

NEWS ANALYSIS

The Linux Voice view on what's going on in the world of Free Software.

Opinion

Free or open?

Which is more important? The ethics of Free Software, or the pragmatism of open source?



Simon Phipps is president of the Open Source Initiative and a board member of the Open Rights Group and of Open Source for America.

concrete set of criteria so that businesses could know if they had permission in advance to collaborate, plus a term that could be used with business people that did not instantly distract people from the real point.

For those with English as a first language, “free” invokes a narrative frame relating to price, and the concept of liberty can only

stops delivering the pragmatic values. That’s why “open core” software fails, for example. Its focus on making the source available omits granting permission in advance to collaborate on the whole software solution.

It fails to guarantee software freedom, and without it the pragmatic benefits of open source don’t materialise either. There are plenty of other failure modes for Free and

There’s a decades-old discussion hidden behind the terms “free software” and “open source” which surprisingly still divides people even today. What’s at the root of the division? Should we still be divided?

The Free Software Foundation was created by Richard Stallman to promote the ethical imperative of Free Software. In the late 1990s a group of experienced people concluded that the term “free software” was a problem in communicating the ideals of software freedom, because the word “free” was too often associated with getting something for nothing.

To better promote the idea that the benefits of software freedom relate to flexibility and community, they decided to coin a new term – “open source” – and start a new organisation, OSI (the Open Source Initiative), to act as the steward of the OSD (Open Source Definition) and rule on which copyright licences truly delivered software freedom.

The people who coined this term were almost all advocates of software freedom as an ethical concept as well as of its pragmatic benefits. They just wanted a

“It’s important for every member of the community to realise that we’re part of a single movement.”

be introduced by way of explanation. As linguistic theorist George Lakoff explains, once the narrative frame is set it’s nearly impossible to change it, so it’s better to start a conversation with a term that invokes the correct frame – I prefer to speak of “flexibility” – and then introduce other terms later – I speak of “software freedom”.

We need flexibility

At first, Richard Stallman accepted the new term, but sadly a set of personality conflicts led to him rejecting it strongly, eventually even condemning use of the term “open source” as ethically bankrupt. But the answer to my original question is that both terms matter, and neither is effective without the other. A focus on ethics without pragmatics alienates many people by sounding “preachy”, while a focus on pragmatics without ethics drifts astray over time and in the process of becoming ethically bankrupt as Stallman asserts also

Open Source Software – the argumentative collective that insists on ideology; the company-dominated project that denies liberty to collaborators; the single-copyright-holder who changes the licence – and so on.

The dual imperative of adhering to the concept of software freedom as a reference model while articulating and securing pragmatic benefits of a collaborative development model is the only successful approach. In every case of failure, part of that dual imperative has been ignored.

Open can also be free

I may be president of the OSI, but I am a strong and persistent advocate of software freedom. I don’t believe there’s any conflict in that, and neither do most of my good friends at the FSF. I believe it’s important for every member of the community, whether they use the term “Free Software” or the term “Open Source”, to realise we are all part of a single movement, the software freedom movement.

Neither ethics without pragmatics nor pragmatics without ethics actually deliver the software we need. Software freedom does.

“A focus on ethics without pragmatics alienates many people by sounding preachy.”

CATCHUP

Summarised: the biggest news stories from the last month

1 Groupon tries to nab Gnome trademark, fails spectacularly

Online voucher seller Groupon decided to launch a new point-of-sale OS called Gnome, and applied for trademarks, thereby causing serious hassle for the desktop environment. So the Gnome Foundation asked the community for financial help, raised \$102,000 in legal fees, and Groupon backed down. The moral of the story? Don't let your marketing department mess with Free Software communities – they can mobilise the troops damn quickly.

2 Mozilla says adieu to Google, Firefox to use Yahoo Search in future

Google and Mozilla have had a long running partnership, with much of *Firefox's* development funded by the search giant. But from December, *Firefox* will use Yahoo as its default search engine, thanks to a new deal. It's all about "promoting choice and innovation" according to a bland buzzword-saturated statement from Mozilla; more realistically, the company simply needs money to fund its browser, mobile OS and other projects.

3 Firefox OS comes to the Raspberry Pi

In other Mozilla news, FirefoxOS is being ported to everyone's favourite single-board computer. The developers would like to see the OS reach "parity with Raspbian" in 2015. <http://tinyurl.com/ojde3yg>



Firefox OS

4 Debian is forked: say hello to "Devuan"

This happened just a few hours before we went to press, so it's too soon to tell whether it's a serious effort or an elaborate troll, but a new website has been set up at <http://devuan.org> which aims to create a spin-off of Debian without *Systemd*. Devuan aims to "protect the freedom of its community of developers and users", and also "preserve Init freedom". This is a mammoth undertaking, but if it's real, it's good to see some proper work and not just flame wars on forums.

5 FreeBSD receives \$1m donation from WhatsApp founder Jan Koum

Happy days for the FreeBSD Foundation: the CEO and co-founder of the WhatsApp messaging service has donated \$1m to the project. "FreeBSD helped to lift me out of poverty", explained Koum, describing how access to a no-cost and robust Unix flavour helped him to get a job at Yahoo and build a career. "We'll all benefit if FreeBSD can continue to give people the same opportunity it gave me, and help more startups", he added.

6 Microsoft open sources .NET, go cross-platform

We've come a long way from Steve Ballmer's "Linux is a cancer" slurs from the last decade. Microsoft has announced that it's open sourcing the full server-side .NET stack, and "expanding it to run on the Linux and Mac OS platforms". This could help developers who've had headaches using Mono in the past, and the source code will be uploaded to <https://github.com/Microsoft/dotnet>. We're still cautious about the company, but it's a welcome move nonetheless.

7 Huge success for Jolla's crowdfunded tablet

Smartphone maker Jolla, founded in 2011 by ex-Nokia employees, has decided to take on the tablet market. The company went to Indiegogo to ask for \$380,000 – but at the time of writing, with still 12 days left to go in the campaign, almost \$1.3m had been raised. The tablet will run the Linux kernel-based Sailfish OS, and be equipped with a 1.8GHz quad-core Intel chip, 2GB of RAM and 32GB storage. The expected retail price is \$249, and it goes on-sale in May 2015.



8 Debian Systemd dev quits after flamewar burnout

This is rather sad. Tollef Food Heen, a Debian developer who maintained *Systemd* in the distro, has stepped back from his role after receiving a huge amount of flak for his work. "The load of the continued attacks is just becoming too much", he said on a Debian mailing list, and later remarked that conspiracy theories (that Red Hat was forcing every distro to use *Systemd*) were also making him glum. Hopefully someone else will step up and not get flamed at every turn.