

Computing “Progress”: Good and Bad

GNU philosophy

The BBC invited me to write an article for their column series, *The Tech Lab*, and this is what I sent them. (It refers to a couple of other articles published in that series.) The BBC was ultimately unwilling to publish it with a copying-permission notice, so I published it on <http://gnu.org>, in 2007.

This document is part of GNU philosophy, the GNU Project’s exhaustive collection of articles and essays about free software and related matters.

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Bradley Horowitz of Yahoo proposed here¹ that every object in our world have a unique number so that your cell phone could record everything you do—even which cans you picked up while in the supermarket.

If the phone is like today’s phones, it will use proprietary software: software controlled by the companies that developed it, not by its users. Those companies will ensure that your phone makes the information it collects about you available to the phone company’s database (let’s call it Big Brother) and probably to other companies.

In the UK of the future, as New Labour would have it, those companies will surely turn this information over to the police. If your phone reports you bought a wooden stick and a piece of poster board, the phone company’s system will deduce that you may be planning a protest, and report you automatically to the police so they can accuse you of “terrorism.”

In the UK, it is literally an offense to be suspect—more precisely, to possess any object in circumstances that create a “reasonable suspicion” that you might use it in certain criminal ways. Your phone will give the police plenty of opportunities to suspect you so they can charge you with having been suspected by them. Similar things will happen in China, where Yahoo has already given the government all the information it needed to imprison a dissident; it subsequently asked for our understanding on the excuse that it was “just following orders.”

Horowitz would like cell phones to tag information automatically, based on knowing when you participate in an event or meeting. That means the phone company will also know precisely whom you meet. That information will also be interesting to governments, such as those of the UK and China, that cut corners on human rights.

I do not much like Horowitz’s vision of total surveillance. Rather, I envision a world in which our computers never collect, or release, any information about us except when we want them to.

Nonfree software does other nasty things besides spying; it often implements digital handcuffs—features designed to restrict the users (also called DRM, for Digital Restrictions Management). These features control how you can access, copy, or move the files in your own computer.

DRM is a common practice: Microsoft does it, Apple does it, Google does it, even the BBC’s iPlayer does it. Many governments, taking the side of these companies against the public, have made it illegal to tell others how to escape from the digital handcuffs. As a result, competition does nothing to check the practice: no matter how many proprietary alternatives you might have to choose from, they will all handcuff you just the same. If the computer knows where you are located, it can make DRM even worse: there are companies that would like to restrict what you can access based on your present location.

My vision of the world is different. I would like to see a world in which all the software in our computers — in our desktop PCs, our laptops, our handhelds, our phones — is under our control and respects our freedom. In other words, a world where all software is *free* software.

¹ Bradley Horowitz, “The Tech Lab: Bradley Horowitz,” *BBC News*, 29 June 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6252716.stm>.

Free software, freedom-respecting software, means that every user of the program is free to get the program’s source code and change the program to do what she wants, and also free to give away or sell copies, either exact or modified. This means the users are in control. With the users in control of the software, nobody has power to impose nasty features on others.

Even if you don’t exercise this control yourself, you are part of a society where others do. If you are not a programmer, other users of the program are. They will probably find and remove any nasty features, which might spy on or restrict you, and publish safe versions. You will have only to elect to use them—and since all other users will prefer them, that will usually happen with no effort on your part.

Charles Stross envisioned computers that permanently record everything that we see and hear.² Those records could be very useful, as long as Big Brother doesn’t see and hear all of them. Today’s cell phones are already capable of listening to their users without informing them, at the request of the police, the phone company, or anyone that knows the requisite commands. As long as phones use nonfree software, controlled by its developers and not by the users, we must expect this to get worse. Only free software enables computer-using citizens to resist totalitarian surveillance.

Dave Winer’s article³ suggested that Mr. Gates should send a copy of Windows Vista to Alpha Centauri. I understand the feeling, but sending just one won’t solve our problem here on Earth. Windows is designed to spy on users and restrict them. We should collect all the copies of Windows, and of MacOS and iPlayer for the same reason, and send them to Alpha Centauri at the slowest possible speed. Or just erase them.

² Charles Stross, “The Tech Lab: Charles Stross,” *BBC News*, 10 July 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6287126.stm>.

³ Dave Winer, “The Tech Lab: Dave Winer,” *BBC News*, 14 June 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6748103.stm>.