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HUFF POST TECH

Macs No More: After Edward Snowden, Time to Come to the Penguin

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This can't go on much longer. You know the scene: a laptop-y cafe, full of freelancers and trust funders occasionally checking each other out but mostly just staring into their luminous screens doing whatever start-up, world-shaking stuff they're doing. But on the back of every single screen, almost, is that glowing apple with a bite bitten out of it -- Mac after Mac after Mac.

Really? How long can the creative class tolerate such crass conformity? And now that Edward Snowden has revealed the U.S. government's shadowy surveillance deals with companies like Apple and Microsoft, how long will we let ourselves be watched?

The apparently tranquil cafe scene lies in the crossfire of demons. Basically what's going on right now is that the major tech companies -- particularly Apple and Microsoft, though Google more ambiguously -- are undertaking a fight to the death over which can more quickly totalitarianize the computer universe in which way too many of us live for too much of our lives. And to what momentous ends? So you'll put the files you've poured your life into creating on *their* cloud servers. So they can insert ads into the programs you're trying to use (which aren't actual programs anymore, just "apps"). So they can keep you from knowing important stuff about the world or doing what might threaten their business model. So their employees can take over the trendy neighborhoods of your city. And, of course: so the government can watch everything you do.

The reason Apple stuff is so stylish is so we don't have to be. With each new version of Mac OS X, the computer becomes more and more like an iPhone or an iPad -- a device designed for controlled consumption, not real creating. (With Windows 8 and the Surface, Microsoft has a head start.) The idea is to turn the computer from a general-purpose anything-machine into a ad-distributing appliance. Your mind is meant to become one too, as the Pslamist predicted this long ago: "They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them." We are what we use, and how.

Macs are on version 10.8 now, and 10.9 is next. What will come after that? 11.0? "XI"? That, or the journey toward the dark side will be complete.

It has been a decade or more since the big open-source buzz in Silicon Valley. (The revolution will be crowdsourced! Here comes everybody!) Seemingly all we got from it, though, is a world in which we tell our friends our deepest, darkest secrets by way of secretive companies run by scary, bitter kids like Mark Zuckerberg. But over the years the original dream has slowly been becoming true-ish. The panoply of Linux "distros" -- the mostly free and open, community-built operating systems out there to choose from -- are getting a lot more steady and accessible. So are the replacements for the software that we think our lives depends on, complete with open file formats that don't lock our data with a key that some Wall Street oinker keeps under his pillow.

The personal computer is political. The time for liberation has kind of come.

So what happens when you load up that new, quasi-user-friendly Linux flavor -- maybe Mint or Ubuntu -- onto some old machine you have lying around? At first, maybe, keep the Internet handy on your shiny Mac, because there might be glitches to look up. But chances are it'll mostly work out of the box, and the rest can be figured out over time. Everything's harder, but in a good way -- like a digital fixie. It's more fun if you do it with a friend.

What's interesting is how different the glitches feel from how they felt on a corporate OS. When the thing crashes, as it might somewhat frequently, it's less aggravating. One actually starts to get more philosophical about the glitches; we're not quite *there* yet as a society, as a species. They're the people's glitches -- the temporary byproduct of democratic and collaborative processes among autonomous geeks, pursuing their own obsessions and curiosities. You don't have to yell at the screen because, in a lot of cases, you can just write to the people making the program, and someone with an amazing amount of time on their hands will write back long, detailed replies. Someday, with hard work and better self-organizing chops, the glitches will go away. Like veganism, the more people join in the easier it will be.

Your new free-software comrades will be mostly an amalgam of email addresses, Twitter handles, and bulletin-board personalities. Many are libertarians -- but in a nice teenager-reading-Ayn-Rand way, not a Koch-brothers way. When they're not speaking in technological gibberish, they may start rhapsodizing about building open-source tractors or utilitarianism or the evils of Scientology. A few of them may be facing years in prison for cyber non-crimes like Aaron Swartz was before he died. It's a reminder that nothing's quite so scary to the powers that be than taking technology into our own hands.

A warning, though: Don't get too attached to any newfound moral and aesthetic superiority. Right at the moment when you think you're definitely the most righteous creative in the Internet cafe, the news will come out on Slashdot that (the grumpy free-software guru) Richard Stallman is mad because the new version of Ubuntu has tie-ins with Amazon. You can't win, but you can at least try.

The devil some of us have most sold our souls to isn't Apple or Google or Amazon but Adobe. How can we be creative without our "Creative Suite"? If we're actually creative, though, I bet we can. Besides, there are more-or-less functional people-

powered alternatives to a lot of those programs, which are a bit less forgiving and a lot more customizable for the clever. It's a better way to go in the long run anyway. Shiny new equipment tends to breed shiny fake art.

Then there's the steampunk thrill of the UNIX terminal at the heart of your new OS. The terminal means going back in time to a text-only screen -- now with customizable colors in transparent windows! -- and telling the computer what you want with magic spells on a command line. Slow tech is addictive. This article is being written in a terminal program that's almost 40 years old, and thanks to a devoted community of hackers it works better than ever.

That's the open-source ethic: If it still works, build on it -- don't design for obsolescence. And when a new improvement comes along, everyone can benefit. When there's an error, the community (eventually) corrects it.

For example, ghost-of-Steve Jobs: It's "think different*ly*."

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