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Your Freedom Needs Free Software

Many of us know that governments can threaten the human rights of software users through censorship and surveillance of the Internet. Many do not realize that the software they run on their home or work computers can be an even worse threat. Thinking of software as 'just a tool', they suppose that it obeys them, when in fact it often obeys others instead.

The software running in most computers is **non-free, proprietary software**: controlled by software companies, not by its users. Users can't check what these programs do, nor prevent them from doing what they don't want. Most people accept this because they have seen no other way, but it is simply wrong to give developers power over the users' computer.

This unjust power, as usual, tempts its wielders to further misdeeds. If a computer talks to a network, and you don't control the software in it, it can easily spy on you. Microsoft Windows spies on users; for instance, it reports what words a user searches for in her own files, and what other programs are installed. RealPlayer spies too; it reports what the user plays. Cell phones are full of non-free software, which spies. Cell phones send out localizing signals even when 'off', many can send out your precise GPS location whether you wish or not, and some models can be switched on remotely as listening devices. Users can't fix these malicious features because they don't have control.

Some proprietary software is designed to restrict and attack its users. Windows Vista is a big advance in this field; the reason it requires replacement of old hardware is that the new models are designed to support unbreakable restrictions. Microsoft thus requires users to pay for shiny new shackles. It is also designed to permit forced updating by corporate authority. Hence the **BadVista.org** campaign, which urges Windows users not to 'upgrade' to Vista. Mac OS also contains features designed to restrict its users.

Microsoft has installed back doors for the US government's use in the past (reported on heise.de). We cannot check whether they have successors today. Other proprietary programs may or may not have back doors, but since we cannot check them, we cannot trust them.

The only way to assure that your software is working for you is to insist on Free/Libre software. This means users get the source code, are free to study and change it, and are free to redistribute it with or without changes. The GNU/Linux system, developed specifically for users' freedom, includes office applications, multimedia, games, and everything you really need to run a computer. See gNewSense.org for a totally Free/Libre version of GNU/Linux.

A special problem occurs when activists for social change use proprietary software, because its developers, who control it, may be companies they wish to protest—or that work hand in glove with the states whose policies they oppose. Control of our software by a proprietary software company, whether it be Microsoft, Apple, Adobe or Skype, means control of what we can say, and to whom. This threatens our freedom in all areas of life.

There is also danger in using a company's server to do your word processing or email—and not just if you are in China, as US lawyer Michael Springmann discovered. In 2003, AOL not only handed over to the police his confidential discussions with clients, it also made his email and his address list disappear, and didn't admit this was intentional until one of its staff made a slip. Springmann gave up on getting his data back.

The US is not the only state that doesn't respect human rights, so keep your data on your own computer, and your backups under your own custody—and run your computer with Free/Libre software.

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