated in Figure 3. It shows how the proportions between the three selected topics changed in the period 1999–2020.

From the first DPL elections, the most frequently discussed issues were connected with management. At the beginning of the analyzed period, management began to give way to people, and then technology. Later, however, from 2003 to 2012, the share of this topic grew steadily. In turn, since 2014 there has been a visible trend, according to which the importance of the topic "technology" has been decreasing and the importance of the topic "people" has been growing. Going down to the level of individual components of the topic "people," it is worth noting that while the terms "people" and "team" began to lose their importance from around 2013 and 2015, respectively, their place began to be partially taken by the word "community."

One possible interpretation is that the Debian Project is maturing and its formalization processes highlight the need to act as a community—not only to survive but also to thrive. Along with "community," the relative frequency (frequency adjusted for the number of DPL candidates in a given year) of the word "discussions" also increased, which may support such an explanation of the phenomenon. In addition, the increased importance of the topic of "management" in 2008–2012 can be linked to problems with the decision-making processes that emerged in Debian in previous years.

Figure 3

Predefined topic share (dictionary-based analysis)



Structural Topic Model

The second part of the analysis was done using R package stm (Roberts et al. 2019). According to the theory of building structural topic models, the key decision in the first phase of the research process is to determine the number of topics that will be analyzed within the model (Grimmer & Stewart 2013). It is important to interpret four parameters here, defined by Roberts et al. (2019) as: Held-Out Likelihood, Residuals, Semantic Coherence and Lower Bound. These parameters were estimated for a number of topics ranging from 3 to 40.

The rationale for adopting such a range was, on the one hand, the usefulness of the model and, on the other hand, the size of the analyzed data set. Three topics seemed the minimum number for which conclusions could be drawn about the investigated phenomenon. Meanwhile, the upper end of the range (40) took account of the fact that the data set was relatively limited. Based on the calculations of the above-mentioned parameters, performed for the given range, it was assumed that further analysis would be carried out on the basis of a model covering $k = 8$ topics.

The detailed list of topics identified in the model included both those related to technical issues and those concerning management and organization. From the point of view of this study, the latter group is particularly interesting. After analyzing the results, it was determined that three topics deserved special interest: those marked in the model as numbers 3,

4 and 8. Their summary, including a list of the 8 most common words and 8 words with the highest value of the FREX parameter[4] (Airoldi & Bischof 2016), can be found in Table 1. Additionally, the topic share rank column shows its rank based on the estimated share of the specific topic in the corpus—taking into account all topics specified in the model. Figure 4 shows how the importance of selected topics changed over the years 1999–2020.

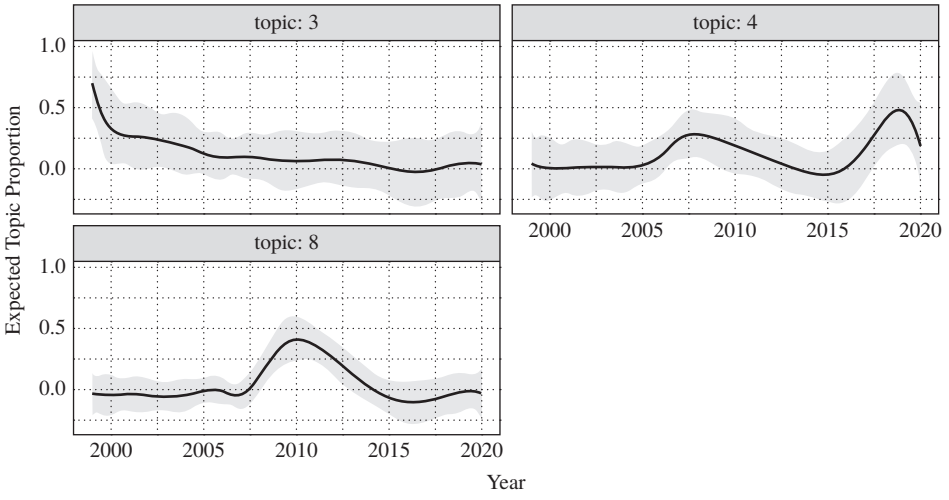
Table 1

Selected topics related to management

Topic no.	Topic share rank	Highest probability	FREX
3	2	year, think, good, community, leader, last, things, many	vision, last, effective, installation, quality, Linux, operating, though
4	7	community, working, software, help, us, within, think, team	decision, sometimes, effectively, diversity, fun, asking, within, large
8	8	term, teams, team, specific, tasks, present, activities, packages	present, derivatives, delegations, term, activities, DD, specific, push

Figure 4

Share of selected topics (STM analysis)



Topic 3 is closely linked to management. It covers issues related to the functioning of the Debian Project as an organization. It was extremely important at the beginning of the analyzed period, that is, from 1999. These were the years when the vision of an organization led by an elected leader was being clarified. Hence, some of the most important words are "vision" and "effective." At that time, the share of this topic was approx. 70%, which means that this proportion of the content of all DPL candidate platforms was devoted to it. Additionally, it is the second most important topic in the entire corpus.

[4] FREX parameter—a parameter that also takes into account the frequency the occurrence of a given word, as well as its uniqueness in the scale of a given topic.

This topic should be viewed more broadly than through the prism of the organization itself and its origins. One of the most important words assigned to it is "installation." It is worth referring to what the operating system market looked like in the late 1990s. Those were the times when the GNU/Linux systems were not as developed and adapted to hardware as they are today. For this reason, installation was often not a quick and seamless process. Along the way, the user often encountered numerous problems regarding drivers or displaying graphics, among others. The installation itself was usually only possible in text mode, and graphic solutions or solutions automating the whole process were just being developed (Wachsmann 2002).

Topic 4 deals with management from a slightly different perspective. It groups together issues concerning the community, software as such (the word "software") and decision-making in the project. In the case of this topic, there are two periods in which its proportion in the analyzed data grew. In 2007–2008, it was related to discussions in the Project that lasted a very long time without leading to specific conclusions. As Michlmayr (2006) noted:

> I think that one of the biggest problems Debian is currently facing is the inability to make decisions. There are so many endless, completely futile (and repetitive) discussions going on. We need someone who comes in, tells people to shut up and makes a decision on behalf of the project. A decision people will follow, even if they personally disagree with it.

In turn, the growing importance of this topic in 2017–2019 can be seen in the fact that, at the time in question, discussions were taking place in the Project as to whether DPL should play a more technical role, or be more a leader who would manage the organization and people around it.

In Topic 8, the emphasis is put on two main interrelated areas. The first refers to the team, people, and tasks ("team," "DD,"[5] "tasks"). The second, however, concerns the so-called derivative distributions, that is GNU/Linux system distributions based on Debian, but adding their own elements to the complete product.

The peak popularity of this topic was in 2009–2010. It was at this time that the community discussed how the Debian Project should relate to derivative distributions. In June 2010, the Derivatives Front Desk was created, a team responsible for making it easier for derivative distribution developers to incorporate their solutions into the Debian Project (Debian 2010a). Additionally, in December 2010, Derivative Guidelines, a set of guidelines for developers of derivative distributions, were developed (Debian 2010b). Both of these initiatives were closely linked to how the tasks in the Project should be divided, and therefore had a significant impact on the whole community.

Conclusions

Summary and Implications

The purpose of this article was to analyze the topics discussed by candidates for the Debian Project Leader since the first elections for this position. Particular emphasis was placed on

[5] Debian Developer—member of the Debian Project.

issues related to the management and functioning of the organization. The Debian Project has existed for nearly 30 years, and the DPL elections have been held annually since 1999. During this time, many changes have taken place in the Project, the sources of which were both internal and resulting from the evolution of the organization's environment. The conducted analysis consisted of two parts: quantitative text analysis using thematic dictionaries, and analysis based on the Structural Topic Modeling approach. The empirical findings allow for the formulation of three main conclusions.

First, for all the DPL candidates, one of the most important areas was people, including the team and the community. Technical issues were also important, but to a lesser extent. This observation applies to both successful and unsuccessful DPL candidates.

The second important observation concerns how the distribution of topics, broken down into "management," "people" and "technology," has changed over time. Listing only these three areas, it can be seen that the relative share of management issues in the platforms varied between 40–60%. It is important, however, to look at management from the perspective of other topics. The relative share of the topic "people" in the initial period fluctuated at around 30%. Then, around 2009, it began to decline, and from 2018 it rose again to over 30%. These fluctuations were quite strongly linked to changes in the relative share of technology-related topics. The smaller relative share of team and community issues translated into a greater emphasis on technical ones. This was caused both by changes in the organization itself (progressive institutionalization, the development of new organizational solutions and specific decisions) and changes in the environment. An example might be 2014, when the importance of technical topics increased sharply in relation to the neighboring periods. The explanation may be the decision to change the default so-called 'init' system, which caused a lot of discussions and a great stir among the community. As a result, part of the community revolted and created the fork (derivative) of the Debian distribution, which was named Devuan (Larabel 2014).

Third, the use of the STM approach made it possible to identify the 8 main topics that were discussed in the DPL candidate platforms. Three of them were concerned management. One referred to issues fundamental to the organization, such as "vision" and "quality." The share of this topic was very high at the beginning of the analyzed period, and then practically ceased to be discussed. The second dealt with community and decision-making. The third management-related topic concerned the team and the tasks performed, as well as issues regarding the principles of creating derivative operating system distributions based on Debian.

To sum up, the subject of management has been present in DPL candidate platforms since the very first elections for this position. It is also the most important, taking into account its share in relation to the topics concerning people and technology. In turn, the analysis with the use of STM allowed the identification of three topics that concerned specific aspects of the management and operation of the Debian Project.

It's worth mentioning that Debian Project uses some well established, traditional governance solutions. Future research might explore some new alternatives, as blockchain-based Decentralized Autonomous Organizations (DAO), where decision rules are self-executing, based on predefined criteria (Rozas, Tenorio-Fornés, Díaz-Molina, & Hassan 2021; Rozas, Tenorio-Fornés, & Hassan 2021). This class of solutions might be useful

when the organization would like to diminish administrative burden and increase the speed of decision making. On the other hand, one must remember that DAOs can be described as an experimental concept and needs further investigation before it might be deployed on a full scale in organizations.

Another potentially interesting issue for future investigation is to assess whether Debian Project can still be classified as a peer production organization. As Benkler (2016) noted, one of the important features that distinguishes this phenomenon from crowdsourcing is that, in general, it involves knowledge-intensive activities. The question is whether Debian Project is actually based on knowledge-intensive activities all the time, or whether the tasks performed within it have become routine in nature.

Limitations

One limitation of the study is that only one organization was analyzed. However, taking into account the assumptions and methods used, this can also be seen as an advantage of the research, because voting for the Debian Project Leader has been described in a very detailed way. This study could form part of a broader analysis comparing different projects operating in the peer production model. On the other hand, future studies may learn from the conclusions described here by verifying whether a similar distribution of topics also exists in other organizations.

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Appendix 1

List of platforms with their URLs

No.	Name	Platform link
1	Joseph Carter	https://www.debian.org/vote/1999/joseph
2	Ben Collins	https://www.debian.org/vote/1999/ben
3	Wichert Akkerman	https://www.debian.org/vote/1999/wichert
4	Richard Braakman	https://www.debian.org/vote/1999/richard
5	Ben Collins	https://www.debian.org/vote/2000/leadership_debate/ben-speech.html
6	Wichert Akkerman	https://www.debian.org/vote/2000/leadership_debate/wichert-speech.html

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No.	Name	Platform link
7	Joel Klecker	https://www.debian.org/vote/2000/leadership_debate/joel-speech.html
8	Matthew Vernon	https://www.debian.org/vote/2000/leadership_debate/mat-speech.html
9	Branden Robinson	https://lists.debian.org/debian-vote-0102/msg00018.html
10	Anand Kumria	—
11	Ben Collins	https://lists.debian.org/debian-vote-0102/msg00017.html
12	Bdale Garbee	https://lists.debian.org/debian-vote-0102/msg00038.html
13	Branden Robinson	https://www.debian.org/vote/2002/platforms/branden
14	Raphaël Hertzog	https://www.debian.org/vote/2002/platforms/raphael
15	Bdale Garbee	https://www.debian.org/vote/2002/platforms/bdale
16	Moshe Zadka	https://www.debian.org/vote/2003/platforms/moshez
17	Bdale Garbee	https://www.debian.org/vote/2003/platforms/bdale
18	Branden Robinson	https://www.debian.org/vote/2003/platforms/branden
19	Martin Michlmayr	https://www.debian.org/vote/2003/platforms/tbm
20	Martin Michlmayr	https://www.debian.org/vote/2004/platforms/tbm
21	Gergely Nagy	https://www.debian.org/vote/2004/platforms/algernon
22	Branden Robinson	https://www.debian.org/vote/2004/platforms/branden
23	Matthew Garrett	https://www.debian.org/vote/2005/platforms/mjg59
24	Andreas Schuldei	https://www.debian.org/vote/2005/platforms/andreas
25	Angus Lees	https://www.debian.org/vote/2005/platforms/gus
26	Anthony Towns	https://www.debian.org/vote/2005/platforms/ajt
27	Jonathan Walther	https://www.debian.org/vote/2005/platforms/krooger
28	Branden Robinson	https://www.debian.org/vote/2005/platforms/branden
29	Jeroen van Wolffelaar	https://www.debian.org/vote/2006/platforms/jeroen
30	Ari Pollak	https://www.debian.org/vote/2006/platforms/ari
31	Steve McIntyre	https://www.debian.org/vote/2006/platforms/93sam
32	Anthony Towns	https://www.debian.org/vote/2006/platforms/ajt
33	Andreas Schuldei	https://www.debian.org/vote/2006/platforms/andreas
34	Jonathan “Ted” Walther	https://www.debian.org/vote/2006/platforms/krooger
35	Bill Allombert	https://www.debian.org/vote/2006/platforms/ballombe
36	Wouter Verhelst	https://www.debian.org/vote/2007/platforms/wouter
37	Aigars Mahinovs	https://www.debian.org/vote/2007/platforms/aigarius
38	Gustavo Franco	https://www.debian.org/vote/2007/platforms/stratus
39	Sam Hocevar	https://www.debian.org/vote/2007/platforms/sho
40	Steve McIntyre	https://www.debian.org/vote/2007/platforms/93sam
41	Raphaël Hertzog	https://www.debian.org/vote/2007/platforms/hertzog
42	Anthony Towns	https://www.debian.org/vote/2007/platforms/ajt
43	Simon Richter	https://www.debian.org/vote/2007/platforms/sjr
44	Marc Brockschmidt	https://www.debian.org/vote/2008/platforms/he
45	Raphaël Hertzog	https://www.debian.org/vote/2008/platforms/hertzog
46	Steve McIntyre	https://www.debian.org/vote/2008/platforms/93sam
47	Stefano Zacchiroli	https://www.debian.org/vote/2009/platforms/zack
48	Steve McIntyre	https://www.debian.org/vote/2009/platforms/93sam
49	Stefano Zacchiroli	https://www.debian.org/vote/2010/platforms/zack
50	Wouter Verhelst	https://www.debian.org/vote/2010/platforms/wouter
51	Charles Plessy	https://www.debian.org/vote/2010/platforms/plessy
52	Margarita Manterola	https://www.debian.org/vote/2010/platforms/marga
53	Stefano Zacchiroli	https://www.debian.org/vote/2011/platforms/zack

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No.	Name	Platform link
54	Wouter Verhelst	https://www.debian.org/vote/2012/platforms/wouter
55	Gergely Nagy	https://www.debian.org/vote/2012/platforms/algernon
56	Stefano Zacchiroli	https://www.debian.org/vote/2012/platforms/zack
57	Gergely Nagy	https://www.debian.org/vote/2013/platforms/algernon
58	Moray Allan	https://www.debian.org/vote/2013/platforms/moray
59	Lucas Nussbaum	https://www.debian.org/vote/2013/platforms/lucas
60	Lucas Nussbaum	https://www.debian.org/vote/2014/platforms/lucas
61	Neil McGovern	https://www.debian.org/vote/2014/platforms/neilm
62	Mehdi Dogguy	https://www.debian.org/vote/2015/platforms/mehdi
63	Gergely Nagy	https://www.debian.org/vote/2015/platforms/algernon
64	Neil McGovern	https://www.debian.org/vote/2015/platforms/neilm
65	Mehdi Dogguy	https://www.debian.org/vote/2016/platforms/mehdi
66	Mehdi Dogguy	https://www.debian.org/vote/2017/platforms/mehdi
67	Chris Lamb	https://www.debian.org/vote/2017/platforms/lamby
68	Chris Lamb	https://www.debian.org/vote/2018/platforms/lamby
69	Joerg Jaspert	https://www.debian.org/vote/2019/platforms/joerg
70	Jonathan Carter	https://www.debian.org/vote/2019/platforms/jcc
71	Sam Hartman	https://www.debian.org/vote/2019/platforms/hartmans
72	Martin Michlmayr	https://www.debian.org/vote/2019/platforms/hartmans
73	Jonathan Carter	https://www.debian.org/vote/2020/platforms/jcc
74	Sruthi Chandran	https://www.debian.org/vote/2020/platforms/srud
75	Brian Gupta	https://www.debian.org/vote/2020/platforms/bgupta