Lessons in Tech Activism

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March 23, 2014

Trigger Warning

This presentation will touch upon free software, activism, politics, surveillance, social justice, and autonomy; it may also contain disparaging remarks about certain forms of brand loyalty.

If these topic are triggering to you, then you may want to find another session.

Still Here?

Excellent!

My Intro to Tech Activism

Humble beginnings:

- Using free software
- Writing documentation
- Filing (good) bug reports
- Writing patches
- Testing pre-releases

All worthwhile activities, but just the tip of the iceberg.

Free Software is Social

- If you write a useful program, then sharing is an ethical thing to do. Everyone benefits!

- To many people, expensive proprietary programs are simply unaffordable.

- Building free software involves building communities.

- Any user can put skin in the game.

Free Software is Political

- It gives people autonomy
    - Granted, autonomy comes with a cost
- Not controlled by any one government
- Not controlled by any one corporation
- It's harder to backdoor software when the source code is public.

Free software fits well into the activists role of challenging power.

Techie Activism

- There are lots of activists trying to save the world

- Activists know their cause inside out, but aren't experts in technology. But you can help!

  - Setting up web sites

  - Setting up mailing lists

  - Setting up collaboration tools

  - Securing communications

Find a group, and work with. There's a lot you can teach each other.

PS: This is also a good way to promote free software.

A Tiny Sampling of Activists

- Environmental groups
- Prisoner support (mass incarceration and political prisoners)
- Immigration rights
- Labor, living wage, working conditions
- Peace activists
- LGBT rights
- Third parties

These groups are fighting for freedom too!

Case Study: Mayfirst

- Radical progressive techies, based in NYC and Mexico City

- Provide hosting and collaboration tools for 600+ members (individuals and organizations)

- Infrastructure runs entirely on free software

- All infrastructure code kept in publicly-accessible git repositories

- Major emphasis on democracy & using free software to empower progressive organizations.

(Disclosure: the presenter is a Mayfirst member)

Case Study: Riseup

- Seattle based

- Riseup "provides online communication tools for people and groups working on liberatory social change"

- Hosts 15,000+ mailing list, with 3.8M subscribers. Also email, etherpad, VPN.

- Funded by user contributions

Case Study: South End Tech Center

- A community computer / tech lab in Boston's South End.

- Big emphasis on education, and youth programs

- Fab lab (laser etcher, 3D printer, etc) runs entirely on free software

(Disclosure: the presenters teach Linux classes at the SETC.)

Why Free Software for Activists

Or, why not send your local activist to a GTC ("ginormous tech company")?

- Data Sovereignty

- Freedom from government surveillance

- Freedom from corporate surveillance

- Autonomy and independence

(Although I've listed government and corporate surveillance separately, I really consider them to be the same thing.)

GNU's Four Freedoms

- Freedom to run the program, as you wish

- Freedom to study and change the program

- Freedom to distribute exact copies

- Freedom to redistribute your modifications to others

Question: what if you change "program" to "service"?

Excerpts from a GTC License

- "... don't interfere with our Services or try to access them using a method other than the interface and the instructions that we provide."

- "You may not ... reverse engineer or attempt to extract the source code of [the] software, unless laws prohibit those restrictions or you have our written permission."

- "You may not copy, modify, distribute, sell, or lease any part of our Services or included software. "

(Free) Software as a Service

- Lots of free software is beneficial to activists

- Drupal, Wikipedia

- Mailman, Sympa

- Owncloud, Etherpad, CiviCRM

- Many others

Hosting your own takes more effort, but using Free Software has generally required a little more effort.

Next ...