

From the president

Boris Veytsman

My previous two columns were written about licenses for free software. The topic is vast, and I would like to discuss another aspect of it today.

First, a little bit of history. Gutenberg’s printing press was a revolutionary invention, which radically decreased the cost of the written word. One of the first applications of the invention was the printing of indulgences. One of the first printed indulgences was presumably produced by Gutenberg himself (Figure 1). Indulgences were one of the reasons for Martin Luther’s revolt against the Catholic church. Luther himself understood the power of the printing press very well. He was able to publish his tracts in hundreds of thousands of copies. Luther hired the best printers, including the famous illustrator Lucas Cranach the Elder. However, Luther’s adversaries, both Catholics and competing Protestants, also used the press to spread their texts. Some historians say that the Reformation and Counter-Reformation would not be possible without Gutenberg’s invention.

This leads to an interesting question. Religious wars took millions of lives in the 16th and 17th centuries. Did the widespread use of incendiary pamphlets contribute to this carnage? And if yes, how much blame can we put on the printing press?

Similar things occurred many times. It is common knowledge that most human inventions were quickly used to kill human beings. The domestication of the horse gave rise to cavalry, the invention of the wheel led to military chariots, people learned to fly and started to bomb other people, and so forth. What I would like to stress here is that information technologies are not an exception to this rule. From writing to printing press to telegraph to radio to television to computers — every innovation was quickly used for killing people, or for military propaganda, which also led to killing people. Even our \TeX work may have military uses. I must confess that in my \TeX portfolio there are styles written and paid for by the US Army.

Thus those of us who work in information technologies can be reasonably sure that our work will someday be used to kill. A fresh example: after the vendors of commercial operating systems left Russia, it plans to switch its military to the “Russian OS”, reportedly being a clone of Linux. Can Free Software prevent this? A naïve approach would be to try to add the clause “Thou shalt not kill with this software” to the license. However, free software guidelines such as DFSG explicitly forbid discrimination with respect



Figure 1: Fragment of 31-line indulgence, from en.wikipedia.org/wiki/31-line_Indulgence

to the field of use. If you forbid the use of your software for nefarious aims, you automatically make your software non-free. Are these guidelines reasonable? I think yes. At the end of the day the rule of law is the moral authority. If somebody wants to use your software for amoral purposes, they can easily disregard this clause of your license. On the other hand, such clause may prevent other people from using your work for defense. There was no way to prevent the tables of logarithms, sines and cosines to be used in artillery: once a mathematical theorem is published, it can be used by anybody for any purpose.

I think I can agree with the position of Canonical, the maintainer of Ubuntu (ubuntu.com/blog/canonical-standing-with-ukraine). In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Canonical terminated support, professional services and partnership with Russian users. However, it did not restrict the access for security patches for these users, noting that “free software platforms like Ubuntu, VPN technologies, and Tor, are important for those who seek news and dialogue outside state control”, and directing any subscription income to Ukrainian humanitarian causes.

There are, however, grounds for hope. Besides being used for war propaganda, the printing press started rapid progress of science and literature, that, after all, made us live longer, healthier, and maybe even happier lives. We also can hope that our work at the end of the day will make the world slightly better. We cannot prevent bad people from using our work, but we can hope our work is used by good people.

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