

## Views & Commentary

### The french Package on and off CTAN

Bernard Gaulle

Editor's note: The following letter was distributed in May 1999 to everyone on the French T<sub>E</sub>X users list. The views expressed are solely those of the author.<sup>1</sup>

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The archivists of CTAN (the Comprehensive T<sub>E</sub>X Archive Network) have been facing an increasing number of requests from editors and user groups wanting to redistribute, and even sell, CTAN archive contents, including software with specific copyright statements. The recurring question then arises: do these specific copyright statements allow such redistribution, and under what conditions?

In response to these redistribution requests [for CTAN materials], different possible options have been considered, rather like a catalogue of extensions or styles and other products, yielding a synthesized attribute, representative of the features of various copyright statements. Various discussions have taken place, more particularly with those making such requests than with authors [of CTAN material]. Amongst the requesting parties, a majority would like to see the archive distributed freely (in the style of the T<sub>E</sub>X copyright: everything can be taken and modified, provided the item no longer bears the same name). This is the sense of “free software”, which is certainly popular but which addresses a real need, so my criticism is not aimed in this direction. For some, however, this notion has become a sort of religion, and thus warrants some kind of crusade against all those who don't buy into it. What influence such cyber-crusaders have had, difficult to say. But it is true that most of what's available to read has been about exclusion rather than gathering.

Now, CTAN, by virtue of its name and original intent, has always had the aim of assembling *everything* — developed codes and various tools — that exists in the (L<sup>A</sup>)T<sub>E</sub>X world. And that has functioned well until a few months ago. However, under pressure from requests to manufacture CDs, the CTAN archivists have decided to split the archive into two:

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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to thank Barbara Beeton and Christina Thiele for their efforts in finding a translation that makes sense in English without violating the original French. In case of doubt, the original French text is the definitive one: “À propos de french”, *La Lettre GUTenberg* 15 (1999), p. 16.

one “free” tree, which can be redistributed without any problem, and a “nonfree” tree, for which all sorts of restrictions may exist. Justification for the split has been based on the assumption of legal texts, although no-one's been able to give me a single reference. Richard Stallman, founder of the GNU project and the “free software” concept, affirms that such texts exist and suggested that I should consult a lawyer. For my part, I regularly see CDs distributed free of charge with well-known monthly magazines, CDs which feature many “shareware” products with restrictive copyrights. However, none of these magazines has yet been condemned for unauthorized distribution of software. The claim that only “free” products can be redistributed without special authorization is therefore an ironic statement.

The CTAN archivists (who, for the most part, I truly believe only want to satisfy their users) began applying their decision at the end of last April, redeploing software according to these two trees, “free” and “nonfree”. And thus, from one day to the next, the **french** package found itself on the “nonfree” side. I therefore had to analyse the situation and ask myself if this was acceptable or not, if I have to change something or not.

The French translation of “free” means, of course, ‘without cost’ or ‘freely’ [‘without constraints’ –Ed.]. If **french** then is placed on the “nonfree” shelves, it means either that it has to be charged for or it is being held hostage to restrictions of some kind. However, the copyright statement for **french** has existed for years now, and was indeed originally devised in such a way that anyone could use it freely and however they wished. Only modification and commercial distribution were subject to a few restrictions. After discussing this with the CTAN group and seeing that my views were not being understood, I decided that it was too shocking to see **french** placed in the “nonfree” tree and therefore I asked that it be removed.

As a result of this action, my long-standing aim to see **french** always available to everyone can no longer be achieved and so I have to ask myself some questions. In the first place, is this CTAN policy of favouring “free” redistribution [of the archive contents] via CD going to last? It's possible but still, I do believe other groups will choose to return to the previous situation and propose an RCTAN (Really Comprehensive T<sub>E</sub>X Archive Network), in which case everyone would again be happy.<sup>2</sup> If it doesn't happen, then maybe I should consider another form for **french**, more liberal in its rights

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<sup>2</sup> RCTAN has now become a reality: <ftp.loria.fr>.

statement but then also probably more restricted in functionality . . . The future and your comments will help shape my choice.

In the meantime, I've chosen freedom, freedom to choose where `french` will be placed, outside the slightly shameful world of “`nonfree`”, so that everyone can freely do what they will with it, within the limits of its copyright statement, without *a priori* constraints or commercial connotations. Thus, the `french` distribution will remain available, as always, from the GUTenberg server <http://ftp.gutenberg.org/pub/gut/french>. Anyone may fetch it for free and freely make use of it.

*I thank you for having read my text to the end; I have tried to be as balanced as possible because I don't want any polemics. Rather, I hope that all needs can be satisfied in the future, leaving authors free to choose the terms of their copyright statements.*

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### Response from the CTAN team

The CTAN team has made the following statement about the content and arrangement of the archive:

The aim of the CTAN team is to make CTAN consistent, simple, and reliable, both for users and maintainers. We apologize if our policies cause upset to some people.

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### Editor's commentary

Having been party to some of the discussions that led to the segmentation of CTAN, I understand the intent of the split in a way that is probably somewhat different from that of someone coming upon it *de novo*.

One of the driving requirements for the split was a request to the T<sub>E</sub>X Live team for permission to distribute the CD beyond the confines of the formal T<sub>E</sub>X user community, in particular, to include the CD in a commercially published book on L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X.

Although CTAN contains shareware and tools that originated outside the T<sub>E</sub>X community, these items are made available by their authors or primary distributors on other net-based archives, and their presence on CTAN is a convenience.

Earlier versions of T<sub>E</sub>X Live were not much concerned with formal permissions from the authors or primary distributors of the files included on the CD; their presence on CTAN was considered

tacit permission, and besides, the intention was to distribute the CD only to the user groups that cooperated in its creation. However, with the request to redistribute T<sub>E</sub>X Live 4 beyond this limited sphere, permissions suddenly became very important.

For a few items restricted by the originators from wider distribution, special permission was requested, and, in most cases, granted; a special version of T<sub>E</sub>X Live 4 was generated for the “external” distribution, omitting any items for which restrictions existed and no permission was forthcoming.

In order to make the creation of T<sub>E</sub>X Live 5 and future editions more straightforward, it was decided to make the provenance of all CTAN holdings obvious without having to check each file. The concept is clear; the naming is perhaps not so clear.

The terms “free” and “nonfree” are short and easily remembered, but “nonfree” seems to imply a monetary transaction. In the CTAN sense, however, it means only that the author has placed some restriction that limits redistribution. This could be a request for a shareware fee, or a statement that a package requires special permission if it is used for other than strictly personal use. In the case of `french`, there is a requirement that any file in the package with an explicit copyright statement not be modified, and the package may not be redistributed as part of any commercial offering regardless of whether or not compensation is asked; these are not unreasonable requests, but they do attach “strings” to the package that mean it cannot be automatically included on a CD such as T<sub>E</sub>X Live, which may find its way into distribution beyond the user groups.

Perhaps “restricted” and “unrestricted”, or (more colloquially) “strings” and “nostrings” might have been better choices of terminology: it's not instantly clear what the terms mean, and if one checks, one will learn exactly what is meant. The kinds of restrictions placed on CTAN offerings are not shameful, and there are good reasons for them in most cases; the CTAN team, as I see it, is merely trying to comply with the wishes of the owners.

I worked for a number of years in international standards working groups. International standards have a reputation for stilted and overly precise language. However, a central requirement for these documents is that they be translatable into many different languages with no change of meaning. This is the misfortune that has now befallen CTAN — an intention to make clear to users that certain items should be checked for possible restrictions has been badly misunderstood.

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