

# NEWS ANALYSIS

The Linux Voice view on what's going on in the world of Free Software.

Opinion

## ODF comes of age

The UK Government's decision to standardise on ODF means Microsoft has lost.



**Simon Phipps** is president of the Open Source Initiative and a board member of the Open Rights Group and of Open Source for America.

At the start of the new millennium, a team of us at Sun Microsystems decided we had to do something about an obvious problem. A decade later, we're seeing the fruits of our labour in the decision of the UK government to prefer openly-created, openly-maintained open standards for document formats.

It was clear to us back then that open source software was being severely limited by the near-monopoly of *Microsoft Office* on the desktop. There were several pretty good alternatives available, including the *StarOffice* product we had just acquired with StarDivision and then open sourced as *OpenOffice.org*. All the same, whenever any business tried to adopt our product, subtle incompatibilities with the way it handled documents would emerge and, as the newcomer, *StarOffice* would be blamed whether it was at fault or not. The need for *Office* was transmitted not by superior functions or performance, but by the need for an interoperable document format.

Worse, Microsoft kept releasing new versions with slightly different document formats, forcing unwanted upgrades on their customers in order to remain compatible

and ratcheting up the interoperability issues for competing code. Format lock-in was what was killing the market. Even worse, it was one of the factors stifling the open source desktop, since businesses were loath to adopt a desktop solution that had no interoperable document software.

### Open standards

We decided that what was needed was an open standard. If an open document format existed, every product – including *MS Office* – could compete on its merits alone, without the distortion of format lock-in. We decided to donate the work we had been doing on a new, XML-based document format for *StarOffice* to a standards body and then invite everyone else in the industry to use that as a base to collaboratively evolve a truly open standard. We selected a standards body called OASIS, both for its focus on XML and for the fact that other large vendors – notably including Microsoft – were top-level members.

The initiative was well received and a large group of contributors came together to work in the new OASIS Open Document Formats for Office Applications Working Group – OpenDocument to its friends. Microsoft were directly invited to participate, but chose not to. The rest, as they say, is history. Today, Open Document Format (ODF) is an ISO standard and is supported in every serious document application on every platform.

That history is the reason I was so delighted in July to heard that the UK Government has chosen to set ODF as the standard for all documents intended for

further collaboration. They have also chosen PDF/A and HTML as standard formats for final-form documents.

Which begs the question: has Microsoft lost? The answer to that is both yes and no. Yes, its initial refusal to join the ODF TC at OASIS and its costly and reputationally damaging foray into standards gerrymandering with its own XML-based OOXML format were definitely a “lose” of their own making. Even today, despite having got OOXML accepted as an ISO standard, Microsoft don't support the actual standard itself in its product – only a non-standard variant. It has even had to implement full ODF 1.2 support.

### We're not there yet...

But that final compromise is what prevents the UK Government's standardisation on ODF being another “lose” for them. Unlike Google Docs, Microsoft has good support for ODF in both *Office* and 365 that interoperates well with other software as long as you avoid proprietary fonts and marginal features in each product. Moreover, Microsoft has other layers of lock-in to fall back on – proprietary support for *Sharepoint*, for example. Competing solutions like *LibreOffice* – the successor to our original *StarOffice* work – don't have a truly level playing field, but at least get to enter a team in the league.

All the same, our original vision of a truly open document format – royalty free, with no platform dependencies, created and maintained in the open – has finally fruited. Arguing against ODF as the preferred format for citizen collaboration will hopefully be seen as self-harming by vendors. That's one less barrier to the open source desktop and one more foundation stone for the digital freedoms of the meshed society. Let's keep going – we can do this!

**“Our vision of a truly open document format with no platform dependencies... has finally fruited.”**

# CATCHUP

## Summarised: the biggest news stories from the last month

### 1 British government adopts open formats

By Jove! This is jolly good news, eh chaps? Yes, the UK government has chosen ODF (as used in *Libre/OpenOffice*) and PDF/A as standard formats for sharing and viewing documents. No longer do users need to buy proprietary software to work with files from government websites, but the use of open formats will also make it easier to access data in the future. It's a slap in the face for Microsoft and its OOXML format as well. Time for a cup of tea to celebrate!

### 2 Valencia saves €36m by switching to Linux

Another success story: the autonomous region of Valencia in Spain has finished the next version of its customised Linux distribution, as used on over 110,000 PCs in schools. The local government claims that using Linux has saved them €36m over the last nine years – and more savings are to come. Linux has also been thriving in another region of Spain, Extremadura, where Linux is installed on 70,000 PCs and laptops in schools. <http://tinyurl.com/lv3pcwe>

### 3 OwnCloud 7 released

*OwnCloud* keeps going from strength to strength, and version 7 brings improved sharing features, a faster interface, and support for Microsoft Word files in the document editing tool. See the full list of new features here: [www.owncloud.org/seven](http://www.owncloud.org/seven)



### 4 Linus Torvalds releases shiny new kernel 3.16

Kernel releases aren't as exciting as they were in the last decade, largely because Linux has matured and stabilised a lot. Still, 3.16 brings a bundle of updates, including better ACPI and power management on Intel CPUs, improved Radeon graphics support, and Btrfs fixes galore. If you're a Dell Latitude user, your hard drive will now stop if you drop the machine thanks to a new Freefall driver. And the best news? 3.16 is due to be included in Debian 8, codenamed Jessie.

### 5 Geneva class rooms switching to FOSS

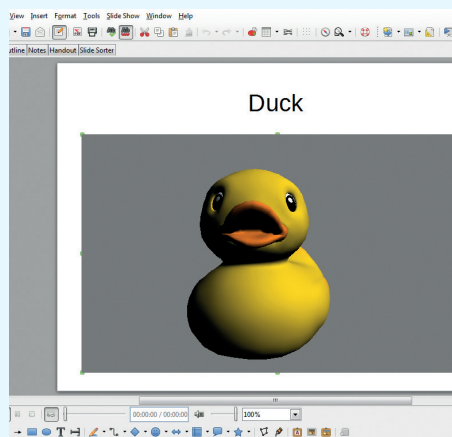
Not to be outdone by Spain, the Swiss canton of Geneva plans to switch its entire school system over to GNU/Linux. Specifically, the move to Ubuntu in 170 primary schools has already been completed, and the transition in secondary schools is planned for later in the year. The canton's IT department claims that Linux is easier to maintain, faster, safer and more stable than the proprietary software it was using before. <http://tinyurl.com/o4m9b4w>

### 6 Microsoft concedes: Windows has just 14% market share

This can't be right – surely? Windows is still dominant on desktop PCs, isn't it? Well yes, but the desktop is just one part of the wider computing world today, and Microsoft's very own COO Kevin Turner has recognised this. As more people are doing work on tablets and large-screen smartphones, Windows on the desktop is looking less relevant, and when you add up the whole desktop and mobile market, Windows has a paltry 14% share. While Android grows and grows...

### 7 LibreOffice 4.3 released: "you can't own a better office suite", apparently

That's quite a bold statement from The Document Foundation, but we can attest that *LibreOffice 4.3* is packed to the brim with new features. There's 3D models in *Impress* (the presentation tool), much better support for Microsoft's OOXML formats, and improved commenting facilities (useful in collaborative projects). Tons of fixes have been made as well, and the suite will be heading to a distro near you very soon. [www.libreoffice.org](http://www.libreoffice.org)



### 8 Toulouse saves €1m by switching to LibreOffice

And another success story to end with. The French city of Toulouse has saved €1m by switching its PCs from Microsoft software to the *LibreOffice* suite. Sure, it isn't a full Linux transition and the savings aren't as huge as in Valencia, but it's a great step in the right direction, especially with the European economy still in dodgy times. Plus, the city's money goes back to local tech support companies, and not giant megacorps overseas. <http://tinyurl.com/ovgpj2l>