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Politics is Local, so Get Political Locally

NYLXS, the New York Linux Scene, (http://www.nylxs.com) has a tradition of political action in the defense of free software and digital property rights. Since its inception, shortly after the terrorist attack on New York City, NYLXS has come to recognize that, like any other industry, we need to have effective representation in the halls of Congress and within the executive branch of government. To this end, NYLXS has supported New Yorkers for Fair Use and has taken independent political action, such as local lobbying, to lay the foundation for a secure future. What we've learned from our efforts is that those who wish to work with free software in the future need some basic education in the political process and the issues that threaten our ability to work with free software and our overall freedom as citizens.

Recently, we've made several calls to hire a professional lobbying body in Washington DC. Lobbies can be useful for promoting an organization's political agenda, but in our case, it seems prudent to get our ducks in order at home first—before we waste valuable resources in Washington.

People come to the Free Software movement for a variety of reasons. Except for the most politically active members among us, the main reason is an attraction to the soundness of the technology and the freedom to access the computer systems we use. Another compelling reason is the economic incentives it can provide disenfranchised individuals as well as large businesses. It's a testimony to our current freedoms that we come to free software without a second thought to the underlining principles that allow for the existence of such systems. In our work promoting free software, we've been surprised how often, even in our own circles, there exists huge resistance to anything political or the least bit distasteful. As a population, we have learned to be skeptical of politicians and stubbornly apolitical.
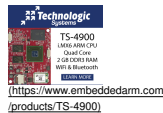
The reality of our current political situation is far more dangerous than most people are willing to admit. In our work, we've learned it's not possible to keep a narrow focus on only free software issues. We also must deal with the nature of digital communications and its relationship with the public. Specifically, NYLXS has found that the efforts of the Copyright Monopoly Industry to restrict the use of digital systems to protect their normal business interests has broad political implications. As our society is rapidly moving into the digital age, this is no doubt the first battle. The basic foundation of our future democratic freedoms is being built now. Yet, the general public is asleep at the wheel. At this point, one of the best things proponents of free software can do is raise the profile of the issue with the public. Fortunately for us, we are taking on the media industry and, if we do things correctly, we can simply ride Jack Valenti's coattails.

But the first step toward political action and the defense of free software doesn't fall on Richard Stallman, the EFF or OSI. No lobby can represent us effectively until those who use free software actually get their representatives to work for our interests. It's really that simple. The US government is made up of three branches, and we have only one nationally elected official. After this, we have 435 elected officials in the House of Representatives. These locally elected officials round out to a representation of less than 700,000 people per representative, although in practice representatives in populous states normally represent more people. In addition, we have 100 US Senators, who also are elected on the local level. We also have a large number of elected officials on the state and local level who have a large swath of guaranteed powers, including control of education programs and local communication network policies. To sum up this civics lesson, almost all politics in the USE are local matters. Our political system is designed to keep political power at home, not inside the Washington DC beltway.

Members of Congress and local officials respond most to issues that effect the people back home. Your job as part of the Free Software community is to raise the issues in your home districts. Without the threat of political awareness in their backyard, members of Congress are free to cut whatever deals they want in DC. If the public is apathetic at home, businesses and business lobbies have the overwhelming advantage. First, they are well funded because they are businesses. Second, they control the press, and members of Congress need the press. Finally, they can make large political contributions our movement can't match. But it's important to realize that despite all these advantages, the Copyright Industry does not represent any major grassroots constituency. As such, they are paper tigers that can be defeated easily if an organization is prepared to do the work needed to influence national policy.

The first step toward getting things done is to get your own house in order. Politicize your local computer groups. Don't flinch from making the political imperatives of protecting the fundamental rights needed for free software's survival a top priority of your user group's mission. If you're not prepared to accept the challenge of protecting the basic freedoms needed to ensure the future of free software, uninhibited by wiretapping and censorship, then you need to step aside. There are plenty of Radio Controlled Model Airplane groups around for you to exercise your interest in technology. Free software is serious business, and we need people committed to the general principles of freedom in the digital age.

What makes free software important is not that we can tinker with it like a hobby horse, although this activity is one that we hope to protect. Free software is the bellwether for our basic political freedom in the digital age. As such, every users group meeting

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should include an update on important political events. Every technical presentation needs to begin with an explanation as to why it's significant that the project was developed using free software. People who complain that you're over-politicizing need to be challenged. They need to be told, flat out and without excuses, that we act in a political fashion because our existence is being threatened by government policy, including the 1998 Digital Millennium Copyright Act, which can end all free software tomorrow.

The next step is to get your organization involved with the political process. This will upset a great many people, because people inexperienced with the political process fail to understand its raucous nature. Public discourse often can be contentious and confrontational, and most people don't like to be in that situation. A great deal of money and political rights are at stake with these discussions. Be prepared to be forceful in your points and to be challenged thoroughly by your political opponents. Your object is to win, and your opponent's object is to win. You have right on your side, but they have good arguments and issues on their side as well. Be ready to defend your rights articulately and forcefully, and don't expect them to pull out the chair for you.

Finally, back up your efforts at discourse with political action. At least once a month, your organization should plan a community-wide activity designed to enhance the profile of fair use and digital rights issues with the public. Expand your constituency at these affairs by including librarians, educators, government officials and industrial leaders. Reach out to local religious leaders, churches and community groups, and make the needed presentations to these constituencies. Knock on doors and give out pamphlets in business districts. Even monthly activities can have a large impact. And don't forget to involve the local press. Find the names and addresses of the editorial staffs. Meet with local beat reporters and do interviews. Alert them to your planned actions. Contact the public to act for a specific action or purpose. Ask them to write their local representatives on the issue of fair use. Tell them you want to protect libraries in the digital age from unfair rights abuses by industry and the government. Try to commit them on the spot. Have literature and buttons ready, and make sure there is contact information in the literature.

Finally, don't forget the elections. This year your representative is up for election. Tell them they need to support freedom for digital communications, or you're going to vote against them. You want their support, and this is not negotiable.

During the Libre Software Meeting in Bordeaux, France last month, exciting technical meetings and separate political meetings were held. They offered high quality presentations on a number of important technical subjects. Unfortunately, the two tracts were far too separated. Technical meetings drew in IT students and professionals from all over Europe, but these people simply skipped the legal and political discussions. We gave away the store and failed to charge admission. If we are going to continue to provide high quality technical discussions at little or no charge, it's our duty to make sure that every eager beaver understands the basic political causes that make these technologies available. They need to know that the very discussion of these issues may be considered a felony in the future. If we're spending 100,000s of Euros or dollars to make these presentations, there has to be a pay off for the movement.

Without this level of support from the home district, it's not sensible to hire lobbyists in Washington. If we are determined to be ineffective at the ballot box and we can't outspend our opponents, then politicians will ignore the representatives lobbying for us in Washington. Unfortunately, there is no silver bullet here. We must do the work at home. Not only is free software free as in freedom and not free as in beer, this kind of freedom is not cheap.

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