

Open source software and a transition to Linux

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Dear friends,

Some of you will know I am a long time open source software supporter. I have even dabbled in using open source hardware [1]. If you're scratching your head, don't worry, I promise this isn't a technical diatribe. Rather I want to discuss how my mindset has shifted from giving a free pass to proprietary software, towards an open-oriented mindset for the future of technology.

I have been a long time Mac user (since early 2004 with an inherited PowerMac G4) and have been an on-again off-again Linux user and server admin since around 2008. With one foot in each camp, and a familiar UNIX-like terminal environment, nothing about either MacOS or Debian feels alien to me. However, for many years the proprietary software available on the Mac has served many of my creative and professional needs much more robustly than FOSS software could.

At work, I am still required to use proprietary software, in particular the Office suite, which I believe is one of the biggest challenges to corporate engagement in Linux. While LibreOffice and OnlyOffice offer alternatives to Microsoft's near complete monopoly, collaborative features are unavailable and demand use of a sub-par web app for Linux use. Said sub-par web app, however, is eventually rumoured to become -the- app on Windows in an Electron wrapper like Teams already is [2]. This substantially lowers the barrier to Linux use in the corporate world, or at least provides a way to use Linux when writing (and collaboration features) is your profession.

Since May I have been using a Lenovo ThinkPad X1 Nano (Gen 2) with Debian (and Gnome) as my daily driver laptop. I have written an article which has been accepted for publication, collaborated with peers on a range of research projects, and used increasingly excellent FOSS tools to do some graphic design and other document post-production. Tools such as Krita, GIMP, Inkscape, and Kdenlive are on a trajectory to match and in some areas exceed what is available in the Affinity and Adobe suite. These have enabled almost my entire academic workflow -including the obvious and excellent Zotero as a reference manager.

This engagement has proven to me, not only that I love to have weird side-projects to occupy my neurodivergent brain but, that Linux is in my particular use case ready for prime-time usage. While there are some frustrations and teething pains, I have felt increasingly comfortable in an environment where I have control over and can see and edit the source of the software I use throughout the entire software stack. In fact, I have even dabbled in development for Gnome to gap-fill a particular niche.

This is not to say I suggest anyone else move their existence to a Linux-only lifestyle [3]. But I would encourage those technically minded people, or those who just want a project, to dabble in the use of FOSS. Not just because you can -but because having a transparent view of where, how and why your data is used, where your data is, and how your computer works is similar to having working knowledge of how any tool is made and used. This shouldn't just be interesting to those who like to tinker, but also those with an interest in data use, innovation, and positive futurism.

We are in a world where proprietary "artificial intelligence" is growingly vacuuming the internet for any content -regardless of copyright status -and where at an operating system level both Windows and MacOS are integrating products from OpenAI and other privacy invasive proprietary LLM tools. While LLMs can be useful, the proprietary nature of these

platforms should be a concern, particularly as we look at capitalists leaning on the LLM space to do the thinking work of a society.

While there is some comfort that there is a lot of Marxist text freely available on the internet, proprietary computing has always been a threat to innovation, privacy, and freedom. Having a better understanding of our tools, more control over the software we use, and choices about how we expose ourselves to corporations or individuals is only a good thing.

So, do what you want, but consider how FOSS factors into your life. For me, thinking critically about where my software comes from, how I contribute (financially) to software development, and where my data and information goes has been both enlightening and somewhat terrifying in some regards. For a better future in this space, I think having a better blend of open source software, where users who can contribute financially or technically do, will lead to a better technology future.

I've also written, aforementioned article, about corporate AI and the economic and environmental impacts of unchecked closed source "AI" being deployed throughout our lives. So watch your local journals for that piece.

Have a beautiful day,

Aidan.

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1. I remain interested in the RISC-V architecture as an avenue for this; and am excited about Framework bringing this to a laptop form factor: <https://frame.work/au/en/blog/introducing-a-new-risc-v-mainboard-from-deepcomputing>
 2. Electron and Microsoft Teams remain two of my least favourite technological inventions. They are bloated, heavy, and often privacy invasive in their design.
 3. In fact, I'm not sure this is feasible or possible except in some edge cases. For example, our TVs at home hinge on use of Apple TV, and while Android is Linux based it is far from open source, so iOS remains. This is just a practicality and personal preference but let no one say I have a fixed mindset!