

Availability of Open Source Software in Public Libraries

Sol Hanna

17th February 2002

Introduction

I am writing this article as a member of the Perth Linux Users' Group (PLUG), a group formed by users of the GNU/Linux operating system and Open Source Software¹ to assist one another with technical advice through arranging regular workshops and lectures, and a mailing list. PLUG also engages in advocacy of Open Source Software which is created by volunteer programmers from all over the world to benefit the public and is as a result freely redistributable according to the terms of the GNU General Public Licence (GPL)². The members of PLUG are of the firm view that offering the GNU/Linux operating system and accompanying Open Source Software on CD-ROM and books relating to the installation and usage of this software would constitute a valuable information service to the public, especially for those people that cannot afford to run propriety operating systems and applications, for those studying computing, and for software enthusiasts in general.

What is GNU/Linux and Open Source Software and how does it constitute an information service to the public?

The GNU/Linux operating system was created by volunteer programmers collaborating over the internet since 1991. The aim has been to provide an operating system and software applications that are in the public interest because they can be freely redistributed without any restrictions upon usage. GNU/Linux runs on a wider variety of computer hardware than any other operating system, including on older, less powerful hardware. It is employed in an enormous variety of contexts from the large mainframes that power Amazon.com, the supercomputer cluster that powers the Google search engine, down to regular webserver

¹To find an accurate definition of "Open Source Software" go to <http://www.linuxgazette.com/issue26/perens.html>

²To find out more about the GNU General Public Licence go to <http://www.linux.org/info/gnu.html>

and small office servers, to personal computers, all the way down to embedded devices like personal organizers. The rapidly growing appeal of GNU/Linux and Open Source Software can be attributed to its reputation for stability and security, its very low cost, its flexibility and configurability, and its freedom - it can be redistributed and installed on as many computers as one wishes without restriction.

The provision of Open Source Software in CD-ROM (and book) format constitutes an information service in many ways. GNU/Linux and Open Source Software are employed in a vast (and growing) array of enterprises and developing skills in this software can lead to gainful employment. Indeed there are already many students of computing that wish to study in this field, but all too often lack physical resources. GNU/Linux and Open Source Software provided by libraries would be positively empowering for those that chose to use it. A library member could legally install it on his/her computer and use any of the thousands of free applications in various ways for information storage and retrieval, for entertainment or learning, or, when combined with the internet, to discover much more information. Many Open Source Software applications have been ported to run on other operating systems, and these could also be provided for installation and use also.

This software provided on CD-ROMs would not only be useful as free software on people's computers, but would serve as an information source in itself as there is extensive documentation accompanying the software of each distribution on the CD-ROMs. For instance, most distributions come with Apache, by far the world's most used web server, and with the documentation for how to install and configure Apache; and another example, most distributions come with the GIMP - a graphical design and manipulation application equivalent to Photoshop - and contains documentation on how to use the GIMP to create or alter graphical images. So these CD-ROMs would not only provide free software, but also free documentation on how to use free software.

How can LISWA provide this resource to libraries and the public, and how can PLUG assist LISWA?

The most appropriate way that Public Libraries can provide this resource to the public is through offering it for loan to all library members as it would with other for loan items, thereby allowing the item to be reused. There are a few different ways that this resource could be offered, but probably the optimum medium in which to offer Open Source Software is in book format describing how to install and use the GNU/Linux operating system and Open Source applications which comes with a CD-ROM to install a particular distribution of GNU/Linux and thousands of free applications. These can be sourced from most major book retailers³.

³All major book retailers (ie: Dymocks, Collins) sell books about Linux and some titles pertaining to Open Source Software applications, many of which are now cross-platform (they have been

There are PLUG members that would be happy to help identify suppliers of books (with CD-ROMs) and advise about which titles might be most appropriate for a given target audience.

Of course, the question may arise, which distributions of GNU/Linux do you offer when there are so many? When sourcing books from major vendors this question will be answered for you as only the most popular distributions have books with CD-ROMs available. However, PLUG is prepared to provide copies of all the major distributions that can be downloaded and copied to CD-ROM with labels for the cost of the CD medium (approximately \$2 per CD). This would most likely include Red Hat, Debian, Mandrake, SuSE, along with a couple of other distributions. These CD-ROMs can be legally copied ad infinitum and installed on computers without any restriction. (NB: PLUG will access the software from websites - of which there are many - that provide the software for download at no charge. This software is freely redistributable. There are no licence issues to worry about. If in doubt read the GNU Public Licence.) These CD-ROMs can even be redistributed for a profit (ie: anyone could produce the CDs for \$2 per copy and sell them for \$10 without breaking any laws). Indeed, it is the wish of those volunteer programmers that have contributed to Open Source Software in the public interest that as many people as possible benefit from their work, and therefore would encourage any amount of redistribution of the software that they have created.

Summary

The members of the Perth Linux Users' Group believe that there would be a clear benefit to the public by providing the books about the GNU/Linux operating system and/or CD-ROMs for loan to members of public libraries in Western Australia. To this end, PLUG is prepared to assist by providing advice about aquisition of publications and is prepared to supply labelled CD-ROMs of all major GNU/Linux distributions for a no more than the cost of the medium. If more information is required in addition to this brief article, PLUG may appoint a delegate to advise LISWA further on this matter and to discuss other possible ways that PLUG may be able to assist in this matter.

ported to run on other operating systems. Another option is to purchase books and CD-ROMs online from Everythinglinux in Sydney (www.everythinglinux.com.au) or to purchase directly from the publishers.