

# “IT’S HARDER FOR PEOPLE TO ATTACK YOU WHEN YOU’RE TRANSPARENT”

INTERVIEW WITH JOI ITO, CEO, CREATIVE COMMONS

By Per Bloch Andersen

It is not until ninety minutes before my interview with Joi Ito is to start that the location where we are to meet is revealed. Up until the evening before, it was still uncertain whether there would actually be an interview at all. The modern cosmopolitan Joi Ito is a Japanese American who lives in Dubai, has an office in Creative Commons in San Francisco, and is paying a lightning visit to Denmark. Everything about his visit seems to be secretive, despite the fact that he “publishes” his life in his blog and via a photostream on the Internet, and is a famous advocate of transparency and sharing.

His CV is long and exhaustive (see the fact box on page 44) so I make do with skimming through it during the taxi ride to the central Copenhagen hotel where he is staying. There is no need to whip up the mood any further, or to prostrate myself on the ground when I arrive. This would not benefit my assignment. So I choose to concentrate on what I know to be the man’s passion and driving force: namely free culture, sharing and the idea of the public domain. These are also some of the key words for the Creative Commons organisation, which Joi Ito heads up.

The taxi arrives at 10.21, nine minutes early. Joi Ito’s Danish contact receives me in hotel’s basement restaurant. Joi Ito himself sits unconcerned in the background, tapping away on his laptop. I am told that he is writing an article for his blog. On the table in front of him stands an old, analogue Leica camera. The metal housing is scratched and dented, clearly indicating this is an item that its owner uses a great deal.

Shortly afterwards, Joi Ito comes over and introduces himself. Whereas the “neutral” expression on some faces is actually neutral, it seems that Joi Ito’s default setting is a smile. He has attentive brown eyes and a balanced smile. He is dressed in discreet, classic style that almost acts as a contrast to his energy and physical appearance, which is enthusiastic and hyper-modern. With the matt aluminum computer he types on and the black camera he

uses to take photographs, he unites new and old: the technology of the digital age with the mechanical tools of former times.

## IN DEEP WATER

Joi Ito’s team decides that we are to leave the hotel immediately and take a car out to *Noma*, the world-famous restaurant, to have lunch. Before we can enter the car, however, the rear seats need to be put back up – the last time the car was used was for transporting Joi Ito’s diving equipment. He spent the previous day on a privately organized dive, which he is keen to talk about.

“Divers and journalists have a lot in common,” he says, eyeing me steadily. “They have to dare to delve into the unknown, and they must have the courage to dive into the darkness and switch on their torches to reveal new landscapes.”

At that precise moment, I can both see and feel what Joi Ito means in every respect.

Before the interview itself starts, we manage to talk a little bit about his Leica camera and our shared love of photography. This more informal chat has eased the hectic atmosphere, and the numerous changes and distractions have shifted my focus from the circumstances to Joi Ito himself. Fortunately. As the car pulls onto the road, I ask my first question.

**SCENARIO:** *You are – in every respect – a very atypical businessman. You are CEO of the Creative Commons organisation and famous for your work as an open Internet activist. In addition, you share your life with the general public via your blog. But you are also an investor and a businessman in competition with others, and in this context, information and secrets are crucial. What do you not share with the general public? Where do you set the boundary for your own personal openness?*

Joi Ito: I think it’s important to protect the privacy of people who don’t have power, and to enforce transparency for those in power. But there is a natural tendency in society to do the opposite, with

transparency for individuals and privacy for people with power.

And I think this idea of sharing and openness and open source software, even when you think about start-up companies, is about empowering people with the ability to understand their own tools, to modify and adapt their own consumption—whether it's food or media, or whatever. And about giving people control.

Because understanding and having open access is also a very important part of being able to modify your own tools. Being able to fix your own car, being able to create your own blog. Those are all very important things and they come from openness. If you have closed-package software, you can't modify its behavior. So the ability to modify behavior also comes with this idea of openness.

Personally, I share more of my own life than most people, because I have chosen a more public position. If people are going to talk about you anyway, it's better if you can manage the conversation. That's a life decision you have to make.

Sharing isn't the right idea for everyone, but for me it's more of a media strategy. Because it's harder for people to attack you when you're transparent.

*SCENARIO: But isn't there a danger that all this openness and communication may actually have the opposite effect? That openness carries enormous complexity because all this information about you is freely available on the Internet? Isn't it the case that openness simply creates more complexity, which must surely be considered the opposite of transparency?*

Ito: A newspaper once accidentally wrote that I had graduated from college, and then somebody wrote that Joi lied about his academic career by saying he graduated. It was very easy for me to stop that rumor, by writing on my blog that I didn't graduate. And if you look at my Wikipedia entry, you can see I'm a college dropout. So I never lied and very quickly I got rid of that rumor.

At some level, if you look at all the politicians who get destroyed by scandals, it wouldn't have been as damaging if they had said the things themselves. I have a blog with many articles about why I've

invested in this company, why I did this and why I did that. So it's very difficult for people to construct false stories, because I already have the story. And with search engines and Google, my stories are always part of the result and I'm part of the conversation. Of course there is a huge cost, a huge complexity and a huge headache, and people attack you even if you're being honest, but at least – at the end of the day – the worst thing that can happen to you is that everybody finds out the truth.

If you close everything up and hide the truth, then something is made up about you, which is worse than the truth. Sometimes it's too late to tell the truth once everybody has labeled you. I believe there's a huge cost, and that's why not everybody needs to do it, but because I am an activist and involved in controversial things it's very important for me.

I probably would be more radical if I wasn't so public. I use to say things that I don't say anymore, because I am now a negotiator with mainstream media, politicians ... so I don't always say everything I feel like saying. Some self-censorship happens when you become transparent. But the cost of the transparency is that your context disintegrates. A lot of my work is to defend privacy, and different people have different roles. I've taken a somewhat more public role, so I have to be a little bit more boring.

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

We have arrived, and decide to decamp to the restaurant lounge to finish the interview. *Noma* is located in the harbour area of Copenhagen, so the conversation naturally drifts to the harbour and the new buildings. Joi Ito takes photographs – not with his Leica camera, but with his iPhone. Perhaps so that he can upload the pictures to his blog straight away if he sees something he wants to share. With a laugh, he shows me the back of his phone, which does not look like the back of a usual iPhone, but like Leica's legendary M9 camera. Keen photographers and iPhone connoisseurs will know that Apple has stated that it drew inspiration from

## JOI ITO

Joi Ito (Jōichi Itō) was born in Kyoto, Japan, in 1966. He is an entrepreneur and a venture capitalist, focusing on the Internet, social networking media and new technology. For example, he invested in what are now well-known phenomena such as Twitter, Last.fm and Flickr at an early stage. In addition, he is CEO of Creative Commons and a member of several boards of directors – including that of the Danish company *Storyplanet* – and of the Mozilla Foundation, which is best known for its Firefox browser. In 1997, he appeared on *Time Magazine's* Cyber Elite list, and in 2008 *BusinessWeek* named him one of the 25 most influential people on the Internet. Joi Ito lives in Dubai with his wife, Mizuka Ito. As an activist, Joi Ito works to combat protectionism and complexity by advocating digital transparency and accessibility. His theory is that accessibility and understanding of the tools of technology help to increase the power and influence that individuals can exert on both their digital and their everyday, "analogue" lives.

the M9 when designing the new iPhone, and that a Leica enthusiast has subsequently uploaded image files to the Internet that make it possible to apply an M9 skin to your iPhone 4. So, of course, Joi Ito has chosen to unite his two worlds by having a “Leica iPhone”.

In *noma*'s lounge, Joi Ito and I sit opposite one another in the black leather chairs. On the table between us lies Joi Ito's iPhone, constantly illuminated. Just what it is doing remains a mystery. Could it be that I am not the only one who is recording the interview? Could it be that Joi Ito wants to assure his transparency by making sure he has a verbatim record of our dialogue?

*SCENARIO: You are Japanese, but you seem to be much more of an individualist than the Japanese people we Europeans tend to talk about. Why don't you live up to our prejudices?*

Ito: “Japan is an interesting society that does allow a lot of individualism, but you have to kind of break out of the mold. So once you get classified as a weird guy or an alien, they allow you to continue to be in the community, but you play by slightly different rules. You don't get the same kind of support as if you were conforming, but Japan allows a very small number of people to be somewhat eccentric. Many of them are artists, professors ... some of them are entrepreneurs. It's not easy to become an eccentric, but once you become one people expect you to be that way.”

*SCENARIO: In the Western world, the answer put forward for many of the challenges of the future is the message: more education! You don't have much formal education yourself, but you have nevertheless achieved great success. What is your message with regard to what we should be focusing on?*

Ito: “It depends on the personality of the child and the field you are studying. In technology, it's changing so fast that the teachers know less than the students, and the structure of traditional curriculum can't keep up with the changes and the structure of the content. Formal education is having a very difficult time. Some children do very well in formal education and some don't. Before,

there wasn't an alternative to formal education but now it's quite possible, using the Internet and people you meet on the Internet to educate yourself. And there is also peer-to-peer education.

But the most important thing is that the formal system of education is based on the expensive way of educating people – printing and disseminating knowledge. It was built in a world of scarcity, but now we have abundance. You can give people access to knowledge, you can convene people for meetings, using the Internet. So we have to redesign the way we think about education and focus more on learning than on education. Because education has a lot of baggage with the word.

I personally don't like the word education. I like to say that I love to learn, but I hate to be educated! For some people, education is the right way to learn, but I think we should create alternatives.”

*SCENARIO: It seems as if the West is lagging behind in relation to economies such as the Chinese, for example, and in relation to cultures such as the Japanese and Korean. You travel around the world and see business projects and start-ups everywhere. What are we Europeans doing wrong?*

Ito: “Every country has its issues. Japan is also a failing economy. Japan has an aging population and they focus too much on manufacturing and the government has had too much control. Everything has two sides, but the problem with Europe is that the strong culture and heritage creates a kind of respect for old institutions. So there is a slow speed of change and also a belief in authority. I think that whether it is education, start-ups or innovation, questioning authority and thinking for yourself are an essential part of empowerment. Questioning authority is not typical and common in the culture of Europeans and they have a lot of respect for experts, which gives these institutions a lot of power. So things tend to get centrally planned and controlled. And these institutions, the consultants and the heads of media companies

## CREATIVE COMMONS

Creative Commons is a non-profit organisation based in San Francisco. It was founded in 2001 by a group including Larry Lessig, the legal expert. Wikipedia states that the focus of Creative Commons is to disseminate the application of reasonable and flexible copyright. The numerous types of license offered by the organisation constitute an alternative to conventional jurisdiction in a modern and digitalised world in which there is a distinctive and widespread culture of sampling and remixes. The sharing and modification of creative works (such as music, design and photographs) are an inevitable and natural way to use the media and their content. This is the starting point, and it is this construct that Creative Commons works to approach actively. According to the organisation itself, it is a common misconception that its aim is to undermine the concept of copyright. In contrast, Creative Commons is attempting to define the spectrum between conventional copyright and free utilisation (public domain). You can read more about Creative Commons in the *FO/Future Orientation* #6/2009 journal (the precursor to SCENARIO).

and suchlike are not the ones who are going to be innovating.

In the US, they are very pragmatic and practical so they switch very quickly and you find people like Mark Zuckerberg (the founder of Facebook, ed.) who get funded and empowered, and these are not the typical people that you would find running these big companies. He was actually 23 years old when he did most of his work.

Another thing is that Europeans, like the Japanese, tend to focus on authority coming with age. When your network, and not your stock of knowledge, is your main asset, then age is a huge benefit. But when things are changing so quickly that your agility, your mental flexibility and the ability to question and open black boxes are your key to success, then it becomes harder for the older people, and I think that right now, many industries are youth driven. That's why I'm very interested in the Middle East, because it has such a young population."

*SCENARIO: You believed – and invested – in social networking media such as Twitter and Flickr at a relatively early stage. What will the next social mass medium be? What are you currently looking at?*

Ito: "The thing is, whether it's Twitter or any of these companies that I have invested in, you never know whether it's *the* one. Twitter is one of many things I thought was interesting. But I never knew that it would get this big. You can't predict what the next big thing will be, but there are some obvious things that everybody is trending towards, and these are so obvious I don't know if they are even worth putting in an answer.

If you look at the trend, it's gone from the lower layers of the systems to the web, to browsers, to e-commerce, and now it's content. Twitter has content, but it is more about communication of presence, information, and context. I think the next layer is going to be much more about culture and about knowledge, and I think Creative Commons is going to play a role in that, but the next big innovations will happen at this cultural, political, content layer. Things that cause political change, collective action ... those are all areas that are very important, but haven't really benefited from the high-speed development.

Some of it may happen in small countries like Denmark, where you have a small government and you have culture and innovators. And some of it may happen in places like India, where they have a huge population. It's hard to tell where it is going to come from, but I think that the future of government and culture, and its relationship to the processes that we are building to make things cheaper, faster, and more transparent, is that it is going to be a very interesting space. I'm not sure when it's going to happen, but I'm looking at that space."

The interview is at an end. I take the train home – one taxi ride a day must be more than enough. I click "Follow" on Joi Ito's Twitter profile and call SCENARIO's editor to tell him how the interview went. We agree that the article is to be freely available on the Internet when the magazine is published. It seems only reasonable when the subject is Joi Ito. ■

---

#### LINKS

Joi Ito's blog article "A short visit to Copenhagen" at <http://joi.ito.com/weblog/2010/11/17/a-short-visit-t.html>

Joi Ito's photostream on Flickr at [www.flickr.com/photos/joi/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/joi/)

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Per Bloch Andersen is a freelance writer, an independent consultant and a graduate in media science and rhetoric. Under his pseudonym, Peer, he has published the hybrid work entitled *Kollektion*, which consists of music, poems, short stories, photographs and more.

