

[Transcript] Sustain / Episode 204: FOSSY 2023 with Adam Monsen

Hello and welcome to Sustain. I am here again at Fosse, the free and open-source software conference yearly run by Software Freedom Conservatives. This is first year and I'm here in Portland, Oregon, which is just completely sunny. It's amazing. It's actually really nice, especially as Vermont is entirely underwater. But yeah, it's just good to be here and I'm here with a guest today. I'm Richard Littauer. If you didn't know that already and my guest today is Adam Monson coming down from Seedle. Adam, how are you doing?

Doing very well, Richard. Thank you for having me.

Thank you for coming on. So Adam, we just had a short chat before the podcast. Super cool. One of the founders of Seagull, which is probably one of my favorite conferences, free every time. Stuff that people are passionate about. Seattle GNU Linux conference. It doesn't just mean GNU Linux. It means all of open source as a Seagull as their mascot. Is it a Glockus winged gull or an Olympic gull or a herring gull? Do you have a species definition for that? I have no idea.

Okay, cool. Anything I missed when describing Seagull?

You nailed it.

Excellent. That's because it's amazing. It's coming out November 11th. It's going to be the 11th time. Remember the person at the UW?

UW, two fireplaces this year. Very exciting. So I was keen to share that. So Adam is one of the drivers around that. We've already talked about that on the podcast before. Go back to Deb Nicholson's episode, one of the early ones to hear more about that. We're probably going to have another episode coming out in October to remind you to go to this free to attend virtual or in-person conference. Super exciting. Adam, let's focus on some other stuff. I know you're an author. What's the book you're working on?

I'm calling it steadfast self-hosting rapid rise personal cloud. It's a manifesto for people who care about having their own data, not necessarily for privacy, although that's a common motive. The fundamental theory I'm trying to push forward, this concept of data sovereignty, I didn't make it up, but the idea is you have your own data for not just you, your small group, your family, your community, your project, your school. And with that, you gain power, autonomy, agency, freedom for the idealistic stance, but the approach is very practical, very pragmatic.

So I love that concept. In practice, it's very difficult to get your data out of any of the monoliths that currently exist. And it's also difficult to have the tools necessary to effectively mine the data in the way that's immediately useful for you. Can you tell me how you take that extra step of saying get your own data to, oh, this is actually kind of cool and useful and fun.

Yeah. There's no wrong place to start, but it's worth it. It's a worthwhile journey.

It's something that's worth debating and questioning. It can be hard. Lately, it's become quite a bit easier. You can take out your data from quite a few places, and migration into different FOSS servers is possible and supported and encouraged quite a bit. I focus on NextCloud quite a bit, no affiliation, but I think their software is great for hosting and sharing your own files, and they have a connector to grab your data off any of the big public clouds, for example. You can just migrate it right in, and they help you do that right in the software.

Is Next the same as Vercel?

NextCloud was a fork of ownCloud.

Okay, different. Okay, got it.

It gives you like kind of a drop, your own Dropbox or a Google Drive, that kind of thing.

It's great that you tell me how to do it easily. What's the first step that I would want to do as a naive user trying to own my own data? How would I get started?

Get my book.

Okay.

For sure.

Very good pitching.

Vercel is hard to know where to start. It's not that hard to start, but there's so many choices out there that it's hard to know what to start with and what's worth your time.

So that's what I focus on in the book. It's designed to be not too long, not comprehensive.

It's not like a massive Linux, how to do everything to a server manual. It's what you need to do to help the people you care about, your group, help them own their data, help them migrate it and whatnot.

And the first step to that is you have to get a piece of hardware and stand up some services so they can use it, so they can put it behind their phone. Their phone can talk to it rather than a big public cloud you're locked in, whatnot. You want to have your data for you to pass on. We work hard to curate our data. So the idea is you could get my book and get a start at setting up your own server and services for your group.

I've never thought about self-hosting my eBird data first and then using APIs to submit it afterwards.

Would that change the way you think about your data or what kind of things?

It would give me a whole lot closer towards building my app so when I'm birding on the highway, which you shouldn't ever do, drive responsibly people, you could just click a button and say, saw a crow at this time, it'll log the location and then save it on my, that's just where my brain went. Long head listeners, I apologize for bringing up birds yet again. There's lots of reasons to do it though, right? There's a chilling effect when you're trying to share something sensitive with a friend and you usually just give in to like, okay, here's the doc, here's the link.

Why do you signal as much as I can?

Great.

But after that, docs, I use Google Docs for this podcast. I really should be using Cryptpad. Don't know why I don't. I just haven't made that switch yet.

Slightly harder, right? Slightly more hassle and somebody else sees it and they're a little slightly more confused. I think NextCloud is one tool that's, it just, it's kind of the current thing that fits that gap, but it does that for a lot of people. It can bring you up to speed by showing you familiar interfaces. Oh, here's a doc, here's a document and I can get it from the web or from a mobile device and I don't care where it's stored, but in this case, great, you've done the work ahead of time to set up a server and services so you can trust where it is served and it works quite well. I would say for me, I trust it more, it's more robust than when I did put things in the public cloud. I try not to, but again, you asked like where to start, why? Nobody's 100% anything. It's worth working on, I would say.

So you're an author. Is this your first book?

Yeah.

Exciting. Why are you an authority on this subject?

I've been curious for quite a while. I've been in tech for quite a while and done different things, use other people's servers. I've self-hosted quite a bit over for decades, but never, I guess I would say committed my family to going along with it, with going along with this with me and they agreed to and I said, I'll stand this up and you can use it and we'll talk through what I think that is just a key part. Like if it's just for you, I don't care, man. It's like everybody, them their own, that's great, but when it's a group, it can be very empowering. It's more meaningful, honestly, when you're doing it for more than one person, you share. So what I did was I stood this up, I took the time to do it right and I kept it going. I wanted no unplanned outages for a couple of years. I tried to treat it like a real server where I've got customers and everything. Well, my customers are right in the house with me and I already care about them. So that made it easy to... 24, 7 hour complaint line right there.

Luckily not too many.

Cool.

They're very understanding. They give me a lot of leniency, but they do make use of it also. They're the reason I'm doing this and I hope they agree when they come see my talk tomorrow.

Segwaying a bit. Love that. It's great. Basecamp recently said that they've switched from being in the cloud to hosting their own servers and as a result, they're saving \$7 million over the next five years because the cloud never works for them. That's a business operation. That's a business shift. And I used to host another podcast called Community to Cloud Native where I talked about the cloud and I sort of stopped doing it at some point, and I'm just curious, have you thought about pitching any of the book towards businesses to host their own data as opposed to just individuals?

Yeah. I think businesses are well aware. When they... At least the ones I've been in, we would always start with needs, budget, and then cost against cloud and self. And generally it comes to cloud hosting because of the convenience. You're just, yeah, I don't care where the servers are or the power of this and that. And then you kind of short term jump on it and then you're not thinking long term because, yeah, I think it is generally a short term play just to throw it in the cloud. And I'm not surprised that Basecamp is saving millions.

Other companies, it seems like they get big enough and they have enough compute needs. It's usually compute, not storage that chips them over into hosting their own. But I think the concepts are useful to businesses. I think people working in these bigger businesses, let's say mid-size, maybe a little beyond startup, but they are probably already familiar. And those people doing their sysadmin, admitting their cloud servers and such, they should walk through this exercise too. They should have a home lab. They should practice this stuff. They need to learn the fundamentals of sysadmin and containers and all the different ways to host and stuff like that. So I think they could find a lot of use out of this.

I don't address businesses directly in this book, but I think SoHo, small office, home office, smaller businesses could definitely make use of this kind of technology just to have their own cloud, have their own cloud, have their own data and the agency that goes along with that.

I'm not an industry expert on this, so this question may be naive. Would there be any benefit towards various small organizations and SMBs funding a cooperative data lake type thing, as opposed to going with the loud cloud foundries, which we're going to charge more because they can even though at scale they may actually have lower operating costs. Is there any reason to sort of think about running together with other companies to have your own open source data? Yeah, for sure. And not my area of expertise, but I would say for sure. Yeah, co-ops are great. Yeah, a number of people here are involved in our running co-ops.

There's a group in the UK called Redecentralized that's been working for the past five, 10 years on trying to find other ways to access and enable and make a standard of APIs between all the large data giants, Facebook, Twitter, Google, so that you can actually take your data out of these things and also put them back in if you want, where it's much more plug and play, but you're the person who owns your data, kind of like you can go to the doctor's office and say, I want all my records and then take them physically out and hand them to your next doctor, which most people aren't aware. I'm curious, given that you're interested in helping people make the shift towards owning their own data, being sovereign of their own world, have you thought about sitting on any sort of nonprofit board or working for any of this sort of Redecentralized type stuff to see how we can make a sea change to actually enable better API usage so we can get our data out of other companies? I haven't, but if they want me, game. Yeah, for sure. That's awesome. Compatibility is a huge thing, interoperability. It flies in the face of walled gardens, lock-in, so that's amazing that do companies participate in this or is it more a third-party effort? More a third-party effort, foundation type effort, just trying to figure this stuff out. I was just curious where you were sitting on any of those sort of discussions if you're helping out. Yeah, I would though. That's another great thing that we should question, we should work on, because our data is, I'm glad you brought up healthcare too. I mean, health records, I don't know. Tragedy. Oh my gosh. Every time I go to the doctor, I have to gather my own. You'd think that you just, oh, can you talk to my last doctor and get that? Well, kind of, you do a records request, it's cumbersome, and I've heard in other countries that there are APIs, and you have the right to request, and not just they send you a CD or a huge sheet of paper, you get digital access. And there are free software EHRs that are very interesting. I want to use that. I haven't yet, but I definitely want to gather my own data. And then when I go to the next doctor, it's just like, oh, here's the stuff you need to help me with this problem right now. Not just for myself too, other people I care for. I mean, I'd want to the same power.

One more weird question, which is you mentioned the word sovereignty. Digital sovereignty is normally used in open source spaces to mean a lack of reliance on another country's technical prowess. So for instance, the sovereign tech fund coming out of Germany, which is an idea to basically try and make Germany less reliant on American tech. Now, this could lead towards a Balkanization of the space. That's not the goal, but it's one of the ways that the messaging is often used to get politicians to go along with having sovereignty. So I'm curious where you sit on the libertarian access of owning your own data and being sovereign as an individual versus actually

thinking about being part of the same team as everyone else and working together to improve data access for everyone using current platforms. I think to me, the free software problem or the struggle has always been international. And I love the idea that if I'm solving a problem in my own country, it crosses borders quite freely. So I'm hoping that my use of the term data sovereignty

overcome theirs. But no, I was not aware of that. And politics will always come into it. But no, I think this is why one would hope this would transcend politics and serve individuals and groups, small groups. But I've heard about government switching to free and open source software. And I mean, how wonderful that public funds, public code, that kind of effort is so inspiring. I mean, it makes quite a bit of sense. Thank you for dealing with my hard ball. Sorry to ask difficult questions. Keep bringing it, keep in comment. I love it. Well, actually, we are running off on time. So I have a few more questions for you. One of them, where can people find this book? AdamMonson.com, A-D-A-M-O-N-S-E-N.com is a good place to start. I'll keep updates going there.

I don't have the website up for the book yet. It is content complete. Now I'm in editing and tech review. That's amazing. Thank you. That's a lot of work. Good job.

It's not a huge book. So part of the idea is to run 100 pages, print it right now.

And I want to stay there, but I want people to be able to get print copies. And I'm working on publishing and distribution. If you're a publisher, actually, please contact me. That could be interesting, but so far I'm planning on self publishing. And the book itself, I think this is significant. The book itself is free and open. You can remix, you can rebuild, you can reprint, even the licenses will be pretty clear in there and hopefully very amenable to sharing.

Because I also want to help other tech authors that are stuck, stumbling, not sure where to start. This is a starting point. The book build system itself is going to be free and open source software. You can build your own book with it. You could fill in the chapters and start your own.

Thank you, Richard, so much for the time to talk. You already answered my second question, which is I can find you in AdamMonson.com. Any other socials you want to plug?

All right. Well, thank you so much. You can find that link also in the show notes.

Adam, thanks for taking the time today. Good luck with the book.

Thank you, Richard.

Listeners, I hope you have enjoyed this podcast. If you're curious about Fossi where these were recorded, go to sfconservancy.org to the Software Freedom Conservancy's website where you can learn

more about it. It's been really, really fun to be here and have these great conversations about free and open source software. Of course, if you've liked this podcast, please let us know.

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