

Crossing the Digital Divide

“Real Privacy”, Volume 6

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for the Observer

With every issue I've included a blanket statement: “there are no secrets on the web”. The statement isn't entirely true, as there can be secrets on the web, whether or not the FBI prevails with their demands of Apple Computer.

All computer-like devices have operating systems. You've heard about Windows, Mac, iOS, Linux, and Android, it's easy to confuse hardware and software. Apple decided some years back that it would not sell their core software without associated hardware. Microsoft took a somewhat different tack with Windows, opting to license (right to use) their Operating System to any manufacturer; this is why you see multiple vendors (HP, Dell, Sony, Asus, Lenovo) selling laptops, desktops and servers with Windows. I'm often asked “Mac or PC”, I usually reply: “It depends”.

I'm personally predisposed to Linux and its variants, designed from Day 1 to work on just about any type computer, Linux today is the primary operating system of the Internet (web). Linux is really the core, or brains that can utilize a number of free tools, suites and services. There are dozens of competing vendors with implementations of Linux (Redhat, CentOS, Debian, Ubuntu, Mandrake...), the differences subtle. Android, the Operating System used by dozens of cellphone makers is a Linux variant. The iPhone, Blackberry, and Windows Mobile are vendor created operating systems.

Multiple Operating Systems might suggest a modern day Tower of Babel. Overly simplified, these Operating Systems are similar to the options we have with vehicles: how many wheels, what kind of motor, how much cargo (or people), how fast, how comfortable, how new, all choices. Non-choices: must be able to go on roads, must be able to move fast enough to keep up with traffic, and must have adequate brakes to stop. Must have lights to indicate a change in direction, change in movement (stop), or illuminate the roadway. Make sense?

Apple makes good products, as does Microsoft. Neither vendor produces flawless products. Is a Mac “better”? Not necessarily. A Windows PC can be as long-lived as a Mac with investment in the same class hardware (or better). The PC market is highly competitive, and the margins increasingly small. You can find PC's cheaper than Mac's, you can spend far more on a non-Apple product if your needs suggest a Linux variant or a Windows powered machine.

Security, privacy, assumptions. There are many “built-in” security tools on all contemporary computing devices. Security and Encryption tools have been added because we've asked for them. It is unlikely the FBI will prevail in their demands of Apple. Apple is more than willing to work on a single device, and may or may not succeed where others may or may not. We know the FBI hasn't the talent or they wouldn't have made demands of Apple (or Google, or Facebook). Two big points:

- 1) Unlocking a phone may yield names/numbers/email accounts. Web and email activity could be validated, pictures and location history a possible bonus, but...
- 2) Discovery may also yield another layer of encryption unbreakable by anyone.

Apple has helped “open” devices for the courts before, as has Facebook. Encrypting your Mac, iPhone or Windows tablet will definitely keep your personal information safe from prying eyes. If you do something to warrant a warrant, be smart, use content encryption like GPG, no one will ever know what’s inside that file unless the right pass phrase is revealed. Open Source (free) tools in abundance, with no Company to approach to request “please break this open”.

Not all whispers will be heard, not all conversations documented. Meetings, people, places (email, chat, video, web surfing, etc.) will take a few court orders, but are easily exposed. They know what we do, what we see, where we go, but they needn’t know what we said.

I’m not advocating illegal activity, nor am I suggesting you all go out and learn how to encrypt every email, however, I am suggesting, we retain perspective, an engineered “back door” will neither make bad people out of good people, nor will it eliminate bad people from harming others. Just like the car example – drive safe, be respectful, and follow the generally accepted rules of the road.

Next week: the local area network