The Relevance of Free Software to ensure Internet Freedoms

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Abstract

There is increasing acceptance, around the world, of the principle that that the Internet is a universal global resource that should be free of restrictive controls in order to for it to be utilized by communities and individuals around the world. Further, there is also an emerging consensus in many parts of the world that that the most effective way to govern this global resource is through the multistakeholder model. This submission argues that in order to ensure that the Internet Freedoms are preserved, it is important to ensure that Open Standards are followed, and reference implementations based on Free, Libr and Open Source Software--which is software owned, developed and maintained by communities--are available as a choice for every Standard and Protocol used on the Internet. Only this measure will ensure that Internet Freedoms remain inviolate irrespective of efforts by governments, lobbies, or corporates.

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All use of the Internet is intermediated by software--it is impossible to use the Internet without using software. While most of us agree about the need for the Internet to be Free, little attention is paid to the need for the software and protocols of the Interent to be Free as well.

The emergence and mainstreaming, in the last two decades, of Free, Libré and Open

Source Software (FLOSS or FOSS) as a distinct model of production, consumption, distribution and maintenance of software--in contrast to the Proprietary/Closed Source Software (PCSS) model--shows that the values that underpin it are sound and acceptable to communities around the world.

There is general acceptance today that a global resource such as the Internet should be governed by Open Standards *vis-à-vis* its underlying protocols. This submission argues that this need for Open Standards is necessary but not sufficient, and that every Open Standard must have reference implementations that are FOSS-based, and further, that wherever possible, FOSS-based software implementations should be given preference over PCSS-based software.

Apart from other important quality parameters--such as robustness, low-cost, extensibility, customizability, security, auditability, and less restrictive licenses--a key differentiator for FOSS-based software is that it upholds Freedoms--of developers, users, communities and nations--and is consequently a more ethical alternative than PCSS. Thus, FOSS is a natural fit in the context of preserving Internet Freedoms.

Therefore, any discussion on Internet Governance is incomplete without FLOSS, and users at large would benefit from utilizing FOSS-based software, at least for reference implementations, but even better, for all applications on the Internet.