

Revealing Errors

Short Description

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This talk will describe how advocates can make a strong for open source and free software to "normal" users by focusing on the way that technology does not work. It will try to show why open source and free software is important by revealing the power of technological decisions by revealing technologies revealed by errors.

Full Version

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Anyone who has seen a famous "Blue Screen of Death" on a public screen or terminal knows how errors can thrust the technical details of previously invisible systems into view. Nobody knows that their ATM runs Windows until the system crashes. Of course, the operating system chosen for a sign or bank machine might have important implications for its users. Faced with a crashed ATM, a consumer might ask herself if, with its rampant viruses and security holes, should she really trust an ATM running Windows?

Free software and open source advocates have struggled to make their case to "normal users" and have, for the most part, failed to do so. Most supporters of the FSF, the EFF, and the OSI -- and most people at OSCON -- understand what a recursive acronym is and why it is funny. And they have trouble communicating the importance of free and open source software to people who do not.

Technically skilled free software and open source advocates understand the power, importance, and limitations of technology and technological mediation because they understand technology. Most users, meanwhile, don't even realize that it exists. Before one can argue for the importance of individual control over technology an audience must first appreciate the power and effect that their technology and its designers have. To understand the power that technology has on its users, users must first see the technology in question. Before you can understand why a webserver should be free, you need to understand what a webserver is.

Errors offer an incredible opportunity as points where "invisible" technology is thrust into view of even the least technical user. This talk will use errors to describe one way that free software and open can help build support for their movement by talking not about the way that technology works but by the way that all technologies fails.

With a tour of errors, it will painting a picture of how certain technologies facilitate certain mistakes and will show how these technologies mediate. By revealing errors, it will reveal previously invisible technologies and their effects. It will make a strong case for free and open source software by revealing the important power relationships behind technological design decisions by revealing technologies revealed by errors.