Ethical and Community based Computer Programs

Written by Alan Cocks
Bracknell U3A
Coordinator, Computers Beyond Beginners, Bracknell, online group

Many of us use computers, and, love them or hate them, they are now part of our lives. They might slow down, and we might be thinking of spending money on getting a new computer in the future or thinking of upgrading. They can also get viruses and malware, so that might mean more cost.

We might get free programs from friends of course, or from the internet, but the free versions chase our purse strings in some way. And if we get a full _and_ free version from a friend, is it legal?

<u>What if</u> there was a worldwide group of talented ethical programmers who were voluntarily committed to writing and sharing programs with each other, and with anyone else who agreed to share alike?

<u>What if</u> this community was something that <u>anyone</u> could be a part of, and benefit from, even without being a computer expert, nor knowing anything at all about computers?

We would not have to worry about copying a useful program for our friends - because we wouldn't be doing anything wrong.

<u>What if</u> this software ran fast on old computers, and did not get viruses?

Well, it <u>does</u> exist, and it is free.

It is used by governments around the world, it is used by big companies like IBM, Amazon, Google, Yahoo, and you can buy a computer running it from a number of vendors. And, it is also used by people who have heard about it. Now you know about it too!

Why isn't it in the shops? Why isn't it on the computers in the shops? It is because the shops are a retail environment. They naturally want to sell what will make money for them. Free programs <u>can</u> make a lot of money for some vendors, but not a lot for shops. So this ethical software is not publicised.

Free programs are so called because of the freedom they bestow on the user, not necessarily because they are free of cost, although most are. The freedom is guarded and preserved legally to prevent companies 'stealing' it, and dishonestly calling it their own, and removing the freedom.

The Government asks for it to be used! The recent action plan from the Cabinet Office (Note1) includes:
'....... When Sir Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web in 1989, he fought to keep it free for everyone. Since then, not everyone in ICT has displayed quite the same philanthropic spirit and a small number of global organisations dominate. But over the past few years, the people have begun to fight back. Individuals, working together over the internet, can create products that rival and sometimes beat those of giant corporations. The age of Open Source is dawning and Government has embraced it, becoming more innovative, agile and cost-effective ....'

The action plan continues at more length and requires full use of free and open source software (FOSS) for Government work.

It so happens that the French Assembly have been using it for over a year, and the Gendarmerie are busy changing all their 70,000 PCs over to it also.

Your computer is likely to be using Windows, which is a proprietary product. If you use a MAC, again, the programs are proprietary. Proprietary means that to use it you have to agree to abide by restrictive conditions which give a great deal of power to the company. The proprietary contents, the actual programs, are also secret, so you have to trust that you are being treated fairly. There is no way of finding out if you are.

With Ethical and Community based Computer Software there are <u>no secrets</u>, it is based upon being 'open'. It is secure because the authors love to make good quality programs. And because they use it themselves, they want it to be secure and safe. They also love the freedom to share and examine and copy and improve and pass the programs on to others.

This helpful cooperation is the basis of FOSS and is seen as promoting a society which shares, helps and learns. These objectives seem close to those of U3A itself!

I should say at this stage that although some of this software is available <u>for</u> Windows (see Note 2), most of it is used to <u>replace</u> Windows altogether.

The people I have helped to use it say 'It is simpler to use than Windows'.

The most popular program is called 'Ubuntu', an African word associated with 'community'. It is usually used to replace Windows. It can be got from a friend, the internet, or someone who uses it like myself. Ubuntu is sponsored by a multi millionaire (Note 3) who made his fortune by using free software (!) and he wanted to support the community which was so useful to him. He might even turn his philanthropic investment into a profit anyway.

How to use free software for Windows? How to use Ubuntu?

Maybe you can find a friend to install it onto your own computer, or if you are good with computers, install it yourself. Or talk to me, I am a volunteer. It might be possible to arrange demonstrations and help sessions.

Note 1: Open Source, Open Standards and Re-Use: Government Action Plan
        http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/318020/open_source.pdf

Note 2: Programs for Windows include Firefox web browser, Open Office, Thunderbird email, Audacity audio editing etc.
        for more, please see
        http://www.theopendisc.com/education/   and
        http://www.theopendisc.com/
        Simply download the individual programs you want

Note 3: Mark Shuttleworth,
          http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Shuttleworth

About the author:
   After a technical career, Alan retired and became a Computer Helper Volunteer for Age Concern Berkshire, setting up the Computer Centre at the Reading office. He ran the facility for three years with the help of many other volunteers, for clients, for free sessions on one or two days a week.
   He is now a volunteer advocate for ethical and community based software, often known as Free and Open Source Software (FOSS), and runs an information table at the monthly Computer Fairs at the local Sports Centre, on the second Sunday of each month.
   He is a member of U3A Bracknell and coordinator of its online group 'Computers beyond beginners'.

   Alan can be contacted by email   aeclist@candt.waitrose.com