The Monthly GNU Column

Brave GNU World

South American society seems to be more aware of freedom and the background of free software than most Europeans. The language reflects this attitude, commonly using expressions such as "software libre" (Spanish) and "software livre" (Portuguese), whereas "Open Source" is hardly used at all.

I went on a three-week tour of South America [5] to learn more about the local Software Community on site, and to help plan an FSF Latin America by drawing on the experiences of the Free Software Foundation Europe. The trip took me to Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil.

Political Perspectives

It is difficult to say whether an open mind towards free software has its roots in everyday politics. However, one thing is very obvious. Politicians in Latin America see the potential to leverage both the local and technical advantages of free software, and thus promote economic growth and gain political strength.

I had the opportunity to talk to the Executive Secretary to the Brazilian "Ministério de Comunicações" (the Minister for Communication) in Brazil's capital city, Brasilia. He emphasized the fact that security is not one of the major factors that drove the pro free software decision. According to the Executive Secretary's opinion, the driving factors behind the Ministry's decision were ongoing economic growth, the propagation of knowledge, and equal opportunities in the digital world.

Talks in Cordoba and La Plata, Argentina, and at Uruguay's National Congress in Montevideo showed a similarly positive attitude. All of these talks were prompted by draft laws designed to strengthen the market for free software.

In Brazil, some members of government are actually active Community members. The "Instituto Nacional de Tecnologia da Informação" (a national IT

This column looks into projects and current affairs in the world of free software from the perspective of the GNU Project and the FSF. In this issue, we will be focusing on: South America – political perspectives, telecentros, learning from Brazil, and the never-ending terminology discussion. **BY GEORG C.F. GREVE**

Institute, ITI), an institution that reports directly to the Brazilian President, uses free software on all its desktops. Some staff are Community personalities, most notably the ITI's Director, Sergio Amadeu da Silveira, a regular speaker at all manner of free software events.

Computer Courses in Telecentros

The Ministry of Communication has one of the most impressive projects running at present. Within the framework of a national project, the Ministry has set up so-called "telecentros". Brazil plans to set up something in the region of 300,000 centers of this kind in the next few years.

Telecentros are community facilities, especially in poorer parts of Brazil's municipal areas, designed to get people involved in all things digital, and thus allow them access to knowledge, although they can not afford a computer themselves. Besides straightforward Internet access, telecentros offer computer training and the like. A typical telecentro has 10 to 20 computers with a broadband Internet connection and a library. This said, no two telecentros are the same.

São Paulo has the biggest concentration of telecentros. The project originally started off using proprietary software. Running a project designed to allow everyone access to knowledge on closed

Figure 1: The Brazilian Government is busy setting up telecentros like the one shown here all over the country. This is a place for people to learn how to handle computers and use the Internet.

source software is difficult, and this has led to more and more operators using free software. The cost is another important factor. The budget required to set up 100 telecentros with free software would only allow 20 to be set up with proprietary software.

As Federico Souza da Camara, the IT Coordinator for telecentros in São Paulo [6] relates, there were quite a few comical situations during the migration phase. Although visitors had received introductory free software training, those responsible often took quite a while longer to migrate their computers to GNU/Linux.

This in turn led to a run on the telecentros that had already moved

Figure 2: São Paulo Telecentro Project homepage. Almost all the telecentros are equipped with GNU/Linux. This reduces costs, and is far more appropriate to the subject of free access to knowledge than a proprietary solution.

to free software. Some managers responsible for centers that had not yet migrated phoned Federico to express their surprise at the declining numbers of "customers". By now, all the telecentros in Sao Paulo have completed the move to free software, with Flash and Java remaining the only issues to be resolved.

The Concept

One of the important basic principles of the telecentros is that they are run by local people. Additionally, the operators have a lot of freedom with respect to equipment, and the type and frequency of events. One telecentro in the north east of São Paulo offers Spanish and poetry courses besides the usual computer courses. A notice board shows ample evidence of how successful these courses have been. The syllabus also included Capoeira lessons by local security guards. For many people, these courses are the first opportunity they have ever had to see something of the outside world, or even to express themselves freely.

Although the telecentros do not typically have guards, only five centers have

been broken into in three years, three of these before they actually opened. Although many people do not have sufficient means to cater for their everyday needs, and the computers in the telecentro must seem like a small fortune to them, nobody touches the computers.

The telecentros enjoy community protection because they are seen as part of the community. This is why the government always chooses local people to run the centers. The effect that the telecentros have had is far more widespread than it would seem at first glance.

Of course, this allows them to provide people with the opportunity to attain computer skills. Experience shows that skills attained using GNU/Linux can easily be transferred to Windows. The other direction would seem to be more difficult, after all problems on migrating from Windows to Linux are often used as an argument against free software.

Learning from Brazil

Telecentros and free software make up the kind of social glue that it takes to build a society and a community spirit. A practical example of this was shown at the fifth Free Software Forum in Porto

Alegre. When a telecentro opened up in an area of East São Paulo, previously notorious for its gang wars and violent crime, there was a noticeable drop in criminal activity. Telecentros are hugely popular. The center I visited was still quite new, having opened just six months previously, but in this short time, 3500 people had registered as users.

Community, help towards self-help, creating opportunities – all of these things are characteristic of free software and the telecentros. An absolutely perfect combination.

Working for free software is often quite abstract. Many developers consider my own personal work at the FSF Europe to be extremely abstract. I sincerely wish that all free software developers have an opportunity to see the joint product of our work, changing the lives of people for the good. Industrialized countries would do well to follow the example set by the telecentros.

Trouble with Terms

Following this report on the practical effect of free software, let's do some more theory. Last issue, I tried to explain how what would seem to be a simple discussion on terms can actually have far wider ranging consequences. Let's continue in that vein now.

Who, in their right mind, would go into a greengrocers and ask for an "A.P.A. – Apple, Pomme, Apfel" just to be able to use the attributes "inclusive" and "nice"? To most people's minds, this sounds a little strange.

However, in the Free Software Community there are people who talk about "Free and Open Source Software" (FOSS) or even "Free/Libre and Open Source Software" (FLOSS). Apart from the fact that this expression can cause panic attacks with people who are afraid of going to the dentist's, these two terms

make just as much sense as the A.P.A. example.

Free software is defined by the four aspects of freedom: to put the software to any use, to study, modify, and propagate the software [7]. The term never refers to the price. This is an obvious distinction in many languages, but unfortunately not in English. The original definition was first published in 1989 by the Free Software Foundation in the GNU's Bulletins. Since then, the definition has been accepted by, and spread to, many organizations including UNESCO.

Open Source

In 1998, a few people in Silicon Valley had the idea of extending the dotcom boom to free software. It appeared that venture capitalists did not really appreciate the finer points of free markets. This led to the coining of the marketing term "Open Source" for free software.

Open Source software was to be defined solely by reference to technical aspects. The creators of the term actually went so far as to actively refute the social, political, and philosophical implications. A Sun employee recently said the following: "Open Source philosophy is an oxymoron. Open Source defines itself through a lack of philosophy."

The founding fathers of Open Source used the Debian Free Software Guidelines (DFSG) as their basis for a definition of Open Source. The free software definition, the DFSG, and the Open Source definition are intended to describe more or less the same group of licenses.

Libre Software

In contrast to this, the term "Libre Software" has its roots in Europe, within the European Commission to be more exact, and is an attempt to avoid the ambiguity of "Free Software" in English. The Commission thus coined an artificial phrase, derived from a mixture of the French "Logiciels Libre" ("logiciel" meaning software in French), and the English "Free Software".

These three terms, Free Software, Libre Software, and Open Source are identical to a greater extent, with respect to the software that they refer to. If you talk about FLOSS or FOSS, you might as well go down to the supermarket and order an APA.

I have noticed a tendency towards preferring the Open Source definition to refer to the concept of Open Source. The free software definition seems to be gaining ground. Apart from these original uses, many enterprises use these terms to refer to proprietary software, where part of the source code is open to public inspection under certain circumstances. This has nothing to do with freedom.

Some sentences use the term Open Source with contradictory meanings. As redundant expressions such as FOSS and FLOSS do not make any sense, many people have tried to explain why they exist. The idea that free software is restricted to the GNU General Public License (GPL) is another popular myth.

In some talks, speakers refer to FLOSS as meaning "Free Linux Open Source Software". This merely causes confusion, and manufacturers of proprietary software are always first in line to exploit this confusion, putting themselves on a level with manufacturers of free software who are incapable of explaining what sets them apart.

Another irritating factor is the fact that many confuse Open Source with a synonym for "without charge", and this is the definitely not what was originally intended. What appears at first glance to be a terminology discussion is far more than that. It is an attempt to uphold an unpolluted concept of free software, and to communicate this concept as a unique selling point, thus allowing free software companies a fair deal on the market.

Let's finish off this issue of Brave GNU World with the usual request. Please send your ideas, comments, questions, suggestions, or whatever to the usual address [1]. ■
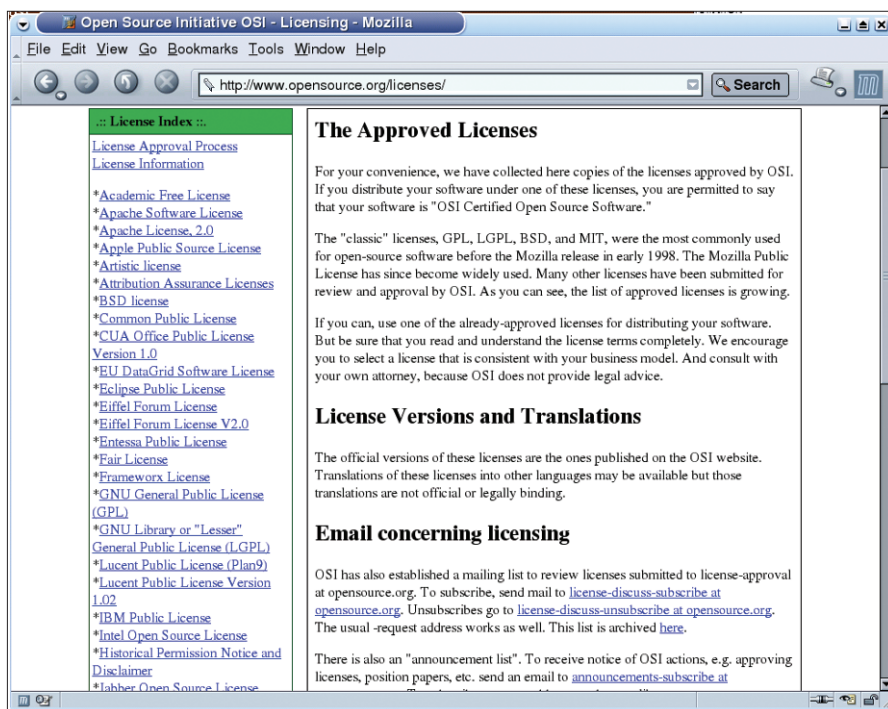

Figure 3: The Open Source Initiative has set itself the task of making free software more attractive to the market by propagating the term "Open Source". The effect is more like a Babylonian confusion.

INFO

[1] Send ideas, comments, and questions to Brave GNU World: *column@brave-gnu-world.org*

[2] GNU project homepage: *http://www.gnu.org/*

[3] Georg's Brave GNU World homepage: *http://brave-gnu-world.org*

[4] "We run GNU" Initiative: *http://www.gnu.org/brave-gnu-world/ rungnu/rungnu.html*

[5] Georg Greve in South America: *http://www.germany.fsfeurope.org/ events/2004/FISL/*

[6] Telecentro Sao Paulo: *http://www.telecentros.sp.gov.br/english/*

[7] Free Software definition: *http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-sw. html*