

EU warns against proprietary software

AOIFE WHITE - AP Business Writer - Associated Press

The European Union's top Internet official took aim at Microsoft Corp. on Thursday, warning that governments can accidentally lock themselves into one company's software for decades by setting it as a standard for their technology systems.

EU Internet Commissioner Neelie Kroes, in her previous post as EU antitrust chief, fined Microsoft hundreds of millions of euros (dollars) in a lengthy row over the company's refusal to share some data with rivals and the tying of a Web browser to a best-selling operating system.

She now says she wants to draw up detailed guidelines for European governments to encourage them to require other software, especially programs based on open source code that is freely shared between developers.

The final programs are sometimes — but not always — given away to users. IBM and Oracle, for example, charge customers for some software they make that is based on open source code.

Kroes is aiming to influence government tender specifications which can demand all suppliers to the state to stick to a certain type of technology. This can have a massive impact by favoring one company's software over others.

She cited tax departments requiring the use of a specific Web browser to file online tax returns.

"Many authorities have found themselves unintentionally locked into proprietary technology for decades and after a certain point that original choice becomes so ingrained that alternatives risk being systematically ignored," she said.

"That's a waste of public money that most public bodies can no longer afford," she told a conference organized by Open Forum Europe, a group of technology companies that want to promote software based on open source code.

She openly favored open software saying users could choose between "the one that you can download from the Website and that you can implement without restrictions or the other one which you have to buy which is restricted to certain fields and which requires royalty payments for embedded intellectual property rights — and the answer is obvious."

Governments should have a "clear justification" if they mandate proprietary software that sets royalties and restrictions, she said.

Google Inc. has tried to rival Microsoft's office programs by providing similar software for free — something it can afford to do because it develops most of its

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revenue from selling advertising linked to widely used search engine. Microsoft relies mostly on selling the software it develops.

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