Freedom of Information

This past Fourth of July, Independence Day, a remarkable thing occurred to me.

Although the Declaration of Independence, after over two centuries, is unreadable (due to the poor preservation techniques used in the 19th century) - an engraving of it made 179 years ago is quite readable today.

Yet, a recent email from Robert Goodman sharing his experiences in closing out his 50 year Engineering business mentions the various flavors of media (3 types of 8" discs, 5 types of 5.25" discs, 3 types of 3.5" discs, 2 types of zip media, and CD's) and the impossibility of reading it all. "Why save this stuff", he asks?

Even if you *could* read the data from these media (there are service bureaus which specialize in reading old and unusual media - for a price), the odds are that there is no currently available software that could read and render the data files reliably! Could MicroSoft Word open and print a document created with a Wang word processor 20 years ago? Could the current version of ANY Word Processor reliably render a document created in version 1.0 of that program without having to fiddle with fonts, margins, indents, pagination, headers and footers and automatic numbering?

Is there any hope of our current files being readable and reliably interpretable in 180 years?

No.

Another issue is availability. If the Declaration were done in today's word processors, perhaps with a nice font and digital signatures, would it be available to 'the people', or only to those who could buy the hardware and software required to read it?

Wouldn't it be wonderful to have full access to and control of your own information?

It's interesting to watch as governments struggle with these questions, because AEC firms share many of the same issues at a smaller scale.

Most recently Dr. Edgar Villanueva, Congressman of the Republic of Peru has proposed Bill #1609 (currently in committee) in an attempt to assure:

- Free access to public information by the citizen.
- Permanence of public data.
- Security of the State and citizens.

The methods of achieving these goals are:

"To guarantee the free access of citizens to public information, it is indispensable that the encoding of data is not tied to a single provider. The use of standard and open formats gives a guarantee of this free access, if necessary through the creation of compatible free software."

To guarantee the permanence of public data, it is necessary that the usability and maintenance of the software does not depend on the goodwill of the suppliers, or on the monopoly conditions imposed by them. For this reason the State needs systems the development of which can be guaranteed due to the availability of the source code.

*To guarantee national security or the security of the State, it is indispensable to be able to rely on systems without elements which allow control from a distance or the undesired transmission of information to third parties. Systems with source code freely accessible to the public are required to allow their inspection by the State itself, by the citizens, and by a large number of independent experts throughout the world. Our proposal brings further security, since the knowledge of the source code will eliminate the growing number of programs with *spy code*. "*

Open data formats, free access to that data, and elimination of software vendor's control of systems and data.

(Quotes throughout this article are excerpts from the Congressman's eloquent response to Microsoft's letter of concerns regarding the bill. Both documents are widely available on the web.)

These rules, if passed, will not dictate software use in the private sector.

In response to Microsoft's concern that such a bill is anti-competitive, the Congressman responds:

"It is necessary to stress that there is no position more anti-competitive than that of the big software producers, which frequently abuse their dominant position, since in innumerable cases they propose as a solution to problems raised by users: "update your software to the new version" (at the user's expense, naturally); furthermore, it is common to find arbitrary cessation of technical help for products, which, in the provider's judgment alone, are "old"; and so, to receive any kind of technical assistance, the user finds himself forced to migrate to new versions (with non-trivial costs, especially as changes in hardware platform are often involved). And as the whole infrastructure is based on proprietary

data formats, the user stays "trapped" in the need to continue using products from the same supplier, or to make the huge effort to change to another environment (probably also proprietary)."

This trend in favoring open-source software (not necessarily freeware or shareware - just code and data formats accessible to the owner of the information) is being seen throughout Europe and Asia. Additionally, the latest versions of OpenOffice (www.openoffice.org) and the StarOffice Suite (which is based on OpenOffice) use the public XML file format.

Team oriented businesses like the AEC industry needs open-source data formats for CAD, Word Processing, Databases and Spreadsheets - and by extension software applications that don't tie us to a particular software maker or version and the constant upgrade hell they force us into. Let's hope this is the beginning of a trend that flourishes, and we start buying software for the features we need rather than for their compatibility with our old files and those of our associates!

Are you using open source data formats yet? E-mail me at mhogan@id-8.com to let me know.

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