

A GNU Priority for a GNU Era

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Free Software Foundation

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Nice to meet you

I've been the Executive Director just since 2011, but I've been with the Free Software Foundation since 2003.

The FSF was founded as a nonprofit organization in 1985 to fight for the freedoms of computer users worldwide, and to sponsor the GNU Project, which has a goal of making a fully free operating system.



Our goal

At the FSF and in the GNU Project, we want **all** computer users to be able to do **everything** they need to do on **any** computer, using **only** free software. We have been working toward this goal since it was announced in 1983.



Network services raise many issues for user freedom different from those raised by purely local computing.

RMS and the FSF's thinking on this has been influenced by the `autonomo.us` working group. This independent group of developers, entrepreneurs, hackers, and activists was convened by the FSF at our LibrePlanet conference in 2008 to discuss the ethical aspects of network services.



The Franklin Street Statement

They drafted the Franklin Street Statement (<http://autonomo.us/2008/07/14/franklin-street-statement/>), which is a set of separate draft recommendations for users, service operators, and developers.



Happy Birthday, GNU!



A GNU Priority for a GNU Era

RMS expands the goal of GNU from creating a fully free local operating system to also include minimizing the potential harms caused to users as they interact with the network – such as eavesdropping, surveillance, and loss of control over their computing.



He didn't say “cloud”

(From <http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/words-to-avoid.html#CloudComputing>)
He did not use the term “cloud computing” because that term is very vague:

The term “cloud computing” (or just “cloud”, in the context of computing) is a marketing buzzword with no clear meaning. It is used for a range of different activities whose only common characteristic is that they use the Internet for something beyond transmitting files. Thus, the term is a nexus of confusion. If you base your thinking on it, your thinking will be vague.



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Ethics and practical strategy

As we consider these issues, GNU and the FSF are concerned with some of them as questions of free software ethics. Just as locally run proprietary software is something completely rejected by GNU, some kinds of network interactions are also completely rejected.

Others are not seen as questions of free software ethics, but nonetheless GNU favors certain practical strategies when addressing them, because those strategies are *better* for protecting other second-order values held by users.



Network services aren't free or nonfree

They pose different issues. By definition, the user cannot modify the software running on someone else's machine, so that cannot be free software for the user – only for the site operator. Site operator should use free software for their own freedom, but it doesn't help the users.



Virtualization

Virtualization is a technology used extensively by the FSF and many in GNU. As with any other jobs we do with a computer at the FSF, we use only free software for this. Users should insist on a fully free stack both within and beneath their virtualized environment. Management tools should be free.



Data storage

There is nothing unjust in free software terms about storing your data remotely, as long as you can access it with free software. But it is *unwise*. Recent events in the US have demonstrated one major reason why it is unwise.



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We need systems like Tahoe-LAFS, which do encrypted decentralized storage.



Dynamically served proprietary software

Interacting with many applications described as “cloud” applications – such as Google Docs – actually involves not just the execution of server-side code but also actually the execution of proprietary code within the user’s own browser. JavaScript is the main example of this.



Ending nonfree JavaScript

The FSF has a campaign at <https://fsf.org/campaigns/freejs> to stop nonfree JavaScript, as an extension of our work against more traditional forms of proprietary software. JavaScript is no different.

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- We work with upstream free software JavaScript developers to clearly label their JavaScript as free software.



Service as a Software Substitute

This is a deliberate transformation of the term SaaS. This is because it describes situations that, from the user's perspective, the service is *replacing* the software.



Other network services

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However, we still *prefer* services which use the AGPL, and are decentralized.



Use the AGPL

Network software distributed under the terms of the Affero GNU General Public License (AGPL) is a good thing. The AGPL copyleft requires that the source code for network services be released. My favorite three things about the AGPL are:

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- It provides some – although not complete – assurance as to what a user is interacting with.
- It means that the service operator is sharing free software code, which by definition is a good thing.
- It means that others – including users themselves – can set up their own version of the site, so it mitigates against single points of failure on the network, and lock-in.



Decentralize

We want to avoid depending on single site operators. We want as many things as possible, even participating in a broader network, to be done with free software locally on users' computers. This is the best way to build a network that is resilient against efforts to control it. Think GNU social, pump.io, Diaspora, XMPP/Jabber, GNU MediaGoblin, FreedomBox, and so on.



A special class of publishing services

Streaming “from the cloud” services are a special class of problem. They require users giving up multiple freedoms. Currently we are trying to stop the W3C from approving an Encrypted Media Extensions (EME) standard, which would severely disempower users and break the Web, through the use of Digital Restrictions Management (DRM).



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- Writing the software



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- Making the software easy for users to install
- Solving the storage problem
- Eventually, solving the ISP problem and ownership of the network



Support Freedom and GNU

Our work is funded primarily by grassroots contributions from thousands of individual members.

- Join the FSF at <http://www.fsf.org/join> (use referrer #8096 if you like me). Or donate what you can at <https://donate.fsf.org>.



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- Join the autonomo.us discussion list, and help continue moving this discussion forward.
- If you are a developer, contribute your code in this area to the GNU System, and help us continue to defend user freedom into this GNU era.



We're hiring

What RMS said in his original announcement of GNU is still true:

I'm looking for people for whom knowing they are helping humanity is as important as money. I view this as a way of enabling dedicated people to devote their full energies to working on GNU by sparing them the need to make a living in another way.

[http://www.fsf.org/news/
fsf-seeks-full-time-senior-gnu-linux-sysadmin](http://www.fsf.org/news/fsf-seeks-full-time-senior-gnu-linux-sysadmin)



Free Software Awards

The call for nominations for our annual Free Software Awards opened yesterday. We have two awards – the Award for the Advancement of Free Software, and the Award for Projects of Social Benefit. Advancements in the free software approach to network services would be an excellent justification for nominating someone.

<http://www.fsf.org/news/>

[free-software-foundation-opens-nominations-for-the-16th-annual-free-software-awards](http://www.fsf.org/news/free-software-foundation-opens-nominations-for-the-16th-annual-free-software-awards)



Microblogging

Why not take this event, and this track in particular, as an opportunity to try out one of the federated microblogging platforms like GNU social and pump.io?

If you're also using Twitter, consider posting to it via GNU social plugin or other free software client, so you are avoiding the proprietary JavaScript (the mobile interface at `mobile.twitter.com` can do in a pinch).

