Slack: It Used to Be a GNU/Linux Distro, Now It's Surveillance Capitalism

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I like "Freedo" (a symbol for freedom) better

THE meaning of words can change over time, along with connotations that accompany these words. A little cat, for example, we can no longer call "pussy" and the word "gay" rarely means happy (*colloquially*). What about "Slack"?

Once upon a time I knew Slack as a solid, freedom-respecting distribution (GNU/Linux distro), whereas nowadays it is something to be stubbornly avoided as it threatens my freedom. It's technically spyware. It is a threat to *everybody's freedom* because of the network effect. When we use it we participate in a viral campaign of unwanted *societal* dependency. We help it spread exponentially. Like disease amongst anti-vaxxers. Richard Stallman had spoken about it in the context of Skype long before Microsoft entered the fray/picture. That's just common sense. The requirement of opening a Slack account to interact with other people is like the equivalent of an employer demanding the applicant has a Facebook account (despite all that is known about Facebook's incredible abuses). It can harm our neighbours, colleagues, family and friends as much as it harms ourselves.

As a little bit of background/context/polite remarks on this, I had been writing about Slack (the spyware, not the distro) for several years -- *years* before the prospects of actually using it. I never ever used it, but I know about it technically, from *various* angles (not just the shallow, *user-centric* end). Slack is proprietary at the front end *and* the back end. Only Slack employees know for sure what it does (and may do in the foreseeable future, as per secret roadmaps). They cannot speak out about it, for fear of retribution (so they're inherently gagged by fear over mortgage etc. or self-restraint that defies logic/ethics). Stallman has long warned about the morality of such circumstances and the ideology they breed. It was recently discovered that Facebook had targeted its critics (a huge number of them), subjecting them to Stasi-like treatment not for any government but for a *private corporation*, namely Facebook. It had been 'hunting' people using dubious and shallow justifications/pretexts. Nobody has yet been held accountable. Negative press has been the only cost/toll, so they got away with it with barely even a slap on the wrist. Others may imitate them, seeing that there are no fines, no arrests, no sanctions.

A colleague told me several months ago that someone at our company wanted to experiment with Slack; there was no final decision about it, so I assumed it was like our RT/OTRS 'dance' (choice of ticketing system half a decade ago). Sometimes we explore FOSS options/alternatives, which is a *good* thing! He sent me an invite, but he wasn't assertive about me joining as it was still an experimental thing (as I understood it back then, based on what I was told; I'll come to that in a moment). I thought we would, if it got adopted, still have options (duality). One colleague (at least) wasn't even sent an invite, so I took that as a sign of the adoption's semi-hearted nature (at the time). My colleagues never mentioned it since, except one person (who apparently liked Slack). Another colleague wondered why nobody had told her about it; as if she was left out, but she's happily using Kopete on KDE, so on she went with Jabber.

I've long been writing about Slack, maybe about 15 years (even when the name referred to a Live GNU/Linux distro, well before the name got 'hijacked'; it's Debian-based, it still has regular releases a few months apart, not the same as Slackware despite the names' similarity; BoycottNovell made a Slack-based distro called SUEME Linux 12 years ago); *Tux Machines* publishes announcements of Slack releases several times a year, but it's always about the distro. It's a European distro with pedigree; but I digress..

Nowadays "Slack" means something different; in a technical context, people no longer recognise it as the distro's name; Slack is now the darling of corporate media; myself and others could never quite explain why (we were rather baffled as it did not seem particularly innovative and we thus attributed most/all the press coverage to good marketing/PR); the name collision also raised legal questions because Slack is a well-known distro and the name is strictly used in the domain of software; it has been used for decades. Now the distro's development team needs to explain to people what came first and how this confusion came about.

OK, so now Slack is enjoying a valuation at *$billions* (as per very recent news headlines), with IPO rumours floated as well (making it easier to buy/subvert). Slack is *relatively* new a player/contender; it goes about 3-4 years back (in the mainstream), around the time we were in Alton Towers. I still remember that based on other events. Privacy activists had been warning about it and recently I kept seeing (also publicly writing about) more red flags. Slack, the company, is getting more invasive over time. It's like Facebook. Facebook for business. LinkedIn got picked by Microsoft, along with all that data (NSA PRISM comes to mind). Personal messages, passwords, social graphs, employment records and so on. Even location (picked every 60 seconds or so from one's phone through the 'app'). Same for Skype, which Microsoft added to PRISM just *months* after buying it (Microsoft was first in PRISM, based on Snowden's leaks -- it was one [among the first stories to come out/emanate](#) [2]). Far less opinionated people than myself have blasted Slack for a variety of reasons. Some [tweets of mine about it](#) [3] go ~3 years back (warning for 'opinionatedness'... I don't mince words much).

I still remember having to install Skype on an old phone for one company meeting. Back then the mere installation (for one hour, then deleted) meant sending Microsoft entire address books, entire call history and more. This phone of my wife is 7+ years old, so that's a lot of data, going a long way back. That's their business model. I'm usually apprehensive because some of my sources, e.g. for exclusive articles in *Techrights* (I published my 25,000th article last week in *Techrights*!), are named in files on my system. I'm no Free software 'purist' *per se* (I use proprietary drivers sometimes), but "Slack would be the surveillance capitalism competitor to Jabber," to quote something I read yesterday. They digest information, including corporate communications. There's a certain risk associated with this, including competitive risk. As a Free software-based company I think it's important to demonstrate that every piece of proprietary framework can be swapped with FOSS. There are quite a few Slack equivalents that are FOSS; a colleague told me that another colleague had brought some of these up. We might examine these soon, maybe test and adopt these. Time will tell. Maybe I'll write about some of these.

I am also reading about bridges between protocols that enable access to Slack, but yesterday when researching it I found that Slack is gradually burning these bridges/gateways. Not entirely surprising, as once they get to a certain point/market share they up/boost the lockin. Naturally. More so if they have obligations to shareholders. Twitter did this last August, shutting out all third-party apps/APIs for the first time ever (in the company's entire existence). Many of us were devastated because we had built interaction tools, custom-made around these APIs). So, basically, whatever

a centralised platform gets adopted, we can always lose control as they can change everything they want at any time. Even, at worst, some company can just buy them for the data; they can start charging a lot, they can shut down, change ToS etc.

The bottom line is, Slack ought to be avoided. It's worse than proprietary because it's all centralised, even the data. There's no concept such as "private" or "privacy". These are only illusions. [?](#)

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