



FREE SOFTWARE FOUNDATION: EUROPE

We discover what this bastion of digital rights in Europe is doing for all of us.

“Ever since FSFE was founded in 2001, creating public awareness for Free Software has been at the heart of what we do. Today, there are more groups than ever before that really understand Free Software, and that are working to promote it. We talk to a lot of different audiences: developers, public sector people, businessfolks, students, police, church groups, and even the military – basically, we’ll go anywhere where people need to hear about Free Software. And on most of those occasions, we still need to start off by explaining what Free Software is and why it matters.”

These are the words of Karsten Gerloff in his reply to a question about how you measure the success of the Free Software Foundation, and more specifically, its European counterpart, the FSFE.

“Being able to reach all these audiences is a huge success. Seeing all the groups that have sprung up to promote Free Software in their specific environment is very satisfying. But there is so much left to do.”

In the beginning...

Richard Stallman has done many great things. Without him, there’d be no GNU, no GPL and no Emacs, and arguably, no Linux in the way that we know it. If the free software ecosystem existed without RMS, it wouldn’t be half as effective without

his idealism, insight and intelligence. Which is why, among those other accomplishments, he also founded the Free Software Foundation in early October 1985, just as Dire Straits’ *Money for Nothing* was to lose its reign at the top of the US singles chart.

But what many people don’t realise is that there are several sister organisations to the Free Software Foundation, including the Free Software Foundation Europe – or FSFE, as it’s better known. FSFE is far more than a local mirror for the US-based FSF. It’s been a significant third party in the European Union’s antitrust case against Microsoft by helping to put the case forward that competition in the file/print server market (thanks to Samba) is essential. At the end of March, the foundation also published an open letter to the EU Parliament and the European Commission asking for the support of open standards.

We had a chance to speak to Karsten Gerloff and Matthias Kirschner, President and Vice President of the Free Software Foundation Europe, about the European branch of their organisation, and Sam Tuke, its Campaign Manager, who writes a great report on this year’s Document Freedom Day over the page.

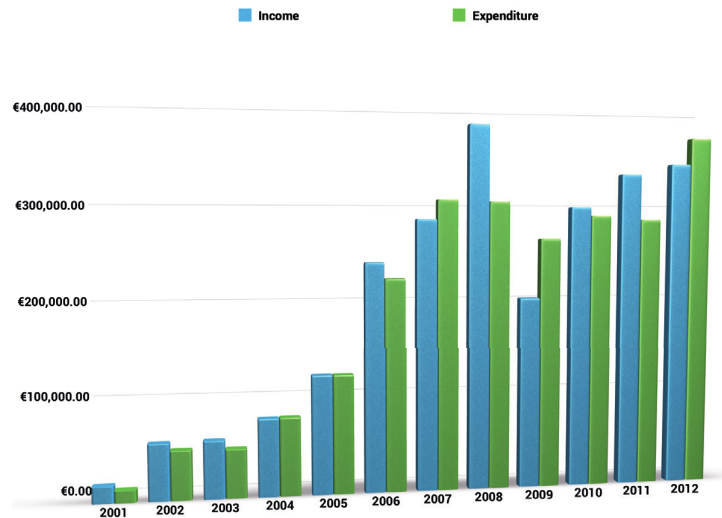
First, we asked whether there are any policy differences between the FSF and the FSF Europe. .

“No”, answered Karsten, “We share the goal of promoting Free Software, and do so by similar means.”

Income and expenses

2012

INCOME	
Donations	€197,420.59
Fellowship/membership contribs	€106,411.08
Paid services	€26,036.85
Merchandise	€13,493.84
Interest/currency exchange gains	€15.16
Total	€343,377.52
EXPENDITURE	
Basic infrastructure costs	€92,830.45
Public awareness	€96,626.77
Fellowship	€47,411.87
Legal work	€69,877.86
Policy work	€50,158.26
Merchandise	€14,262.61
Total	€371,167.82



For us, that begs the question of why a European-centric FSF is important.

"Being based and rooted in a specific region, in our case in Europe, makes it easier to be effective as advocates, by adapting to the local cultures and circumstances."

Shared goals

"We frequently work together [with the FSF, FSF India and FSF Latin America] to come up with shared approaches to fundamental issues. These internal discussions tend to be very thorough, and quite productive. In organisational terms, however, all FSFs are fully independent of each other. FSFE has its own legal entity, employees, independent governance structure, and raises its own funds."

Raising your own funding under the umbrella of a perhaps more widely known organisation must be a difficult task. We wanted to know how you measure the success of the FSFE, rather than the wider organisation, to be able to attract funding.

"That's a tough call to make. We have had a lot of success in all three areas!" Karsten told us.

"In the legal field, FSFE has achieved something unique. Through eight years of careful work, we have built the world's largest network of legal experts on Free Software. There are currently over 340 lawyers and engineers in this group, including many of the very best people in the field. They are helping each other learn more about Free Software and about how their respective companies and organisations are using it, and remove fear, uncertainty, and doubt. This has given us a great set of contacts to many of the companies that build Free Software. For the companies, this exchange of

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Help the FSFE

We asked Karsten how best we the community might help.

"There are many different ways how people can contribute to FSFE," he told us.

"We have a page (<http://fsfe.org/contribute/contribute.en.html>) that outlines most of them. If you're passionate about Free Software, and want to work with others who care for the same thing as you, there will be a place for you. One of the reasons FSFE is doing so well is that we try very hard to identify each person's speciality, and help them use it for Free Software in the most effective way. In the UK especially, we would love to get more local groups going, with regular meetings and occasional events. People who are interested should write to fellowship@fsfeurope.org, or simply contact anyone they know in FSFE!



Karsten Gerloff, protector of Free Software and President of FSFE.

knowledge means that they better understand their obligations when using Free Software, leading to fewer licence violations."

"We have always invested a lot of time and effort in policy work, whether it was about keeping software patents out of Europe, helping the European Commission to bring Microsoft to book for its anti-competitive behaviour, promoting Open Standards like ODF, or changing public procurement. These issues often take many years to bring to a conclusion – that is, if they ever end. FSFE is one of very few organisations, and almost the only one specialising in Free Software, that has the skills and resources to stay on the ball for as long as it takes."

We love the way Karsten says "for as long as it takes", as we think that's the vital component in the FSF's strategy – an unrelenting approach to Free Software advocacy and adoption. You know it's not going to sell out or dilute its vision in the face of commercial pressure. And that's an important differentiator between Free Software and other development models. It's channelling spirit of Stallman through the foundation he created 30 years ago.

"When companies lose the fear of putting Free Software into their products, and ideally give users the possibility to change it on their devices, that is success for us," Karsten told us.

This is just as important today, now that Windows XP is no longer supported, as it was when Microsoft was more confrontational and the FSF was trying to side-step the FUD being thrown. But times have definitely changed.

"When the European Commission gives Microsoft a record antitrust fine, along with a clear message that their behaviour isn't acceptable around here, that is success for us," Karsten began.

"When the UK government goes ahead and opts for ODF as a default format for its documents, in the face of fierce resistance from the incumbent IT suppliers, that is success for us. We don't always get everything we want. But often we'll get most of what we push for."

"The biggest challenge for the next 10 years will be making sure that we can be in control of our own computing. That's really what a lot of the fights we are fighting today are about: Can you be trusted to control your own computer?"

Document Freedom Day 2014

Freedom to read, write, and create requires freedom of formats, writes Sam Tuke. Here's how one campaign brought open standards to 51 locations in 22 countries.

Balloons litter the floor, cream smeared plates pile high on tressel tables, beside which the crowd of participants file out of the auditorium door. "Give us a chance – choose Open Standards" reads the Spanish posters adorning the walls, and a typical Document Freedom Day event ends.

An animated band of students and professors have been debating the video files that Grenada University uses for publishing research in Southern Spain. They've been here all afternoon, and in a few hours their pictures will join hundreds of others that have been streaming out of cafes, lecture halls and hackerspaces around the world the last 24 hours.

As well as baking cakes, volunteers took the word of document freedom out into the streets.

Document Freedom Day is when people celebrate freedom from data format tyranny and the systems that preserve it. On the last Wednesday of March every year groups like GALPon in Granada University ("Grupo de Amigos de Linux de Pontevedra") take the opportunity to run events that explain why these freedoms are important, and share the knowledge and tools necessary for citizens to take them back.

Some events are big, like the 300-attendee speech at Istanbul Turkey. Some are small, like the group of sixteen friends who discussed Open Document Format (ODF) in Yuli Township, Taiwan. Others are run by governments, like the Brazilian Federal Government CISL Committee. And a few take place in schools, like Maltepe Nezahat Aslan Ekşiöğlü Primary in Istanbul. All are organised at a local level by independent community leaders.

Open as standard

While DFD is about people, events, and not a little cake, many of the issues addressed are necessarily technical. What you can do with a file once it's been saved depends on the format of the data inside. What governs such formats are loosely called standards. And similarly to software applications, some standards protect freedoms while others prohibit them. Unlike software however, generic licences like





the GPL don't exist for standards. The two serve fundamentally different purposes, and what makes a file format useful is more nuanced than what makes software free. For example, the future development of a standard can be just as important as its past. When LibreOffice forked OpenOffice, the result was two separate, independently useful applications. But if a fork of their native file format, ODF, had also been made, it would have been far less useful, as no other applications would have been able to understand it. Standards provide a platform of data compatibility upon which software is built and competes.

So instead of a license, criteria are used to identify freedom-respecting standards. The ones that pass the test are "Open Standards", and the rest are "closed". Some governments, including the European Union, have their own definition. Document Freedom Day uses FSFE's five-point version, and while the variations are the subject of heated political debate, most agree on core requirements that the standard may be used by everyone, that technical details are freely available, and that modifications to the standard are set by an impartial group.

While the politics of file extensions may be fascinating to power-users and freedom fighters, getting the message to everyone else can be challenging. Highlighting the importance of Open Standards to mainstream society is a core goal of Document Freedom Day, and talking direct is a fun and effective way to achieve this.

In 2012 we raised eyebrows and headlines by sending steel handcuffs to politicians and public figures whose websites endorsed closed standards. European Commission Vice President Neelie Kroes

even showed hers off during a keynote speech (www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2012/apr/19/digital-handcuffs-ec-vice-president).

Last year netizens reported popular websites that used Adobe Flash instead of HTML5 technology for streaming video. Educational packs were duly delivered to the appropriate webmasters, together with a pair of blacked-out "plugin required" glasses illustrating the downgraded experience of users missing closed standard browser extensions.

In March, MEPs were challenged to reconsider Parliamentary security when a panel of experts debated surveillance in the European Parliament for Document Freedom Day 2014, and on the same day an open letter to EU Institutions confronted their captivity to Microsoft.

My job as campaign manager is to empower local people to serve their own communities. Our small team in Berlin can't be in 51 places at once, but our network of freedom fighters can. Nor could we generate the enormous creative energy that marks the campaign each year. A monkey hitting a typewriter infinite times may finally write Shakespeare, but it's doubtful the otherworldly sounds produced in last year's DFD Zurich open audio jam could have come from a centralised campaign.

And when getting involved can be so much fun, it's easy to ask others to participate, so why not run your own event? Join us next year in the campaign for document freedom! 🐒

All this year's DFD materials and source code are hosted online under copyleft licenses. Recipes, origami, certificate templates and forms for claiming back expenses are all in public repositories.

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