The Mozilla Foundation believes that the best way to increase user power on the Internet is to turn users into creators. We talk to executive director Mark Surman about how this could be achieved.

By Kris Sangani

I ENTER a modern office reception at the heart of the fashionable theatre district in London’s West End. The third floor houses offices of Mozilla Foundation, Mozilla Spaces. My eyes roll with typical corporate pessimism when I scoot past the reception and see a central area dominated by pool tables, pinball machines – and a large bar area serving bean-to-cup coffee, smoothies and soft drinks.

But what may seem as customary kooky US West Coast office culture serves a more pragmatic purpose for the mega social enterprise that is the Mozilla Foundation. This is designed as a welcoming drop-in area for Mozilla’s thousands of voluntary developers to work and collaborate together to create free software applications that fit into the organisation’s social ethos.

I’m here to interview Mozilla Foundation’s executive director, Mark Surman, on the eve of the Mozilla Festival at London’s O2. Dubbed ‘Mozfest’, this global get-together is for developers and inventors to exchange ideas and work together to create socially beneficial applications.

The meeting rooms at Mozilla Spaces are all named after iconic British comedies. After being ushered into the ‘Red Dwarf’ room, I take off my coat, check my digital recorder. It’s not an easy task considering that this small office/meeting room is home to a keyboard (of the musical, rather than the typing, variety), an electric guitar and a full-sized drumkit.

Surman is in the UK to launch Lightbeam, a privacy tool for Mozilla’s Firefox Internet browser. He arrives with his PR manager. Unfortunately, there’s not room for the three of us, so my interview about Lightbeam, Mozilla, Firefox and global Internet privacy issues takes the form of a private chat.

Lightbeam is a tool to allow users to better visualise the interactions they are having online with the websites they are using by tracking how the cookies are used.

“Maybe in Europe, because of the cookie warning, users are more aware that cookies exist and it’s great to see the amount of people turning on their do not track flag,” says Surman when I ask about how savvy European web users are.

He believes that the EU-mandated cookie warning has helped to educate web users on how these small tracking files are used.

Surman describes himself as a ‘community activist’ and technology executive of more than 20 years. As a developer, he has overseen the development of standards in multimedia and interactivity on the web.

Before joining Mozilla, Surman was awarded one of the first Shuttleworth Foundation Fellowships (founded by Mark Shuttleworth of Ubuntu Linux fame), where he explored the application of open-source principles to philanthropy – basically extending a software development philosophy to areas such as school textbooks.

As a developer of note, he also oversaw the development of Popcorn.js and its integration into the HTML5 standard. Some see this as the future of online video. >
Therefore, he has serious credibility among the open-source developer community.

The Mozilla Foundation, which he runs, is best known for the development and distribution of The Firefox browser for free. Netscape created the Mozilla Organization in 1998 to coordinate the development of the Mozilla Application Suite.

When AOL (Netscape’s parent) scaled back its involvement with Mozilla Organization, the Mozilla Foundation was launched in July 2003 to ensure Mozilla could survive without Netscape. Hardware and intellectual property was transferred to the organisation from Netscape and AOL.

Initially, the remit of the Mozilla Foundation grew to become much wider than that of mozilla.org, with the organisation taking on many tasks that were traditionally left to Netscape and other vendors of Mozilla technology.

The commercial activities of the foundation are handled by the Mozilla Corporation and the Mozilla Foundation delegates all its development and business-related activities to this commercial subsidiary. This allows the Mozilla Foundation to focus on governance and policy issues, and it continues to oversee non-commercial product development activities.

One such policy issue is privacy. The organisation has been promoting the privacy of consumers and citizens for over a decade and very recently – since the revelations from Edward Snowden in the Guardian about the activities of the CIA and the British Secret Service – it appears that a lot of others are talking about it as well.

The giants of social media and Internet technology are calling for greater restraint and regulation from governments on how personal information from citizens is tracked. But these are businesses who are also tracking the activities of their consumers – the very same citizens with whom they are worried about the activities.

“With recent news events, we are seeing more and more people thinking about privacy and then the question is: what do people want to do about it?” says Surman.

His proposed solution is to tackle privacy on three key fronts. “One is what kind of software and tools can we have to have control over our own privacy choices, where our data flows and whether our data is exposed,” he explains.

The second method to tackle privacy would involve policy and legislature. Surman has already cited EU cookie legislation as providing best-practice in educating users about how their personal information is gathered and how their web usage is tracked by Internet companies.

Going further

Surman feels that a lot more could be done, and he is encouraged by moves in the Californian legislature for companies to state clearly if they will honour commitments on DNT (Do Not Track) requests from web users.

The proposed bill would require an operator to disclose whether or not it honours a request from a consumer to disable online tracking and would also require an operator to disclose if it does not allow third parties to conduct online tracking on the commercial website or online service. Surman welcomes this clarity in the contentious debate surrounding DNT proposals.

The third piece of the puzzle, according to Surman, is getting the public educated on how these cookies work and to take control.

“We’ve moved beyond the question on whether we can be completely private. Most consumers want to be able to make the choice when to be private and when not. “We want users not to just know how browsers work, but how information flows. We really need a dramatic increase in web literacy and given that we live our lives online, we think having that web literacy is as important as knowing how to read, do math. It’s almost like a fourth literacy in the digital age.”

Surman points out that, for the web to work in citizens’ or consumers’ favour, it needs to realise that there are times when we
want to broadcast and there are times when we want to be a little bit more discreet in how we release our personal news. The problem is that, in most circumstances you only have two options: public or private.

“It’s a pretty normalised part of our world to be quiet or loud about some things or to have our curtains closed. I may be whispering to my friend because I’m telling him a joke that he would find funny but might offend somebody else,” explains Surman.

“We’re at the beginning of this era of the Internet and its going to last at least to the end of this century. We’re really figuring out the infrastructure; the legal structure and the social norms for choosing how and when to be private which is just a normal part of human society.”

And education is the key and the growth of Firefox as one of the most popular browsers on consumer and business desktops demonstrates how The Mozilla Foundation could help users to become developers of sorts. This would start from the first day of school through the rest of a person’s life. “Our first stab is to go at it from a grassroots level. When we think about how Firefox adoption worked, it was really about mass grassroots education campaign.

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Mark Surman, Mozilla

“Millions of people installed Firefox for other people and when asked why, the answer was ‘It’s safer and more private!’ That started millions of conversations and we still see that today as we bump into people who are not technical at all but use Firefox. They may not know the complexities of it, but they had their consciences raised just by that interaction.”

Webmaker
Mozilla has created an education initiative to achieve this goal. Mozilla Webmaker has a goal to help millions of people move from using the web to making the web. As part of Mozilla’s non-profit mission, Webmaker’s primary aim is to help the world’s technically minded citizens increase their understanding of the web as part of a global web literacy drive.

“It’s a call to action to teach someone something about the web, and summer 2013 is when we really kicked it off with our Maker Party. Some 1,700 events happened around the summer in just in the course of three months. We’re also starting to work with schools and looking at formal curriculum.”

One of the Mozilla Festival’s aims is to extend this education principle. Surman does not want Mozfest to be seen as just a mass hackathon.

“Mozfest isn’t just about web development tools. There are some people there developing curriculum on how to do web development. There are some people looking at privacy; there are some people looking at how to bring more of the web into games. All these people have a hacker ethic and are looking at how we build the value of the web into all aspects of our society.”

Surman is adamant that readers of E&T should be in the vanguard. He says, “Engineers should be at the forefront of building this curriculum. That’s really what Mozfest is – people taking that kind of action.”

“As one of our founders, Mitchell Baker, said: ‘Mozilla aims to turn users into makers of the Web.’ …Mozilla wants to move back to the world that Tim Berners-Lee envisaged,” he explains. Surman sees user empowerment centred on the functionality of the browser.*