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Free software!

You can’t usually do the right thing without inconveniencing yourself. Bruce Byfield reckons free software is a rare opportunity.

When you turn on your computer, you’re making a political statement.

If, like most people, your computer boots Microsoft Windows, the statement you’re making is that transnational corporations should control access to the most powerful public media that ever existed. You’re passively accepting, too, that non-industrial nations should be kept from developing, and helping to preserve a monoculture that threatens the existence of minority languages. At a personal level, you’re accepting that these same corporations should control your access to educational and government services and have a right to install lock-down technologies on your computer without your permission – to say nothing of controlling what other software you can use and how you use it.

Most people, of course, never think of these implications. When confronted, some will claim that none of this matters. Most, even social activists, accept the situation because they don’t know of any alternative.

Yet an alternative does exist, and it’s becoming more viable by the day.

It’s called Free Software. It has already built and still runs most of the internet. Now, increasingly, Free Software is finding its way on to the desktops of those who want their ethics to extend to their computers.

From the city of Munich and the Extremadura region of Spain, to Brazil and the Indian state of Kerala, the possibilities of Free Software are being explored and, in many cases, implemented. Adaptation is slower in North America, where Microsoft’s influence is strongest, but even there many universities, corporations and

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government departments are at least considering the possibilities.

Where it all comes from

Free Software began in 1984 when Richard M Stallman started the GNU project to build a free operating system. Stallman had become concerned about a major shift in the culture of programming. With the increased popularity of computers, software was being treated as a commodity and the old academic tradition of sharing programs in the name of exchanging ideas was dead.

As an alternative to the new proprietary programs, Stallman created the Free Software Foundation as a home for his project and wrote a software licence called the GNU General Public Licence. 'The GNU General Public Licence is intended to guarantee your freedom to share and change free software,' the Preamble to the licence says, 'to make sure the software is free for all its users.' The licence then goes on to grant users the right to copy, install and change any software that uses it in any way that they please, so long as a few basic conditions are met, including preserving the original programmers' credit and using the same licence for any modified version.

These were radical ideas in the 1980s and they were largely ignored by the general public. Free Software's real boost came in the early 1990s, when the internet – that it had largely created – in turn allowed groups of programmers to co-operate remotely. In a few years they had built a whole operating system called GNU/Linux – or Linux, as it is often shortened to.

Soon, thousands of people were collaborating worldwide to fill in the gaps. At first their efforts were focused on GNU/Linux. However, enthusiasm quickly led to similar efforts on Windows and the Mac, as well as several other lesser-known operating systems. An offshoot and ally, the Open Source Movement, uses the same licences and co-operative work methods, but its main concerns are software quality and working with business. Today, some gaps remain – notably games and some drivers for the very latest software. But it is now possible, without much effort, to perform routine office functions entirely in free software that is usually as good as, and often superior to, the proprietary tools it replaces.

Need to replace MS Office? Try OpenOffice.org. Internet Explorer? Try Mozilla Firefox. PhotoShop? The GIMP. And, in many cases, you'll find not just one alternative, but dozens, especially if you drop Windows or OS X in favour of GNU/Linux.

The free software world view

If you're not a programmer or a lawyer, all this might sound as exciting as washing the dishes. So why should you care? Because, in ensuring their own power to tinker with software, free software programmers have also empowered users.

With free software, access to programs becomes a matter of accessibility to the internet or contact with a project rather than the size of your bank balance. Instead of going to the store, users can download the type of program they need from the

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internet – and have it automatically installed in minutes. Upgrades are the same. If organizations or users need some functionality that isn't there, they can add it themselves, or become involved with the project that develops it and lobby for changes. Moreover, organizations no longer need to be worried about licence audits or getting activation codes.

The fact that it comes without a price tag doesn't hurt, either. Although the Free Software Foundation prefers to emphasize philosophical freedoms, its cost-free nature remains one of the main attractions for cash-strapped governments and educational institutions. Even allowing for training, free software has been found consistently cheaper to run than proprietary software in every neutral study ever conducted.

If you are socially active, you'll probably find the values associated with free software even more attractive. For one thing, projects are usually communal organizations, where authority and respect are based largely on contributions. Many of the members, too, are volunteers, working only for credit, although a growing number are paid for their efforts by companies like Google or IBM that see benefits in both software results and public relations by offering assistance.

In some companies, too, the co-operative ethos spills over into their interactions with competitors, evolving a less capitalistic, more humane way of doing business. The same clashes of ego occur as anywhere else, but, even so, the thousands of projects around the world are living proof of how efficient collaborative methods can be.

One more reason to support free software is that it helps to put the entire world on an equal footing. Free Software Foundation supporters believe that it is a basic necessity of free speech. Today this requires that everyone who wants it has internet access. Yet, given the price of proprietary software, many people – especially in impoverished nations, but also in the inner city and remote rural regions in the industrialized world – can't afford legal access. Nor can some governments afford to build the technological infrastructure to improve their countries. Free software removes many of these barriers.

Admittedly, hardware can also be a problem. That's one reason why One Laptop Per Child, an initiative whose goal is to build a $100 computer and see copies distributed as widely as possible, finds many of its most enthusiastic supporters in the free software community. The computer will be distributed to millions of schoolchildren in the developing world and free software will be installed (see http://laptop.org).

Some people question the priorities of the project, arguing that it matters less than ensuring food or shelter. Yet, by the same arguments, efforts to improve education in developing nations should also be ignored. The issue is less about priorities than about people helping in the areas where they can make a personal difference.

Similarly, personal computers and the internet threaten to produce a monoculture. Fortunately for the British, North Americans and Australasians, the language of the monoculture is English. Those in less dominant states or in minority regions aren't so lucky. Often they have trouble finding programs written in their own language, because proprietary software vendors have judged the market too small to be worth

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developing a product for it. However, armed with enthusiasm and a perception of need, volunteers can often bridge the gaps that economic realities leave. OpenOffice.org, for example – the alternative to MS Office – has been the first office suite in many languages, including Welsh, Scots, Gaelic and Slovenian. With free software tools, minority language users can keep their language alive and growing. In fact, Free Software projects have frequently been the originators of dozens of computer terms in such languages.

Ethical computers and civil society

It’s all very simple: supporting free software is good for you and even better for the global community. Yet fewer than 10 per cent of computer users have any free software installed.

A large part of the reason is probably the tactics used by Microsoft to encourage the use of its products. However, Peter Brown, Executive Director of the Free Software Foundation () and a former New Internationalist co-operative member, suggests some additional reasons. For one thing, he suggests, the implications of Free Software are so large that mainstream journalists have trouble covering the issue. When Brown tried to interest a friend at the BBC in covering free software, his friend was overwhelmed. ‘He was like: “This is a big topic we’re talking about,”’ Brown recalls.‘“It covers disks, it covers downloads, it covers television, it covers iPods. How on earth am I going to wrap up this story?”’

Another reason, Brown suggests, is that until recently the free software community has not managed to contact potential supporters who lack a strong interest in technology. The philosophy and organization of the movement have close affinities with those of social activists, charities and religious groups, yet such people know little about them. Many people in such groups have a minimal knowledge of technology, and tend to accept the dominant media portrayal of technologists as smart but anti-social people whose concerns are irrelevant to the average person.

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Yet, slowly, the connections are being made. For example, as the Free Software Foundation explains in its Defective by Design campaign, the increasing spread of ‘lock-down’ technologies that can limit users’ control of their own hardware and obtain information about their habits without their consent raises issues about consumer rights, privacy, anti-trust and industry standards. In such cases, the technical aspects become secondary to the social implications.

‘When you’re talking about recycling, you don’t say that you’ll take waste to this location and heat it to so many degrees. No-one needs to know that,’ Brown says. ‘You don’t need to know the architecture of GNU/Linux in order to make a judgment call about the ethics of free software.’

In the end, he says, ‘Free software should be an obvious civil-society issue. It should be as obvious as recycling cans. It should be something that every parent should be asking when they go into a parent-teacher meeting: is the school using free

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software? Is my child being taught to use free software? Having control over your computer and knowing that your devices aren't spying on you, that you have an ethical computer – [these] are all issues for civil society.'

Support begins with personal involvement. Instead of trying to grapple all at once with the complications, start simply. Look up the subject at Wikipedia and Google (two organizations with strong connections to the free software communities) and choose a program or two to try. Two good choices are the OpenOffice.org office suite (http://www.openoffice.org) and the Mozilla Firefox web browser (http://www.mozilla.com).

What happens next is between you and your conscience.

Bruce Byfield is a journalist and editor for the Open Source Technology Group.

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