

THE FREE-SOFTWARE IMPERATIVE

You have a moral obligation to use free software. At least, that's the message that Patrick Ball is trying to get out.

Ball is deputy director of the Science and Human Rights Program of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He's best known for his analysis of the Kosovo refugee movements during NATO's bombing campaign in 1999. Now Ball is on another kind of mission: he's telling the world's 10,000 human-rights groups to stop using pirated copies of Microsoft Windows and Microsoft Office and trying to persuade them to use free software instead.

The best-known examples of free software are the GNU/Linux-based operating system and OpenOffice—an application suite that includes a decent word processor, spreadsheet, and presentation package. You can legally make as many copies of these programs as you want. Moreover, because this software is distributed with its source code, any programmer can examine the code, fix bugs, and tinker with the software's features.

Unlike some other advocates of free software, Ball is not fundamentally opposed to Microsoft or other commercial-software makers. But he worries that too many people put themselves in jeopardy by illegally copying programs from these companies. Ball is especially concerned about overseas human-rights organizations, but his argument is universal.

Illegal software copies are particularly common in poor countries. The rate is highest in Vietnam, where the Business Software Alliance estimates 94 percent of all software used in 2001 was illicitly copied. But bootlegging is common in disadvantaged parts of the United States too. In Mississippi, 49 percent of the software now in use runs afoul of copyright laws.

Such copying poses a special risk to human rights organizations: U.S. companies and the U.S. government are working hard to make this practice a go-to-jail offense worldwide, as it is in the United States. Although the world frowns on countries that lock up their citizens for crimes of conscience, it's easy to imagine that some repressive third-world regime could invoke antipiracy laws as grounds for shutting down a meddlesome human-rights organization. And if U.S. or other Western governments object, the regime might logically respond, "You are always telling us we should be more aggressive in the protection of intellectual property. And now when we are, you criticize us."

Would Amnesty International mount a letter-writing campaign to get a human rights activist out of jail if she had been arrested for pirating Microsoft Word? Probably not, says Ball. Amnesty International, the world's richest human-rights group, buys properly licensed copies of Microsoft Office for its computers. But when rich organizations use expensive, proprietary software, they implicitly encourage the poorer organizations

with whom they work and share documents to do the same. And that requires either violating the law or using scarce resources to buy legitimate software. This is a compelling reason to push for the widespread adoption of free software. The pervasive use of Microsoft Office, combined with a staunch antipiracy program, amounts to economic colonialism.

There is another reason for human rights organizations to eschew Windows: verifiability. Whenever death squads make threats against a villager who speaks with rights workers, those workers have a moral responsibility to be sure their computers are secured with the best technology available. Lives depend on it. There is no way to verify the security of Windows: the software is secret. Indeed, Microsoft's latest license agreements give the company the right to go into computers without their owners' permission (or knowledge) to load software and retrieve "technical" information at Microsoft's sole discretion. A hostile government could probably exploit these vulnerabilities, reach-



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ing through the Internet to break into a rights worker's computer, never even setting foot in that person's office.

The only way a human rights organization (or anybody else) can be sure there are no back doors into its software is to have an expert remove all parts of the program that allow remote access. Clearly, this verification would require access to the source code. In practice, the need for verification rules out not only Windows but also any other closed-source system, including those on Macintoshes and on Palm handheld devices.

Even two years ago, it wasn't practical for nongeeks to run Linux and the rest of the free-software mélange. (Articles in computer magazines that claimed otherwise were prematurely enthusiastic.) But today, thanks to Red Hat Software and OpenOffice, free software is a viable alternative. The current version of Red Hat Linux runs on a wide range of hardware, automatically loads OpenOffice, and provides a usable and visually attractive desktop.

There's another reason for my becoming more bullish about free software. A few months ago, a system administrator in a Central American human-rights office e-mailed Ball that the office had stopped running its pirated copy of Microsoft Exchange and had switched its e-mail system to Red Hat Linux. The reason: it was nearly impossible to run Exchange without expensive books and training courses. Free software, by contrast, comes with free documentation. And monetary freedom translates into political freedom by eliminating at least one way oppressive governments can thwart these groups' good works. ■