

Free Software Matters: Free Government

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Eighteen months ago I said, in this space, that government adoption of free software was the next objective of the Free Software Movement in our campaign to bring freedom to technology. I said it was also the development Microsoft most feared. My forecast has turned out correct.

As the New York Times recently reported, Microsoft and Intel have established, together with a few small businesses around the world, a grandly-named "Initiative for Software Choice," which seeks to prevent government from choosing free software.

Considering that they're posing as freedom fighters, the members of this so-called initiative are surprisingly alarmed by the ongoing outbreak of freedom. The bad news, they told the Times, is that more free choosing is going on all the time:

There are currently 66 government proposals, statements and studies promoting open source software in 25 countries, according to the Initiative for Software Choice. The policy statements and legislative proposals mainly encourage the use of [free or] open source software in government procurement, and nearly all of them have cropped up in the last 18 months.

I guess one could say that my crop has cropped up on schedule.

It was clever public relations for Microsoft to say the opposite of what it means, creating a "pro-choice" organization that opposes government choice. Given the corner it's now in, there is no other way out but the big

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lie. Free software is available at zero marginal cost to all the world's governments, which are responsible for wise use of taxes and can no longer justify paying out public funds in massive subsidies to Microsoft. By using free software, government not only saves money but also shares in technology transfer with the private sector, pooling development resources in the unique way that the free software commons makes possible.

Collectively, governments are the world's largest users of software. If they switch, proving to the private sector that the needs of any organization, large or small, can now be met beautifully through the employment of free software, the monopoly's heyday is over.

This proposition is so obviously right that it should not require much marketing, but every good idea benefits from promotion. Microsoft's most formidable competitor is now committed to making the sale. IBM—which has made enormous investments in distributing GNU/Linux and the rest of the free software community's products—is telling all its government customers about the benefits of using free software. IBM would be pleased to deliver standardized free software systems to government purchasers of its hardware and services, at nominal prices, thus improving marketability of its hardware products and reducing the cost of its services.

Working with commercial partners such as IBM, as well as with non-commercial developers and distributors of free software, governments can realize both economic and social benefits from competition in the software market. Naturally there is an enormous reduction in the cost of acquiring software; indeed, those governments which have been under pressure to stop using pirated copies of proprietary software are also realizing that adoption of free software substantially improves user satisfaction and eliminates the need for the proprietary software, at no cost. Government use of free software makes local software development opportunities, as technical students everywhere learn how to install, maintain, and improve it. This is just one aspect of the enormous human capital improvement that comes when free software—whose users can learn anything about how computers work by reading the code of the programs that they use themselves—is pervasively employed.

With the involvement of IBM, a firm that has established commercial relations with almost every government on earth, free software's time in government has come. In Germany, in Peru, in China, soon in France and Canada, Malaysia and Brazil—we're going to be doing the public's business. The pitch to governments is simple: freedom produces terrific software that makes good social sense and costs orders of magnitudes less than Microsoft's.

So the Initiative for Software Choice is right to be concerned. If I represented the monopolist who doesn't want governments to be able to choose free software, I'd be concerned, too. But the deceptive name reminds us that one has to be a little careful with words, now that everybody's pretending to be for "choice." My advice is, look for the phrase that nobody ever misuses: FREE SOFTWARE. Nobody calls it free software who doesn't mean "free as in freedom." So you'll never catch Microsoft using the phrase. We're the Free Software Movement. We don't just say we're for software choice: We *do* software choice. We're freeing the world from a particularly wealthy monopoly that wants to convince everyone that worse is better, dearer is cheaper, and slavery is freedom. Governments are beginning to understand, and it's time for all of us, everywhere, to make clear that free governments should stand for freedom. Let your elected officials know that you're part of the Free Government Software Movement; tell them that everyone from IBM to the twelve-year-old next door knows that government can save heaps of money and get everything to work better by using free software. It's time to think globally, act locally, and bring free software to power.