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IT Week: Tim O'Reilly talks Open Source part 1

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Publisher Tim O'Reilly needs no introduction to the Internet community, as his reference books have become the staple of Web-facing IT departments. One of the architects behind the Open Source branding initiative, a board member of the IETF and trustee of the Internet Society, O'Reilly was in London for the launch of O'Reilly UK. He spoke to Andrew Orłowski, news editor of IT Week.

IT Week: So why the interest in Open Source now? Has it increased, or did the media just wake late up to it?

Tim O'Reilly: In a lot of ways media is starting to wake up to something that has been there for a long time. Focusing on Linux is missing the point. The Internet was the first Open Source phenomenon, but people didn't think of it that way. The original TCP/IP stack, that low level code was open source and in it's in everyone's code now, even Microsoft's. And every time you use the Web you're using Open Source code -- written by

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Bill Joy -- one of the founders of Sun -- every time you type a URL.

So part of what I try to remind people of is that the Internet standards process is an Open Source phenomenon too -- it's a standards body that consists of whoever shows up. Now if that doesn't sound like Open Source I don't know what is -- it's whatever rag tag bunch of people who want to decide the infrastructure or just turn up or join the mailing list.

IT Week: So why now?

Tim O'Reilly: It is a confluence of several things. One was when we changed the name from free software to Open Source and that had a positive effect on the software.

Open Source has always been there but hasn't been noticed. Two to three years ago Bill Gates said Netscape isn't the biggest competitor to IIS [Microsoft's Web server] -- it's Apache. Why did he say that?

A small company in Bath here in England had a lot to do with that, Netcraft. They produced a survey and that made a big difference. In the past Gartner analysts would go out and ask people's buying intentions, and publish them. But now everything is connected: there's massive information flows -- so popularising Open Source projects are easy ...

IT Week: You've warned before about the threats to Open Source software, particularly from protocols becoming commoditised. Is that still the biggest threat?

Tim O'Reilly: I try to warn the Open Source community that they're not trying to win the last war. There's a lot of focus about taking back the desktop from MS. That's not the most important battleground. If you look at the future of PC software, a company like Intuit is already replacing its old apps with web versions. The Web is changing that already.

I mean, I think KDE and GNOME are interesting products but what we should focus on is that we shouldn't replace Apache and Perl with IIS and ASP. More important for Apache and Perl to remain parts of the Internet.

IT Week: Is the standards process vulnerable?

Tim O'Reilly: Every piece is vulnerable, Sendmail can be vulnerable -- now it's owned by a private company. Unix was originally an Open Source phenomenon -- not in licenses but clearly in terms of voluntary development -- people contributed development -- but AT&T had a license to shut that down and they did. But the impulse to collaborative development broke out and led to Linux.

It's a very natural impulse to share code. Programming is speech with computers -- it's telling computers what to do. And a lot of rules we understand of free speech apply to it. You can't tell people to speak in prescribed sentences! And as we use more and more speech there's way more informal speech than formal speech. A lot of canned speech gets frozen, in an interview like this --



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but the Web is accelerating that trend.

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IT Week: What about the fear that Linux has conquered the foothills, but not the mountain. There's an observation in the Halloween documents that fit and finish, the last ten percent of a programming challenge, is the hardest to do...

Tim O'Reilly: Well, I'm not a rabid Open Source advocate that says *all* software must be free. My advice to Microsoft is not to kill it. It's to say, "It's good for you. There's plenty of room to add value." Microsoft has really benefited from Open Source and will continue to benefit.

But there's a further level -- and this is where MS really misses the boat. But the software is not the real frontier of the industry anymore. People like Etrade, E-bay and Yahoo are adding value, and they're doing it for the Web platform not the Internet platform. Talk to Yahoo! and they'll tell you seventy per cent of software they use to deliver Yahoo! is Open Source.

The way I see it is like this:

First there all software was bundled with the hardware--

IT Week: (interrupts) The vertical players?

Tim O'Reilly: Yes, and then came along the PC and that was an open hardware platform, and you could have software without owning the hardware. And now the Web is an open software platform.

If you look at the traditional companies you can assign new roles to all these players. You don't say Red Hat is trying to be like Microsoft. I say no no no! It's more like Dell.

Bob Young is saying we're better at delivering commodity components. Bob says: "We don't make traditional software -- we're a marketing company and we package it."

The challenge for Open Source is to become the "Intel Inside" of software apps, for the Amazons of this world. People are now buying a computer so they can use Amazon -- now that's a killer app. That's a market Open Source has to lose.

Some companies have capitalised on it in some ways and they're not Open Source players. UUnet is a winner. Rick Adams -- the author -- didn't try to sell the software -- it's free. But he invented a new commercial service industry, based around a free s/w product. And I look at Yahoo! -- that's capitalising on OS software.

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