



OPEN BRITANNIA

Linux Format puts on its clean shirt and trousers to go on a VoIP call with Amanda Brock and discuss OpenUK, influencing government policy and how old we all are.

CREDIT: Amanda's photo (with Kitten Dundee) was taken during lockdown as part of @onthedoorstepcrouchend photography project by Julie Kim Photography, May 2020.

Amanda Brock is CEO of OpenUK (<https://openuk.uk>), a new non-profit body focused on promoting Open Technology, but this is a recent appointment in a line of influential positions. She has a CV that includes open source advisory work at the United Nations Technology Innovations Labs, being a European rep for Open Invention Network (the largest defensive patent pool in the world) and being on an Open Projects Advisory for the OASIS Standards Body. She also spent five years as General Counsel for Canonical where she set up the legal function.

Part of the reason Amanda is involved in so many projects and initiatives is apparent the moment the VoIP connection kicks in. Even a global pandemic can't stop Amanda being a connector. She's someone who enjoys talking to people and pulling others into the world of open source, and given the serendipitous way she caught the open source bug, we're fortunate Tux tipped the scales of fate in our favour.

Linux Format: What made a commercial lawyer get involved with the open world?

Amanda Brock: The honest truth is a job. I had joined something called Lawyers on Demand as the sixth lawyer on its books. It's now a massive organisation – a new model for placing lawyers. I was placed in Canonical for three months. I was meant to go to another contract with Amazon to work on its new electrical retail device, which I'm assuming was the Kindle, but six weeks in, Canonical asked me if I'd like to stay. So first, I got a job in open source and, second, I fitted. I've never felt more at home anywhere than I did at Canonical.

LXF: Have you always been interested in software and technology?

AB: When I was at school, I was told to stay away from computers! When I was in fifth form in Scotland in about 1985-86, they had us coding for a term and, for some reason, not one of my coding programs ran. Ever. They couldn't work out what it was. We were learning to code in binary; it was madness. I was told that computers just didn't like me, and I should stay away from them.

Later, when I joined Canonical as General Counsel, I contacted my old computer science teacher and he apologised. And my old high school is part of the kids' competition we're running this year. They run Ubuntu in the school now!

At the time, I took my teacher's advice, stayed away from computers and became a commercial lawyer. In 1996, I was just

joining a law firm as an IP, an intellectual property lawyer and they kept telling me that they were hiring me as an IT lawyer. I kept correcting them. In the end I gave in and joined as an IT lawyer. The firm sent me to Queen Mary University, to the Centre for Commercial Law Studies, where I completed a master's degree over two years in intellectual property and IT.

That included the first internet law course in the UK, and I ended up specialising in ecommerce and internet, and going to work for Dixons. I was on the team that created and managed Freeserve, the ISP. Canonical was my first software company. I like working with software engineers. I particularly liked open source. I got into the whole ethos behind it.

LXF: So, why do we need OpenUK? And why do we need it now?

AB: When I was first approached about it, my reaction was to say I wasn't interested, we didn't need OpenUK. Open is about global communities and that's one of the things that I like about it, that people all over the world have the freedom to work together. Geography hasn't been a boundary for people, which is great.



Brexit was the trigger, the risk of isolation, making sure that we're a strong community and not fractured. I think we have amazing talent in the UK in Open, but that talent has rightly been focused on international projects and we don't know each other geographically. We want to make sure there's a cohesive, strong voice influencing government.

We're trying to build that in three ways. One is community, by running an active site with blogs and good social

MAKING THE OPEN SOURCE VOICE HEARD

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My view shifted when I watched what was happening with Brexit. I joined OpenUK a year ago as a director, then became CEO. Now the European Commission's Open Source Software (and Open Hardware) Beyond 2020 is finally putting its money where its mouth is, and looking at making open the way forward for the Commission and promoting its use across Europe.

It has a report being worked on at the moment by Open Forum Europe. That's about 400-500,000 Euros being spent on understanding Open better. I realised that the UK was going to get left behind as we exited Europe. We don't have that same integration into government in the UK that we've had from a policy perspective in Europe. I don't think the UK's open source, open data and hardware communities' voices have historically been very strongly heard here.

media, creating events and training, bringing people together and reaching out to people, and building community across the industry. Post Covid-19 there'll be events. Second, making the UK a great place for Open through our legal and policy committee influencing legislation, public sector and policy. Third is learning. It's something I'm passionate about. Making sure that we have the right educational tools in place for the next generation to come through understanding Open.

We've got an impressive board in place. We met for the first time in January and it set our purpose, our vision and our mission. The purpose of OpenUK is "to develop and sustain UK leadership in Open technology". That includes software, hardware and data. I would bet that we'll include science formally at some point this year, but I think that makes OpenUK the

first organisation in the world to formally say that it was bringing those three together and trying to represent them.

That changes things. Data, in terms of commercialisation around open data, is definitely the way forward. When you look at that and where the world's going, I think it's important to bring it all together.

LXF: Talking about the education side of things, what are you working on?

AB: We've got a few different things. Our Universities Committee has something called POSSE – Professors' Open Source Software Education – scheduled for a three-day, face-to-face meeting teaching professors. Potentially, that could extend to college teachers. It's about helping them to teach Open. We're working on timing and how we rejig things – whether it's going to be something either later in the year or next year, or something virtual.

The Learning Committee is focused on school-aged kids. The first thing it's doing is a competition. We sweated blood to get this fabulous competition, which included a day in Red Hat's offices where we had a code camp and a hack finals for the competition with the singer Imogen Heap.

The competition focuses around the Mini-Mu glove. The glove is based on Imogen Heap's Mi.Mu glove (<https://mimugloves.com>), which is a software-enabled glove. The Mini-Mu is made up of a micro:bit and some other components, including instructions on how to make the glove and a template. Components that can be are being open sourced this week, and the BBC micro:bit is already open.

We're distributing the glove to up to 100 schools for the competition. We're

offering four glove kits to each school and the kits are being sent out to the kids directly in mid-May. We'll be running a 10-week course of 10-minute animations being done by a professional animator and voiceover artist. Each of those will have a fun activity for the kids to do and they'll learn about Open. We'll do that course for the first time from the end of May. Potentially, we'll run it again over the school holidays. We may have a further announcement about that to make and then, potentially, it will be translatable into other languages because everything is Creative Commons.

We're speaking to certification and exam bodies at the moment about the possibility of a formal qualification in Open and also the possibility of setting up an apprenticeship scheme. With the pandemic we're probably looking towards the end of 2021 or early 2022.

LXF: Would that be a GCSE?

AB: Potentially, but we're still working out if the GCSE is the right vehicle. We've had a lot of push-back on whether or not there's politically room for a Computer Science GCSE beyond the mainstream one and whether it would get support. We're looking at that qualification as a vocational one that would be open in colleges.

LXF: Any other initiatives you're doing on the education side?

AB: Our Future Leaders group. I think that's unique in the world. We've now got 16 folk working collaboratively, reviewing UK public sector terms and conditions and the procurement processes regarding procuring Open. We thought that we'd do

a bit of mentoring and training, and that was so well received that we've opened that up to everybody.

What was a couple of training sessions morphed into 20. We're doing them every Friday and recording them. We have some key figures in the UK and internationally involved. People like the executive director of the OSI spoke last week about what Open really means, what the OSD is and where it came from. We've got people like Simon Wardley [researcher at Leading Edge Forum] and Neil McGovern [ED at Gnome]. These sessions have been so well received that we're getting people from other countries come along.



LXF: Do you feel there's a concern over what Open technology and open source software in particular means now?

AB: Yes, and age is a factor. That older generation of people around Open, who are part of the community organisation, and the developers themselves made a conscious decision that this is something they wanted. It came at a point in time when copyright had been applied to code and people decided that they didn't want to be working on proprietary code which had copyright restrictions. They wanted to have Open and free licenced code to work on. They made a conscious decision to move to Open.

It seems to me that people born after the Linux kernel have grown up with Open as a norm. Because of that, they haven't made a conscious decision to "go towards the light to move away from the dark side".

By not having to choose, they haven't had the same learning process. We've done them a disservice. We haven't taught them the history or why things are a certain way. I think it's important, and it's one of the reasons we're so focused on education at OpenUK. We need to ensure people understand making code public alone isn't enough. Putting it on to a git repository isn't going to make it open source. There's an educational gap that we have a duty to fill if we want it to be fixed going forwards.

If you look at some of the Open Core companies, there are mistakes made around commercial models, and a lot of that has come out of a lack of understanding of the nature and obligations of Open and licences.



I've just finished a book chapter on that, looking at every significant company, what they did and what happened.

LXF: You're writing a book? What's it on?

AB: I'm the editor of *Free and Open Source Software: Policy, Law and Practice* published by Oxford University Press – that rocks doesn't it? The first edition was published seven years ago. The second edition has over 20 contributors and is very broad; we have people from all over the world contributing. It was to be published in the summer, but we've pushed back to January. We'll launch it at FOSDEM.

What's special is we've got funding from the Vietsch Foundation, to make it open access. It will also be an open access PDF and e-reader book. People will be able to just download the chapters they want to know about, which is fabulous and I'm proud we made that happen.

LXF: You've also mentioned the Future Leaders Group which also seems an exciting initiative...

AB: Yes, the Group has co-chairs who both happen to be lawyers: Rob Grannells and Katy Gibson. I want to mention that because one of the things that you'll notice about OpenUK, and it's not done intentionally, is there's a lot more women involved than you would see in most of Open. I think they've just gravitated towards it. Maybe that I'm there has helped people feel comfortable sticking their heads above the parapet and maybe the Open Data side is a wee bit more female-friendly?

LXF: What do you think are the biggest challenges for Open technology?

AB: Brexit was definitely a factor in me getting involved with OpenUK. It created

a moment in time; the space when we had a need to bring everybody in the geographical location together. I haven't spoken about this until this moment, but Covid-19 has done something similar, as we're anchored in our homes. As we move forward, there's a change, right? We can't move around the world the way we're used to. I enjoy going to conferences and seeing people I know from Open. It's a welcoming community. We're not doing that, but we may be able to travel domestically sooner than internationally. That potential of bringing us together where we're rooted becomes much stronger.

There's a risk. I pointed out already that the Europeans are ahead of us on uptake and government support of Open. We just saw the European Parliament agree to predominantly use open source. From now on, all software development by and for any European Institution will be open source – or have to justify why not. It's even being reported on to a Parliament Committee annually. That's nothing short of incredible and exactly what I worry about in the risk of the UK falling behind Europe in its uptake.

Here's an example. I've been writing about contact-tracing apps. NHSX has a policy that it open sources its output [the app was open sourced a week after our chat]. Every other country seems to have made a formal announcement about whether or not they are going to open source the app.

Matt Hancock [secretary of state for health and social care] said on Easter Sunday that the code would be "public", but he didn't actually say it would be open source. (the code has been released under an MIT licence: <https://github.com/nhsx/COVID-19-app-Android-BETA>).

This goes back to the other point about understanding that making something public doesn't make it open source; you also have to attach a licence. It would be nice to see our government not only understanding what these things mean, but proactively encouraging Open as some of its European contemporaries did.

We've had some interaction with the government and we're delighted that the trade folks negotiating the international trade agreements as a consequence of Brexit invited us in to chat with them about the open source code provisions in the treaties, because open has an impact on them. It was good that we had that engagement with them. But generally, you



don't see the same level of understanding that Europe has and therefore we don't see the big statements.

LXF: What's on the roadmap for OpenUK next year? Or has that changed?

AB: We were supposed to be hosting OpenUK Week, which was ambitious but had come together really well. We had lots of sponsors like the law firm Bristows and Red Hat. We had an Open Hardware Day, where all the major organisations in open hardware were coming together. We've tried to shift that to October. But at this stage, we can't say if there will be physical events or not.

I'm hoping that in 2021 we'll be able to physically bring people together in the UK for events. Obviously, like everybody else, we're looking at new models, but there's nothing like talking to somebody face to face. I'm a great believer in it, and if we can we'll do more in that way. We'll focus more on regional events and streaming that back into London as well as from London out. I think it's important.

And, hopefully more lobbying and interaction with government. The Future Leaders Group will have its output in the autumn, so we're hoping that it'll engage with a lot of younger people in the public sector and government, and gain more engagement and understanding for the future.

We host the OpenUK Awards on 20 October, announcing the winners of our kids' competition and our five categories for Individual, Young Person, and then three for companies, projects or organisations in each of software, hardware and data. Nominations closed at the end of June and Chris Lamb, Cheryl Hung [CNCF director of Ecosystem] and Jeni Tennison [Open Data Institute] are our judges. We are going to have trophies designed by Boldport. Whether it's face to face or online it'll be a lot of fun. **LXF**

