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Stuff that matters to Wayne

Ubuntu: The Relationship Between Freedom and Quality in The Software World

Posted on December 04,2016 by admin

Unlike previous blog posts, I'm going to start this one with two exciting tables to get you thinking. In the first table, I increased freedom and in the second table, I decreased it so that we could look at the effect, if any, on other items. Sorry, they are just image screenshots:

EFFECT OF DECREASED FREEDOMS

| | FREEDOM | REGULATIONS | QUALITY | RISK OF NEGATIVE EVENT | ACCOUNTABILITY |
|--------------------------|----------------|--------------------|----------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| DRINKING WATER | DECREASE | INCREASE | ? | DECREASE | INCREASE |
| VOTING | DECREASE | ? | ? | ? | ? |
| GUNS | DECREASE | INCREASE | ? | DECREASE | INCREASE |
| RELIGIOUS BELIEFS | DECREASE | INCREASE | ? | DECREASE | INCREASE |
| MARRIAGE | DECREASE | INCREASE | ? | ? | ? |
| STOCK MARKET | DECREASE | INCREASE | ? | ? | ? |
| COMPUTER CODE | DECREASE | INCREASE | INCREASE | DECREASE | INCREASE |
| | | | | | |

EFFECT OF INCREASED FREEDOMS

| | FREEDOM | REGULATIONS | QUALITY | RISK OF NEGATIVE EVENT | ACCOUNTABILITY |
|--------------------------|----------------|--------------------|----------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| DRINKING WATER | INCREASE | DECREASE | ? | INCREASE | DECREASE |
| VOTING | INCREASE | ? | ? | INCREASE | ? |
| GUNS | INCREASE | DECREASE | ? | INCREASE | DECREASE |
| RELIGIOUS BELIEFS | INCREASE | DECREASE | ? | INCREASE | DECREASE |
| MARRIAGE | INCREASE | DECREASE | ? | ? | ? |
| STOCK MARKET | INCREASE | DECREASE | ? | INCREASE | DECREASE |
| COMPUTER CODE | INCREASE | DECREASE | DECREASE | INCREASE | DECREASE |
| | | | | | |

Someone sent me over [this article written by Mark Shuttleworth, chief of Canonical](#) – the company behind Ubuntu. Usually, Mr. Shuttleworth writes with excitement, hope, positivity and other such forward-moving adjectives. Unlike pretty much anything else I have read written by him, this article sounded more like a dad who was forced by his disobedient kids to lay down the hard law. Just the tone alone being so different from his usual, caught my attention. It appears that some unnamed European corporation has taken the Ubuntu code (written for free by many coders and volunteers around the world and maintained by the for-profit company Canonical at their heavy cost of time and money), done a few ‘things’ to it, and published it as ‘their own’. For full disclosure, I haven’t done any of my own research like looking at the notice of claims against them. However, what I’m picking up from the article is that the soon-to-be defendants contributed little or nothing to the base code that made ubuntu what it is today

- invested little or no money to the ubuntu project
- decreased the quality of the user experience
- harmed the Ubuntu name
- harmed Canonical by means of all of the above

If this is true, it should not be difficult to prove monetary damages for [Canonical](#) plus I’m guessing there will be a lot of angry programmers out there who would rally beside Mr. Shuttleworth for screwing up all their volunteer work. From a bird’s eye view it seems like a suitable analogy for this behaviour would be something like this: Imagine a grade 5 teacher creating a cool project where the students build a gizmo that’s valuable to the world – let’s say it creates clean drinking water out of thin air. Next thing you know, all the parents and grandparents are excited about the project and start volunteering their time to help build it and make it better. Next thing you know, a company (let’s call them Company A) picks up on the project and realizes that they can help improve the project by funding certain parts plus they can make some money as well because some industries will want an industrial version of these water-makers which is out of the scope of these volunteers time/money to build or support. So Company A starts investing time and money and builds a business around it while continuing to support the kids’ gizmo proliferation around the world. Out of nowhere, Company B, which has not participated in the project at all, shows up, takes the plans that all these volunteers made and improved on over the years at the cost of their time (and at Company A’s expense, too), and starts making their own industrial water-makers. They slap their own brand on it, change one or two small things and start making money. Then problems start happening. They don’t have a volunteer base of countless thousands who can jump in to improve or fix things when they go wrong, so this makes sense. Company B then routes all the problems of their customers to Company A saying “they have support over there, I think...” I’m guessing that there would be lots of angry kids and grandparents and most people would agree to take action to stop Company B. The question of this soon-to-be lawsuit will probably hinge entirely on the [licensing](#) of the software. Has this European company violated any software license agreements including the free software licenses of Ubuntu? What exactly did they change? Are they guilty of changing the code or are they guilty of not supporting the code? It will be interesting to read the claim, for sure (if you like reading litigation documents) This also got me thinking about correlation between freedom and regulation. I know that one of the main reasons why myself and others moved to Ubuntu was for the freedom. We didn’t want to be told by bullies like Apple or Microsoft how we are going to be using our hardware and who will be accessing our private information. I started thinking about un-related industries and correlations between different things when you increase or decrease freedom. I thought it would be timely to share the quick charts that I built. (review charts above again) As you can see from the charts, it was an interesting exercise. It seems that in most cases clear changes occur in most columns – except one. I could not determine in any instance that quality increased or decreased with the increase *or decrease* of freedom. At a glance you might quickly disagree with my conclusions, but allow me to explain them.

Drinking water: Although you may increase regulation and decrease freedom to do what you want with your drinking water, it is debatable that the government controlled waters with chlorine, fluoride, and who knows what, is better for you that this or that in a free stream of water. The long term jury is still out on this one.

Voting: To clarify I am referring simply to the freedom to vote and having a regulatory system to

govern the actual elections and voting procedure. By regulating or not, does it really help improve the final product (the person you are voting for)? Point proven in recent elections in big North American country... Guns: Perhaps you could say the quality of the actual physical gun might improve with regulation.... I don't know enough on the topic, but it would seem to me that a nice old man building a gun in his shop could do just as well as a heavily-regulated gun factory. Religions beliefs: the 'negative event' here would be something like a mass suicide with a cult. The Catholic church is heavily regulated, but is the quality of faith and the fruit of believers higher? Marriage: I was thinking here free-love marriages versus arranged marriages. Although one might think that by choosing your spouse, instead of your parents choosing him/her might yield a higher-quality spouse/match, I believe the jury is still out on this. Look at the divorces in 'love marriages', for example. So when it's all said and done the only category where I felt freedom had a measurable impact on quality was in the realm of computer code. No one will deny that the fruity computer company typically has typically stable software which works on stable hardware. But on the other hand, very few of its users, when asked, deny that they feel stifled, controlled and possibly even spied on – if not totally 'stuck'. And so there seems to be a much more pronounced correlation between freedom and quality in the world of code. And that also is why this will be a very interesting legal case to follow. Will Shuttleworth be tempted to pull in some of the freedoms of the Ubuntu code base in order to maintain the quality that Ubuntu deserves? Will a task force of lawyers be commissioned to seek and attack low quality Ubuntu publishers much like how a big proprietary corporation might do? Until now Ubuntu has wowed the world with its ability to stay both free and yet maintain an incredibly high quality final product which I can boldly say is the same and better than competing proprietary systems in every category. The proof of this quality has been in the pudding with fast world-wide growth with more and more everyday users converting 100% to ubuntu and also in the realm of innovation (look it all up yourself because I don't even know where to begin!). On the one hand I'm completely in agreement that selfish individuals and corporations should be stopped in their tracks and made to pay for damaging others. On the other hand, I'm also keenly aware that the freedom of the Ubuntu code must remain of higher importance overall. I find myself favouring the 'whatever-it-takes-to-make-sure-ubuntu-comes-out-the-winner' side but I will remain full open to all sides of this story.

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Tagged:Canonical,Freedom,Lawsuit,Legal,Philosophy,Privacy,Quality,Shuttleworth,Ubuntu | With 0 comments