Since Google Software Is Funded from a Public Source, (CIA and IN-Q-Tel) Its Code Should Be Open Source

by [Glyn Moody](#)

If we pay for it, we should be able to use it.

Perhaps because many free software coders have been outsiders and rebels, less attention is paid to the use of open source in government departments than in other contexts. But it's an important battleground, not least because there are special dynamics at play and lots of good reasons to require open-source software. It's unfortunate that the most famous attempt to convert a government IT system from proprietary code to open source—the city of Munich—proved such a difficult experience. Although last year saw [a decision to move back to Windows](#), that seems to be more a failure of IT management, than of the code itself. Moreover, it's worth remembering that the Munich project began back in 2003, when it was a trailblazer. Today, there are [dozens of large-scale migrations](#), as TechRepublic reports:

> Most notable is perhaps the French Gendarmerie, the country's police force, which has switched 70,000 PCs to Gendbuntu, a custom version of the Linux-based OS

Ubuntu. In the same country 15 French ministries have made the switch to using LibreOffice, as has the Dutch Ministry of Defence, while the Italian Ministry of Defence will switch more than 100,000 desktops from Microsoft Office to LibreOffice by 2020 and 25,000 PCs at hospitals in Copenhagen will move from Office to LibreOffice.

More are coming through all the time. The Municipality of Tirana, the biggest in Albania, has just announced it is [moving thousands of desktops to LibreOffice](#), and nearly [80% of the city of Barcelona's IT investment this year](#) will be in open source.

One factor driving this uptake by innovative government departments is the potential to cut costs by avoiding constant upgrade fees. But it's important not to overstate the "free as in beer" element here. All major software projects have associated costs of implementation and support. Departments choosing free software simply because they believe it will save lots of money in obvious ways are likely to be disappointed, and that will be bad for open source's reputation and future projects.

Arguably as important as any cost savings is the use of open standards. This ensures that there is no lock-in to a proprietary solution, and it makes the long-term access and preservation of files much easier. For governments with a broader responsibility to society than simply saving money, that should be a key consideration, even if it hasn't been in the past.

Open-source advocates have rightly noted that free software is a natural fit for any organization that requires solutions based on open standards, interoperability and re-usable components—key elements of the European Commission's new [digital strategy](#), for example. One of the leaders here is the UK government. In 2014,

it announced a new policy of ["Making things open, making things better"](). It achieved this by setting [Open Document Format for Office Applications Version 1.2]() as the [default format]() for sharing or collaborating with UK government documents. It's produced an interesting [review of how things have gone in the last four years](), which concludes:

> We cannot have important documents published in formats which do not meet open standards. Government documents are for everyone. Whether you're using Windows, Mac, GNU/Linux, Chrome OS, iOS, Android, or any other system— you have the right to read what we have written and we will continue on our journey to make documents open and accessible.

The use of open standards is not the only big benefit of moving to open source. Another is transparency. Recently it emerged that [Microsoft has been gathering personal information]() from 300,000 government users of Microsoft Office ProPlus in the Netherlands, without permission and without documentation:

> Microsoft systematically collects data on a large scale about the individual use of Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Outlook. Covertly, without informing people. Microsoft does not offer any choice with regard to the amount of data, or possibility to switch off the collection, or ability to see what data are collected, because the data stream is encoded. Similar to this practice in Windows 10, Microsoft has included separate software in the Office software that regularly sends telemetry data to its own servers in the United States.

Moving to open-source solutions does not guarantee that personal data will not leak out, but it does ensure that the

problems, once found, can be fixed quickly by government IT departments—something that isn't the case for closed-source products. This is a powerful reason why public funds should mean open source—or as a site created by the Free Software Foundation Europe puts it: ["If it is public money, it should be public code as well"](#).

The site points out some compelling reasons why any government code produced with public money should be free software. They will all be familiar enough to readers of *Linux Journal*. For example, publicly funded code that is released as open source can be used by different departments, and even different governments, to solve similar problems. That opens the way for feedback and collaboration, producing better code and faster innovation. And open-source code is automatically available to the people who paid for it—members of the public. They too might be able to offer suggestions for improvement, [find bugs](#) or build on it to produce exciting new applications. None of these is possible if government code is kept locked up by companies that write it on behalf of taxpayers.

Once again, the natural fit of open source with public computing is evident. Indeed, when you think about it, it seems ridiculous that public money would be used to produce anything but public code. The Basque Country understood that back in 2012 and brought in a law that required all [software developed for the government there should be released as open source](#). More recently, the Canadian government has made the connection too. Its new [Directive on Management of Information Technology](#) says:

> Where possible, use open standards and open source software first.
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> ...
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> If a custom-built application is the appropriate option, by default any source code written by the government must be released in an open format via Government of Canada websites and services designated by the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat.
>
> All source code must be released under an appropriate open source software license.

The fact that this approach is not already the norm is something of a failure on the part of the Free Software community. Perhaps it's time to drop the snobbery about open source in government and put more effort into turning it into the next huge win for the world of free software.

Glyn Moody has been writing about the internet since 1994, and about free software since 1995. In 1997, he wrote the first mainstream feature about GNU/Linux and free software, which appeared in *Wired*. In 2001, his book *Rebel Code: Linux And The Open Source Revolution* was published. Since then, he has written widely about free software and digital rights. He has a blog, and he is active on social media: @glynmoody on Twitter or identi.ca, and +glynmoody on Google+.