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## **The Responsibility of Governments? Open Standards, Open Source, and OpenOffice.org**

### **Abstract**

When it comes to the public documents created by governments, what responsibility do governments have to their people? What obligations are there to ensuring that the people of a nation are able to read the flood of digital documents daily created by the public sector? Historically, we printed the words of government on paper, and if one could read—and it is the duty of government schools to teach people how to read—one could keep oneself informed, and it is the duty of a citizen to be informed, that is clear. But with the advent of digital documents in the last two decades (especially the last), this historical arrangement is shaken. It is no longer the case that knowing how to read will, in itself, lead to the satisfaction of a citizen's duty. That's because the governmental documents are likely to be in proprietary formats, requiring not only the purchase of expensive software but also placing the documents on the threshold of the abyss of memory loss: proprietary formats are always subject to the caprices of the market and a hundred years from now may not exist. In a way, the wealth of a nation is risked by the use of proprietary formats for digital documents. What then should a government do in order to satisfy the needs of the citizen and preserve the wealth of the nation?

This presentation examines the problem sketched above and suggests solutions: the use of open standards for file formats and the deployment (and development) of Free and Open Source Software (FOSS). I argue that merely using open standards is not enough. One must use FOSS, also, if the desire is to ensure that the citizens of a nation have access to public documents.

### **I. From Inked Paper to Electronic Media**

Paper and ink documents do not require any special technology to read or

write. This is so obvious I have to say it. You do not need a special reader, computer, or other mediating device. To write your thoughts on paper a simple stick saturated with ink is enough, provided you can make intelligible marks; to read it, you need nothing at all, just the ability to decode the marks. You need, in short, only education. What is more, the document is yours to do as you like and is not dependent on the company that made the paper or ink; it won't become illegible if the company who made the ink or the paper decides to change its product. The longevity of the document depends of course on the robustness of the ink and paper and, most importantly, on the ability of people to read the language.

Since the modern period—since the rise of the public sphere and other public modes of exchange and investment and governance—it has been the historical responsibility of government to teach its citizens to read and write. Why? It's almost absurd to ask. But if a people cannot read and write, then a nation's wealth is imperilled: no business, no history, no public sphere, no future. And it has been a characteristic of modern states to ensure the health and wealth of a nation.

Switch now to the present and to the modern usage of electronic media. What happens to the paper? To the ink? These are seldom used now, except for legacy bureaucratic forms or as a supplement to electronic documents (print outs) or for nostalgic reasons. The trend, which has only been accelerating, is to produce purely electronic documents and to save them in huge electronic archives. Paper documents, which recorded so much of our past so easily and which anyone with training could produce (no special technology required), are already a thing of the past. They linger on out of habit.

Brazil is leading the world in moving toward the widespread deployment of FOSS and in embracing a future freed from neoliberal demands and in charting a path that gains its strength from the intelligence and drive and potential of its people.

A quick summary of known installations:

### **Public Sector**

- Caixa Econômica Federal (over 15K workstations last time we talked)
- Empresa Brasileira de Correios e Telégrafos (Over 10K workstations so far)
- Exército Brasileiro (unknown number of workstations)

### **Private Sector**

- Casas Bahia (retail)

- Carrefour (retail)
- Habib's (fast food)

**Evaluating (if confirmed these will be major deployments):**

- VisaNet (finance)
- Stefanini (services)

Nice job. :-)

We owe, in fact, our thanks to the BrOpenOffice.org group, led by Claudio F. Filho and Roberto Salomon. They have done brilliant work, motivated by faith in the process, in Brazil, and in OpenOffice.org. Thanks.

But it is a just the opening act.

More people can now create documents for free and pass them along via the Internet. Even people in remote areas are poised to benefit. Now that the cost of the suite is nearly irrelevant (support is always an issue), other expenses (such as establishing connectivity) are easier to address.

The future? A Brazil that is connected not just for the elites but for all; where students can access material freely and collaborate; where license restrictions do not impose harsh boundaries or support clandestine piracy.

Microsoft would say that we could get to this utopia by simply buying more Microsoft products; that open source is not the ticket. They will point out that their products are easy to use and built for collaboration. They will not say that buying into Microsoft is the same as making a terrible bargain for that convenience. We pay a price for the convenience promised.

## **II. The Bargains We Made**

That price is measure in more than dollars but even in dollars it is very high. Unlike ink/paper technology, which anyone can use and which can preserve thoughts for millennia, the documents we create today using an office suite not only require us to use technology that is neither open nor free (like ink/paper writing) but proprietary: it's owned by someone, in this case, most often Microsoft. It's as if a language were created that you had to pay to learn and then all the important texts were written in it. Only those who paid could write and read the texts.

An analogy: It is as if we had entered the European feudal age, when a version of this was in fact the case. The language for official communication was Latin,

not what people spoke, and learning Latin cost a lot, so that only a very few families in this Cathedral culture could wield official power. With the Renaissance, the people's language (what they actually spoke, especially at the marketplace) was used and culture, commerce, flourished; what counted as the public sphere grew--and has continued to grow.

The threat against public culture is the use of technologies of writing and reading that effectively exclude all but the privileged public—a return to the Feudal age and something we do not want.

The still-dominant seller of technology that is predicated on exclusion is Microsoft. Microsoft is of course only interested in profits and in retaining its hold on the market; that's true of any monopoly. Innovation from without represents a threat to their market hegemony. They need to satisfy their shareholders not philosophical or moral or ethical or national concerns, except as they affect their profits and markets and ultimately shareholders.

I should underscore that this is not a rant against Microsoft—that would be easy and also a little predictable. Rather, the point of my presentation is to dramatize the situation we find ourselves in now and to offer a strong solution.

The situation, as I have suggested, is one in which the documents we produce are effectively owned by proprietary companies, chiefly Microsoft, using proprietary technologies. The problem with this situation, which has quietly, with almost no political discussion crept up upon the world, is that it returns the world to a quasi-feudal system where a nation's documents are available only to those who own an expensive technology owned by a company thousands of miles away and beholden to shareholders who do not care about Brazil's own interests, except insofar as it helps the company's bottom line. What is more, Microsoft has made it so that if one wants the collaboration features promoted one must buy into the entire stack: buy Microsoft and Microsoft buys you.

### **III. The Solution Is Open**

The solution is to use open standards and open source.

Why are open standards important? Open standards are, "publicly available and implementable" standards (Wikipedia). Any compliant application can use an open standard, whether it be proprietary or open source, so in purely pragmatic terms, the real test of an open standard is not which organization—OASIS, ISO, ECMA—has approved it but which applications are using it. In

this test, Microsoft's proposed standard, Open XML, fails miserably and the OASIS OpenDocument Format (ODF)—now ISO 26300—does quite well: IBM's Workplace, Sun's StarOffice, OpenOffice.org, KOffice, Writerly, AbiWord, and many others all use the ODF (see Wikipedia for an excellent list of applications that implement the ODF).

The result of this open standard? Files can be freely passed among applications. You no longer need to worry that your colleague or collaborator or any recipient is using the same applications as you or that you will have to pay for the privilege of reading a public document created using proprietary technology. It's the file that counts, not the application. But open standards is but one half of the coupling.

We need more. Open standards allow for free exchange of files both now and in the future but open source allows for **anyone** to afford the application, both now and in the future, for open-source applications like OpenOffice.org, which is licensed under the LGPL, are free, gratis: you pay nothing to use them. This is an important point: by coupling open standards with open source, OpenOffice.org gives everyone the ability to participate with no encumbrances in the public sphere.

How might this work? Let's imagine that the public sector uses StarOffice or Workplace or OpenOffice.org or whatever and saves its documents as ODF or PDF files. The government, either working on its own behalf or with the private sector, installs OpenOffice.org on computers in all public libraries and other public spaces where it can site a server or computer. Anyone thus has access to these documents. Is this an insecure arrangement? No: For open source and open standards are constructed from the ground up with real-world security issues foremost. Systems and files can be made secure; security works at every level, and heterogeneity of systems is allowed, in fact expected (this is the real world). In contrast, Microsoft claims its systems are really only secure if one only uses them; insecurity comes from without.

But we know that blaming the victim, in this case the person affected by the viruses and crashes, is a poor way to defend oneself. The better argument is to recognize the flaws in the model. But the model Microsoft has promulgated cannot support a heterogeneous world where different systems coexist. Open source and open standards can; they have been designed from the very beginning with that model in mind.

And the technologies are maturing. It is the case now that support in Brazilian Portuguese and many other languages exists for OpenOffice.org, which can run on Windows, Linux, Mac OS X, and many other platforms. If you wish to

customize it, that's possible, too. The code and license allows you to write plugins, addons, whatever you need to extend the application. And if you don't want to do this yourself, it's easy to pay for someone to do it for you.

But all that assumes—incorrectly—that there is a pool of developers. I've been in this business now for over five years and I assure you, that's a myth. So what we need to do is build that pool. Otherwise, we will have exchanged one consumer model for another. What makes FOSS special is the ability, after all, to enhance it, to make it your own. Carlos Menezes and his team of CoGroo has done great work in building an excellent grammar checker for Brazilian Portuguese. But his team's accomplishment also suggests what needs to be done.

I invite students, professors, entrepreneurs to consider OpenOffice.org as a nearly limitless source. The code can be used to learn how to program, for instance. New applications using OpenOffice.org can be distributed—even for money: our license allows for that. Support, training, certification: all these are possible and very much encouraged.

But what is crucial is that we think of OpenOffice.org not as another consumer commodity but as something that can produce wealth: for the person, for the nation.

So what do we have? A choice that must be made. I'll paint it starkly: On the one hand, we have a kind of neo-feudalism privileging the elites and costing the nation untold millions not just today but tomorrow. On the other, we have open standards coupled with the free open source and the promotion of markets and innovation. The first leads to an increasing dependency on foreign companies, the second drives the growth of national wealth.

Choose open.