



i100

[NEWS](#) [VIDEO](#) [PEOPLE](#) [VOICES](#) [SPORT](#) [TECH](#) [LIFE](#) [PROPERTY](#) [ARTS + ENTS](#) [TRAVEL](#) [MONEY](#) [INDYBEST](#) [STUDENT](#) [OFFERS](#)

John Buckman: The battle to keep the internet free for all

The Business Interview: His entrepreneurial skills are put to good use in the battle to defend his vision of the web

STEPHEN FOLEY  Thursday 11 August 2011

[f SHARE](#) [t TWEET](#) [g+ SHARE](#) [REDDIT](#) [in SHARE](#)  Shares: 60 PRINT | A A A

John Buckman hands his fold-up bicycle to the maître d', scans the menu, gently rebuffs the sommelier's suggestion of English sparkling wine ("You can't even cook with it") and settles in for a philosophical chat.

The British-born, US and French-educated head of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) is a man without borders, who splits his time between London and Silicon Valley, running two businesses, indulging his passions for the arts, and campaigning for freedom on the internet.

When *The Independent* caught up with him in the UK, he was alive with tales of a recent "soirée" at his London home, a regular event he holds in the style of a French salon. He had invited a shakuhachi player to entertain the guests, if entertain is the precise word, since the didgeridoo-style Japanese flute is more of a personal meditative tool than a performance instrument. "It's the one performance where it is perfectly acceptable to fall asleep," he says.

One of Mr Buckman's businesses is Magnatune, a distributor of world and classical music and defunct styles of Eighties electronica, by artists who have found no place in the modern factories of iTunes and cost-cutting record-label giants. Unlike traditional labels, Magnatune lets the artists keep the rights to their work. "I make about three months' rent for 4,000 musicians, and that's my contribution right now," he explains.

Mr Buckman's other venture is BookMooch, whose 250,000 members swap second-hand books amongst themselves. "It was inspired by a Bruce Sterling science-fiction story, where everyone had a watch on them that kept track of what they were doing and suggested favours they could do for others at no cost to themselves, through an invisible co-operative net."

This pair of ventures, like his soirées, speak to Mr Buckman's

belief that the world is at its best when people collaborate, share and create, and where the internet is the most powerful force for achieving these goals. It is a vision of the web that is under constant threat from corporations that aggressively enforce "all rights reserved" copyright, and from governments and courts who spend too much time snooping on what people do online.

Which is why he joined the EFF, and the board of the Open Rights Group, a similar UK-based campaign group. "I am not actually a very political person," he says, "but I find there is a British person in me, saying: 'That's not on.'"

The EFF was founded 21 years ago in an early wave of public and corporate concern about computer hackers, to defend computer programmers and entrepreneurs caught up in the US authorities' campaign against cyber-crime. Some of its first funding came from the co-founder of Apple, Steve Wozniak. It still advises hackers these days – not the "black hat" types out to steal people's credit-card details, but the kids and hobbyists who risk falling foul of intellectual property laws when they tinker with other people's source codes or hardware – and it goes into battle to shape copyright and free-speech laws through the US court system.

It took on the Texan telecoms giant AT&T which was revealed to have secretly aided the security services by allowing them access to phone records and to wiretap customers in the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks, a case that was stopped only when Congress retrospectively legitimised the assistance. In the UK, the EFF is campaigning against new laws to block websites suspected of aiding music and film piracy, and last week it welcomed the Government's climbdown from provisions of the Digital Economy Act that would have forced internet service providers to do so.

"Instead of trying to get laws passed or repealed, we try to get case law we like," Mr Buckman says. "Judges are much more reasonable people than politicians. They listen to arguments and they are supposed to make a decision based on what everyone heard, not on a back-room deal. But when you consider we are 50 people working on the entire body of US law against every company that wants to push things too far, that is not many people."

For many companies, particularly music and media businesses, the EFF's lines are hard to swallow. But the bottom line, according to its chairman, is this: the internet is new, the laws governing it are new, and it is important to carve out as much protection for free speech and freedom of activity as possible. Laws that might seem to be aimed only at child pornographers or music pirates might one day be used to infringe basic human rights and to censor the web in egregious ways.

"One of the most interesting things that WikiLeaks has taught is that your best defence against the government is putting your words out on dead trees. If you are purely digital, you don't have

seem to have anywhere near as strong a legal defence. A huge amount of our effort goes into building up case law to show that journalism online should have all the same legal protections. And by journalism we mean a very broad definition of journalism that includes bloggers and citizen journalists. Essentially anyone who writes on the internet engages in journalism, and we think should be protected."

The EFF under Mr Buckman is carving out an influential niche in the world of advocacy, on – as its name suggests – the frontier of technical and business innovation. There are running battles to come between those who envision a sometimes anarchic, always collaborative, internet where people freely share, adapt and build new ventures, and those who want to impose order and restore the primacy of intellectual property over those who would steal it. The polymath has chosen his side, and Mr Buckman is clear about why.

"London is a screaming example of the success that openness leads to," he says, before cycling off into the Central London traffic. "In the European Union now, every talented person who leaves school spends a couple of years in London. It's the new British empire. Where before we had bureaucrats all over the world, now we have Anglophiles."

Buckman in brief

Campaigner Chairman of the Electronic Frontier Foundation since 2010; director of the Open Rights Group.

Entrepreneur Currently chief executive of BookMooch, a book-swap service, and Magnatune, an artist-friendly record label. Previously founded Lyris, a direct-marketing firm. "At one point George Bush used my software to send out all his emails in his re-election campaign. To do penance I gave a free copy to the Howard Dean campaign."

World traveller Born in London and raised in France and the US, his family moved around with his father's job as an executive for Singer sewing machines. Studied philosophy at Bates College in Maine and the Sorbonne.

Musician Renaissance lute and viola da gamba player, and a composer of jazz and classical jingles for radio.



Suggested Topics : [Copyright](#) [Cycling](#) [Justice](#) [Piracy](#)

0 COMMENT
