

Words to Avoid (or Use with Care) Because They Are Loaded or Confusing

GNU philosophy

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Words to Avoid (or Use with Care) Because They Are Loaded or Confusing

There are a number of words and phrases that we recommend avoiding, or avoiding in certain contexts and usages. Some are ambiguous or misleading; others presuppose a viewpoint that we hope you disagree with. (See also *Categories of Free and Nonfree Software*.)

BSD-Style

The expression “BSD-style license” leads to confusion because it lumps together licenses that have important differences. For instance, the original BSD license with the advertising clause is incompatible with the GNU General Public License, but the revised BSD license is compatible with the GPL.

To avoid confusion, it is best to name the specific license in question and avoid the vague term “BSD-style.”

Closed

Describing nonfree software as “closed” clearly refers to the term “open source.” In the free software movement, we do not want to be confused with the open source camp, so we are careful to avoid saying things that would encourage people to lump us in with them. For instance, we avoid describing nonfree software as “closed.” We call it “nonfree” or “proprietary.”

Cloud Computing

The term “cloud 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.

When thinking about or responding to a statement someone else has made using this term, the first step is to clarify the topic. Which kind of activity is the statement really about, and what is a good, clear term for that activity? Once the topic is clear, the discussion can head for a useful conclusion.

Curiously, Larry Ellison, a proprietary software developer, also noted the vacuity of the term “cloud computing.”¹ He decided to use the term anyway because, as a proprietary software developer, he isn’t motivated by the same ideals as we are.

Commercial

Please don’t use “commercial” as a synonym for “nonfree.” That confuses two entirely different issues.

A program is commercial if it is developed as a business activity. A commercial program can be free or nonfree, depending on its manner of distribution. Likewise, a program developed by a school or an individual can be free or nonfree, depending on its manner of distribution. The two questions—what sort of entity developed the program and what freedom its users have—are independent.

¹ Dan Farber, “Oracle’s Ellison Nails Cloud Computing,” 26 September 2008, http://news.cnet.com/8301-13953_3-10052188-80.html.

In the first decade of the free software movement, free software packages were almost always noncommercial; the components of the GNU/Linux operating system were developed by individuals or by nonprofit organizations such as the FSF and universities. Later, in the 1990s, free commercial software started to appear.

Free commercial software is a contribution to our community, so we should encourage it. But people who think that “commercial” means “nonfree” will tend to think that the “free commercial” combination is self-contradictory, and dismiss the possibility. Let’s be careful not to use the word “commercial” in that way.

Compensation

To speak of “compensation for authors” in connection with copyright carries the assumptions that (1) copyright exists for the sake of authors and (2) whenever we read something, we take on a debt to the author which we must then repay. The first assumption is simply false, and the second is outrageous.

Consumer

The term “consumer,” when used to refer to computer users, is loaded with assumptions we should reject. Playing a digital recording, or running a program, does not consume it.

The terms “producer” and “consumer” come from economic theory, and bring with them its narrow perspective and misguided assumptions. They tend to warp your thinking.

In addition, describing the users of software as “consumers” presumes a narrow role for them: it regards them as cattle that passively graze on what others make available to them.

This kind of thinking leads to travesties like the CBDTPA, the “Consumer Broadband and Digital Television Promotion Act,” which would require copying restriction facilities in every digital device. If all the users do is “consume,” then why should they mind?

The shallow economic conception of users as “consumers” tends to go hand in hand with the idea that published works are mere “content.”

To describe people who are not limited to passive use of works, we suggest terms such as “individuals” and “citizens.”

Content

If you want to describe a feeling of comfort and satisfaction, by all means say you are “content,” but using the word as a noun to describe written and other works of authorship adopts an attitude you might rather avoid. It regards these works as a commodity whose purpose is to fill a box and make money. In effect, it disparages the works themselves.

Those who use this term are often the publishers that push for increased copyright power in the name of the authors (“creators,” as they say) of the works. The term “content” reveals their real attitude towards these works and their authors. (See Courtney Love’s open letter to Steve Case² and search for “content provider” in that page. Alas, Ms. Love is unaware that the term “intellectual property” is also biased and confusing.)

² An unedited transcript of American rock musician Courtney Love’s 16 May 2000 speech to the Digital Hollywood online-entertainment conference, in New York, is available at <http://salon.com/technology/feature/2000/06/14/love/print.html>.

However, as long as other people use the term “content provider,” political dissidents can well call themselves “malcontent providers.”

The term “content management” takes the prize for vacuity. “Content” means “some sort of information,” and “management” in this context means “doing something with it.” So a “content management system” is a system for doing something to some sort of information. Nearly all programs fit that description.

In most cases, that term really refers to a system for updating pages on a web site. For that, we recommend the term “web site revision system” (WRS).

Creator

The term “creator” as applied to authors implicitly compares them to a deity (“the creator”). The term is used by publishers to elevate authors’ moral standing above that of ordinary people in order to justify giving them increased copyright power, which the publishers can then exercise in their name. We recommend saying “author” instead. However, in many cases “copyright holder” is what you really mean.

Digital Goods

The term “digital goods,” as applied to copies of works of authorship, erroneously identifies them with physical goods—which cannot be copied, and which therefore have to be manufactured and sold.

Digital Rights Management

“Digital Rights Management” refers to technical schemes designed to impose restrictions on computer users. The use of the word “rights” in this term is propaganda, designed to lead you unawares into seeing the issue from the viewpoint of the few that impose the restrictions, and ignoring that of the general public on whom these restrictions are imposed.

Good alternatives include “Digital Restrictions Management,” and “digital handcuffs.”

Ecosystem

It is a mistake to describe the free software community, or any human community, as an “ecosystem,” because that word implies the absence of ethical judgment.

The term “ecosystem” implicitly suggests an attitude of nonjudgmental observation: don’t ask how what *should* happen, just study and explain what *does* happen. In an ecosystem, some organisms consume other organisms. We do not ask whether it is fair for an owl to eat a mouse or for a mouse to eat a plant, we only observe that they do so. Species’ populations grow or shrink according to the conditions; this is neither right nor wrong, merely an ecological phenomenon.

By contrast, beings that adopt an ethical stance towards their surroundings can decide to preserve things that, on their own, might vanish—such as civil society, democracy, human rights, peace, public health, clean air and water, endangered species, traditional arts. . . and computer users’ freedom.

For Free

If you want to say that a program is free software, please don't say that it is available "for free." That term specifically means "for zero price." Free software is a matter of freedom, not price.

Free software copies are often available for free—for example, by downloading via FTP. But free software copies are also available for a price on CD-ROMs; meanwhile, proprietary software copies are occasionally available for free in promotions, and some proprietary packages are normally available at no charge to certain users.

To avoid confusion, you can say that the program is available "as free software."

Freely Available

Don't use "freely available software" as a synonym for "free software." The terms are not equivalent. Software is "freely available" if anyone can easily get a copy. "Free software" is defined in terms of the freedom of users that have a copy of it. These are answers to different questions.

Freeware

Please don't use the term "freeware" as a synonym for "free software." The term "freeware" was used often in the 1980s for programs released only as executables, with source code not available. Today it has no particular agreed-on definition.

When using languages other than English, please avoid borrowing English terms such as "free software" or "freeware." It is better to translate the term "free software" into your language. (Please see *Translations of the Term "Free Software"* for a list of recommended unambiguous translations for the term "free software" into various languages.)

By using a word in your own language, you show that you are really referring to freedom and not just parroting some mysterious foreign marketing concept. The reference to freedom may at first seem strange or disturbing to your compatriots, but once they see that it means exactly what it says, they will really understand what the issue is.

Give Away Software

It's misleading to use the term "give away" to mean "distribute a program as free software." This locution has the same problem as "for free": it implies the issue is price, not freedom. One way to avoid the confusion is to say "release as free software."

Hacker

A hacker is someone who enjoys playful cleverness³—not necessarily with computers. The programmers in the old MIT free software community of the 60s and 70s referred to themselves as hackers. Around 1980, journalists who discovered the hacker community mistakenly took the term to mean "security breaker."

Please don't spread this mistake. People who break security are "crackers."

³ See my article, "On Hacking," at <http://stallman.org/articles/on-hacking.html>.

Intellectual Property

Publishers and lawyers like to describe copyright as “intellectual property”—a term also applied to patents, trademarks, and other more obscure areas of law. These laws have so little in common, and differ so much, that it is ill-advised to generalize about them. It is best to talk specifically about “copyright,” or about “patents,” or about “trademarks.”

The term “intellectual property” carries a hidden assumption—that the way to think about all these disparate issues is based on an analogy with physical objects, and our conception of them as physical property.

When it comes to copying, this analogy disregards the crucial difference between material objects and information: information can be copied and shared almost effortlessly, while material objects can’t be.

To avoid spreading unnecessary bias and confusion, it is best to adopt a firm policy not to speak or even think in terms of “intellectual property.”

The hypocrisy of calling these powers “rights” is starting to make the World “Intellectual Property” Organization embarrassed.

LAMP System

“LAMP” stands for “Linux, Apache, MySQL and PHP”—a common combination of software to use on a web server, except that “Linux” in this context really refers to the GNU/Linux system. So instead of “LAMP” it should be “GLAMP”: “GNU, Linux, Apache, MySQL and PHP.”

Linux System

Linux is the name of the kernel that Linus Torvalds developed starting in 1991. The operating system in which Linux is used is basically GNU with Linux added. To call the whole system “Linux” is both unfair and confusing. Please call the complete system GNU/Linux, both to give the GNU Project credit and to distinguish the whole system from the kernel alone.

Market

It is misleading to describe the users of free software, or the software users in general, as a “market.”

This is not to say there is no room for markets in the free software community. If you have a free software support business, then you have clients, and you trade with them in a market. As long as you respect their freedom, we wish you success in your market.

But the free software movement is a social movement, not a business, and the success it aims for is not a market success. We are trying to serve the public by giving it freedom—not competing to draw business away from a rival. To equate this campaign for freedom to a business’ efforts for mere success is to deny the importance of freedom and legitimize proprietary software.

MP3 Player

In the late 1990s it became feasible to make portable, solid-state digital audio players. Most support the patented MP3 codec, but not all. Some support the patent-free audio codecs

Ogg Vorbis and FLAC, and may not even support MP3-encoded files at all, precisely to avoid these patents. To call such players “MP3 players” is not only confusing, it also puts MP3 in an undeserved position of privilege which encourages people to continue using that vulnerable format. We suggest the terms “digital audio player,” or simply “audio player” if context permits.

Open

Please avoid using the term “open” or “open source” as a substitute for “free software.” Those terms refer to a different position based on different values. Free software is a political movement; open source is a development model.

When referring to the open source position, using its name is appropriate; but please do not use it to label us or our work—that leads people to think we share those views.

PC

It’s OK to use the abbreviation “PC” to refer to a certain kind of computer hardware, but please don’t use it with the implication that the computer is running Microsoft Windows. If you install GNU/Linux on the same computer, it is still a PC.

The term “WC” has been suggested for a computer running Windows.

Photoshop

Please avoid using the term “photoshop” as a verb, meaning any kind of photo manipulation or image editing in general. Photoshop is just the name of one particular image editing program, which should be avoided since it is proprietary. There are plenty of free alternatives, such as GIMP.

Piracy

Publishers often refer to copying they don’t approve of as “piracy.” In this way, they imply that it is ethically equivalent to attacking ships on the high seas, kidnapping and murdering the people on them. Based on such propaganda, they have procured laws in most of the world to forbid copying in most (or sometimes all) circumstances. (They are still pressuring to make these prohibitions more complete.)

If you don’t believe that copying not approved by the publisher is just like kidnapping and murder, you might prefer not to use the word “piracy” to describe it. Neutral terms such as “unauthorized copying” (or “prohibited copying” for the situation where it is illegal) are available for use instead. Some of us might even prefer to use a positive term such as “sharing information with your neighbor.”

PowerPoint

Please avoid using the term “PowerPoint” to mean any kind of slide presentation. “PowerPoint” is just the name of one particular proprietary program to make presentations, and there are plenty of free alternatives, such as T_EX’s `beamer` class and OpenOffice.org’s Impress.

Protection

Publishers' lawyers love to use the term "protection" to describe copyright. This word carries the implication of preventing destruction or suffering; therefore, it encourages people to identify with the owner and publisher who benefit from copyright, rather than with the users who are restricted by it.

It is easy to avoid "protection" and use neutral terms instead. For example, instead of saying, "Copyright protection lasts a very long time," you can say, "Copyright lasts a very long time."

If you want to criticize copyright instead of supporting it, you can use the term "copyright restrictions." Thus, you can say, "Copyright restrictions last a very long time."

The term "protection" is also used to describe malicious features. For instance, "copy protection" is a feature that interferes with copying. From the user's point of view, this is obstruction. So we could call that malicious feature "copy obstruction." More often it is called Digital Restrictions Management (DRM)—see the Defective by Design campaign, at <http://www.defectivebydesign.org>.

RAND (Reasonable and Non-Discriminatory)

Standards bodies that promulgate patent-restricted standards that prohibit free software typically have a policy of obtaining patent licenses that require a fixed fee per copy of a conforming program. They often refer to such licenses by the term "RAND," which stands for "reasonable and non-discriminatory."

That term whitewashes a class of patent licenses that are normally neither reasonable nor nondiscriminatory. It is true that these licenses do not discriminate against any specific person, but they do discriminate against the free software community, and that makes them unreasonable. Thus, half of the term "RAND" is deceptive and the other half is prejudiced.

Standards bodies should recognize that these licenses are discriminatory, and drop the use of the term "reasonable and non-discriminatory" or "RAND" to describe them. Until they do so, writers who do not wish to join in the whitewashing would do well to reject that term. To accept and use it merely because patent-wielding companies have made it widespread is to let those companies dictate the views you express.

We suggest the term "uniform fee only," or "UFO" for short, as a replacement. It is accurate because the only condition in these licenses is a uniform royalty fee.

Sell Software

The term "sell software" is ambiguous. Strictly speaking, exchanging a copy of a free program for a sum of money is selling; but people usually associate the term "sell" with proprietary restrictions on the subsequent use of the software. You can be more precise, and prevent confusion, by saying either "distributing copies of a program for a fee" or "imposing proprietary restrictions on the use of a program," depending on what you mean.

See *Selling Free Software* for further discussion of this issue.

Software Industry

The term "software industry" encourages people to imagine that software is always developed by a sort of factory and then delivered to "consumers." The free software community

shows this is not the case. Software businesses exist, and various businesses develop free and/or nonfree software, but those that develop free software are not run like factories.

The term “industry” is being used as propaganda by advocates of software patents. They call software development “industry” and then try to argue that this means it should be subject to patent monopolies. The European Parliament, rejecting software patents in 2003,⁴ voted to define “industry” as “automated production of material goods.”

Theft

Copyright apologists often use words like “stolen” and “theft” to describe copyright infringement. At the same time, they ask us to treat the legal system as an authority on ethics: if copying is forbidden, it must be wrong.

So it is pertinent to mention that the legal system—at least in the US—rejects the idea that copyright infringement is “theft.” Copyright apologists are making an appeal to authority... and misrepresenting what authority says.

The idea that laws decide what is right or wrong is mistaken in general. Laws are, at their best, an attempt to achieve justice; to say that laws define justice or ethical conduct is turning things upside down.

Trusted Computing

“Trusted computing” is the proponents’ name for a scheme to redesign computers so that application developers can trust your computer to obey them instead of you. From their point of view, it is “trusted”; from your point of view, it is “treacherous.”

Vendor

Please don’t use the term “vendor” to refer generally to anyone that develops or packages software. Many programs are developed in order to sell copies, and their developers are therefore their vendors; this even includes some free software packages. However, many programs are developed by volunteers or organizations which do not intend to sell copies. These developers are not vendors. Likewise, only some of the packagers of GNU/Linux distributions are vendors. We recommend the general term “supplier” instead.

⁴ “Directive on the patentability of computer-implemented inventions,” 24 September 2003, <http://eupat.ffii.org/papers/euoparl0309>.