NEWSANALYSIS

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

Opinion

Steering where you look

The seductive power of boundary conditions can ruin your business and community.

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When I learned to drive, my instructor told me "you steer where you look" -- in other words, wherever you focus your attention becomes your destination, so keep your eyes on the road ahead and don't worry about the stores at the roadside (or even too much about the kerb and the parked vehicles).

The same principle seems applicable in other contexts. We're moving away from a hierarchical, post-industrial society and evolving into a meshed society of peers, interacting in variable roles on their own terms. That's challenging established institutions, but sadly they have frequently "steered where they looked" and made the wrong choices.

The big media lobby -- especially the movie and music industries, but also book, software and games publishers -- is right to be concerned about systematic infringement of their copyrights by commercial-scale criminals. But they have let their eyes wander.

They have looked so long in anger upon those crooks, invested so much time and money in frustrating them, that they've become fixated on copyright enforcement and forgotten to keep pace with the expectations of their customers.

They've let the market run away from them and failed to build new businesses around their fans and friends. Instead, fixating on copyright infringement, they alienate the very people who should be their best bet for the future by treating them as criminals. They may not go as far as chasing everyone with lawsuits, but the unskippable admonishments on DVDs and their like shout loud and clear: "We may have some of your money but we still don't trust you."

Open entrepreneurship

Open source projects are another case, perhaps a little more subtle. Entrepreneurs see the word "free" and assume there's a commons there to exploit for profit. But open source only has a commons once a community gathers -- it doesn't magically arrive the instant you apply an OSI-approved licence. Moreover, the commons exists only by the collective agreement of its participants to set aside certain rights so that collaboration becomes possible. Entrepreneurs tend to be so focussed on leveraging a free network effect that they overlook the actual mechanism that makes it happen.

An open source community is an example of a group of people choosing to synchronise a fragment of their mutual interests, each at their own expense, for the benefit of all involved including themselves. While there may sometimes be a non-profit organisation for administrative reasons, an open source community is inherently neither a non-profit or a for-profit organisation; profit is an orthogonal concept.

The process by which this distraction from core values happens is subtle, and undoing the error is hard. It probably happens incrementally as communities pass through the scales described by Dunbar Numbers [the theoretical number of people we are capable of forming direct relationships with without our brains melting, proposed by Robin Dunbar to be between 100 and 230]. They eventually mistake their boundary conditions for their core values.

At first a community is small enough for everyone to have a set of direct trust relationships. As the community grows through the Dunbar limit, it becomes necessary to define the norms for the community, to make it clear to newcomers what the values of the community are.

As growth continues, those norms become rules and the frequency with which they are enforced increases. Gradually, communicating the rules to outsiders becomes a common community function and the ability to do so becomes a community skill. Over time, application and explanation of those rules becomes so important to the community that they overshadow the original core values.

Influence, not control

There's no canned solution for this; it takes a brave executive to step away from the weapons and chart a course for influencing the meshed society instead of attempting to control it. The news that Getty Images is now allowing free embedding of their entire catalogue for non-commercial use is just such a bold, visionary move. I hope we will see much much more of that and many fewer anti-fan lawsuits and copyright-assignment-based open source projects.

> **"The media lobby alienate the people who should be their best bet by treating them as criminals."**

CATCHUP
Summarised: the eight biggest news stories from the last month

1 Linux has won. No, really.
According to technology analysts Gartner, Android has now overtaken iOS as the leading operating system for tablets. And this is massively significant – the same date suggests that in around 115m tablets were sold worldwide in 2012, compared with 200m in 2013, so in contrast to PC sales, tablets are growing quickly, and Linux is taking the majority of this very large pie. Android is estimated to have 62% of the tablet market, with iOS on 36% and Microsoft lagging behind them both with on just 2% market share.

2 Microsoft to follow strategy espoused by Linux Voice readers
We've only been in print for two issues, but already Linux Voice is having an effect at the top table of tech. We asked listeners to the Linux Voice podcast what advice they would give to the new CEO, Satya Nadella, and among the responses was the suggestion that the company should give Windows 8 away for free, to preserve the market for the lucrative Microsoft Office package. Lo and behold, it has come to pass, as the soothsayers of LV foresaw.

3 Mt GOX, the world's biggest Bitcoin exchange, has collapsed
The rabbit hole gets deeper for the most widely used cryptocurrency.

4 Broadcom releases the source code for Raspberry Pi graphics stack
Much as we love the Raspberry Pi, it isn't as free as in speech as it could be, largely because Eben Upton is a pragmatist and doesn't particularly want to make things easier for the Pi's profit-driven competitors. However, we're glad to see that Broadcom, maker of the Pi's graphics hardware, has released the source code for the Pi's graphics chipset under a BSD licence. Well done Broadcom!
www.raspberrypi.org/archives/6299

5 Google Chromium browser ported to run on Mir graphics server
The great schism at the heart of Linux graphics continues, as Ubuntu continues to go it alone with its Mir display server. It has now managed to get Chrome running on the server, which is its intended replacement for X. Meanwhile, most distros have elected to use Wayland as the replacement for X. X is such an old, ingrained standard that it is taking time to replace it, but the day will come, and either Wayland or Mir will be the new norm.

6 Linux Containers reaches its 1.0 release
Linux Containers have been bubbling away under the radar for a while now – discerning sysadmins can read our take on them on page 62 – and now they have reached their first major version number. Linux Containers can be thought of as being a bit like VirtualBox, except that rather that being completely virtualised, they use the existing kernel and just create their own userspace, making them handy for anyone who wants to be able to deploy lots of Linux instances easily.

7 Canonical unveils manufacturers for Ubuntu for Phones
Like buses, you wait ages for a phone manufacturer to team up with Canonical to bring Ubuntu for Phones to market, then two turn up at once. Spanish firm BQ (which also operates in Latin America) and Chinese firm Meizu have both signed up to produce handsets loaded with Canonical's swish mobile operating system. We've always liked Ubuntu for Phones, and we're delighted that there will soon be a physical product in the shops.

8 Calligra 2.8 released
KDE's office suite, Calligra, has reached its latest stable release. You can read all about our impressions of Krita, the suite's image editor, on page 23, but there's much more to the suite then that. There's now support for comments in Author and Words, the ability to open hyperlinks in the Kexi database app, and the usual bugfixes. We yield to no-one in our love of LibreOffice, but if you're running a KDE system you might want to give the Calligra suite a try as an alternative.
www.calligra-suite.org