



New Zealand Open Source Society

Newsletter February 2008

It has been a while since my last "Letter from the President", and there is fair bit to cover, so I'll just launch straight into it:

OOXML Standards work

The Society's work to review ISO's adoption of OOXML as an international office document standard continues to be both our most significant undertaking and the greatest draw on our only resource – volunteered time. Matthew Holloway (née Cruickshank) in particular has been engaged with the issue both publicly and in the valuable behind-the-scenes work we are doing with Standards New Zealand to review the response to comments.

You will also have seen my name a few times in the press lately speaking on behalf of the Society on matters OOXML. Most recently regarding Standards Australia's decision to change the composition their BRM delegation in a way that certainly could be perceived as being unbalanced in favour of adoption. As I have said publicly on a number of occasions, Standards New Zealand's approach and conduct throughout has been impeccable. When the dust has settled, we will have much to be proud of both as a Society and as a country, whatever the final Standards NZ and ISO decision.

That Society members have engaged with the International Standards process at this level and in such detail is remarkable. New Zealand's "No" vote carries as much weight as Canada's or the UK's under ISO rules. We may be a tiny country, but we are making a big difference in this case. We should also note InternetNZ's activities in supporting this work.

Of course, the outcome of the upcoming Ballot Resolution Meeting (BRM) and the final vote adjustment in March is far from certain. You can run the scenarios yourself at www.iso-vote.com.

Wellington bid for LCA 2008

While the OOXML work has been a focus of my attention for quite some time, I have not forgotten other more constructive NZOSS initiatives. In particular the need to make progress on our bid to host the 2010 LCA conference in Wellington. A small group of us met ahead of the recent Melbourne conference, and have come back with a swag of information from the organisers to help our planning and the bid itself.

LCA Wellington will be a fabulous opportunity to build on the success of the Dunedin LCA in 2006. Having a FOSS event of this scale right on the doorstep of our decision-makers in the Beehive will not go unnoticed. We have already received support and encouragement from Wellington's Regional Economic Development Agency ("Grow Wellington") who see this as a significant event for the local IT industry.

That the membership can organise and execute a gathering of this size and scope will open some skeptical eyes and build up our reputation as a significant and credible organisation. This reputation is crucial for our being able to advocate and lobby effectively for what we stand for. That reputation is, if you will, our most valuable asset beyond the individual efforts of you as a member of the NZOSS.

So I call on all members – not just those in Wellington – to pitch in and make this happen.

Kiwifoo update

This year's Kiwifoo organised by Nat Torkington and Russell Brown was bigger and better than the inaugural foocamp last year. And that was a hard act to follow! Nat and Russell invited a lot of new faces to this year's event, which gave it a distinctly "web 2.0" feel some would say. This is probably representative of the number of startups coming out of the main centres – initiatives like Silverstripe, Zoomin, HireThings, PlanHQ and Ponoko – all of which are built on FOSS.

The stalwarts like the LAMP stack, as well as newcomers like Rails and an increasing number of open frameworks, are the fuel that is driving the so-called web 2.0 economy. How this economy will pan out in the long term is anyone's guess, but the sheer power of enablement that FOSS and open standards offers, especially for the size of our industry in New Zealand, is something we should keep in the minds of Ministers and policy-makers.

Unfortunately David Cunliffe couldn't get to the camp this year, owing to family commitments. David gave an impressive performance at the New Zealand Open Source Awards, and is someone who I believe really understands the value of the open ethos we promote and protect.

Judith Tizard – another of last year's foocampers – was there this year, however, and 'reported back' on the trials and tribulations of the Copyright (New Technologies and Performers' Rights) Amendment Bill (2006), of which this Society has had much say already. Peter Harrison and others lobbied long and hard to have the worst aspects of this Bill ameliorated. And it seems even now that the glacial progress of the Bill – complete with the DRM clauses we so vociferously argued against – will emerge in due course as New Zealand Law.

By then, of course, the rest of the world will have moved on, with innovative new business models that don't demand impractical TPMs and leave ordinary consumers teetering on the edge of legality whenever they want to do something that we all should be able to take for granted when we hand over our hard-earned cash for music or videos.

Judith – being a politician – has to balance the needs of a number of different interest groups in all this, and every other policy decision. That's what we pay them to do after all. What's encouraging, and part of the magic of Foocamp, is that out of this informal setting and some vigorous debate in a steaming hot classroom in Warkworth can come an open invitation to call on Judith personally and put our case directly.

I will certainly be taking up that offer, both on this and other issues we are concerned about, and have every confidence that through this sort of direct channel better policy and ultimately better law may emerge to protect the kind of legal, economic and social environment in which open source and open innovation can thrive.

Tea with Key

For quite a different reason altogether I and a fellow Catalyst Director recently had 'tea with Key' – John Key, leader of the National Party. We are certainly not accustomed to regular fire-side chats with major political figures – we just happened to win a charity auction sometime ago. None the less, it was an excellent opportunity to get some key messages across about open source, what it has meant for our business, and the significance, as we see it, for our economic future.

We didn't go into the meeting expecting to get across the subtleties of the GPLv3 or the free/libre versus open source debate. But felt he went away with a greater understanding of our concerns – both for the industry and for the principles that underpin FOSS thinking.

New Zealand Open Source Awards

Congratulations to all the nominees, finalists and winners of last year's New Zealand Open Source Awards held last October (www.nzosa.org.nz/winners). We've already had several people asking when nominations for the 2008 event will open. I also have a queue of interesting people asking if they can be on the judging panel. All in all it looks like this might become something of a permanent fixture – a regular celebration of open source progress and achievement.

This can only be a good thing, but I also think we can learn from the success of this year's FooCamp that keeping the event fresh with new people and new ideas can only make it better. With this in mind I'd ask you to drop me or Chris Daish a note if you have suggestions we might include in NZOSA 2008.

A big thanks is owed by many for the hard work that Chris Daish and his small team put into making the event such a success. This thanks also applies to the judges who were willing to volunteer a lot of time to shift through the volume of entries whose numbers and quality took us all by surprise.

Don Christie
President

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