



Societies Without Borders

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 8


2008

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Recommended Citation

Juris & Giuseppe Caruso. 2009. "Freeing Software and Opening Space: Social Forums and the Cultural Politics of Technology." *Societies Without Borders* 3 (1): 96-117.

Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb/vol3/iss1/8>

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Freeing Software and Opening Space: Social Forums and the Cultural Politics of Technology¹

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Keywords

World Social Forum process, cultural politics, technology, free software

Since appearing in 2001, the social forums have formed part of a wider global justice movement characterized by the innovative use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). The power of new ICTs such as the Internet to transform the speed, scale, and mode of organizing first became apparent in the mid-1990s with the early anti-Free Trade Campaigns and Zapatista Solidarity Networks.² Activists soon began to employ e-mail lists, webpages, and collaborative software to communicate and coordinate within transnational networks such as Peoples' Global Action and to organize mass anti-corporate globalization actions, including the November 1999 protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle. New ICTs have not only facilitated action-at-a-distance, they have also changed the way social movements organize, favoring decentralized, networked structures involving a widespread “cultural logic of networking”.³

¹ The article was collaborative, but each author contributed (an) empirical section(s): Giuseppe Caruso, “Free Software in Mumbai;” Lorenzo Mosca, “Technology, Organization, and Conflict within the ESF Process;” and Jeffrey S. Juris, “Technological Architecture of the Forums,” and “Organizing Software and Technology within the USSF.”

² Cleaver 1999; Smith and Smythe 2001.

³ Juris 2005a and 2008.

As Peter Waterman points out, the global justice movement “does not so much *use* the new media as *live* them- in the sense of understanding the potential and significance of such media for the articulation (meaning both joining and expression) of its events and processes.”⁴

As with other spheres of the global justice movement, ICTs have also played an important role in the organization of the world and regional social forums.⁵ Forum webpages have provided key outreach tools, also archiving documents and facilitating on-line registration. Moreover, as Giuseppe Caruso suggests WSF organizers increasingly view free software (FS) as “one more way to support people’s struggle against marginalization and uneven and unfair distribution of resources.”⁶ FS means users have the right to freely adapt, improve, and distribute a program, challenging corporate monopolies that use patents to privatize knowledge.⁷ Adopting FS is thus a new way to practice political consumerism: citizen engagement meant to change objectionable institutional or market practices through consumer choices based on attitudes and values related to justice, fairness, and other non-economic concerns.⁸ Moreover, FS development, an open, horizontally networked mode of collaboration, reflects the view of the Forum as an “open space” for the free and open exchange of ideas, information, and strategies.⁹

At the same time, ongoing forum processes have been less directly shaped by the culture and logic of the new ICTs.¹⁰ This partly reflects the more institutional character of the forums. As Pippa Norris suggests, traditional organizations often adapt new technologies to their ongoing communication routines, while informal actors are more likely to reorganize themselves around such technologies, using their interactive capacities to

⁴ Waterman 2005, p. 3.

⁵ Cf. della Porta and Mosca 2005.

⁶ Caruso 2005, p. 174.

⁷ In 1998, a group of programmers began using the term open source rather than FS. Some open source licenses are more restrictive and the term also includes software that is only semi-free, but the biggest difference relates to values- FS advocates prefer to stress the more politicized notion of freedom rather than simply open source code (see <http://www.gnu.org/>) (accessed August 31, 2007). Others, including a few of our interviewees, refer to “free and open source software (FOSS).” We use FS in support of the aims of the free software movement.

⁸ Micheletti 2003.

⁹ Sen 2004; Whitaker 2004.

¹⁰ Cf. Waterman 2005.

overcome disadvantages with respect to size and resources.¹¹ In this sense, forum websites have often functioned more as brochures than interactive spaces for horizontal collaboration. This has begun to change, however, particularly within the European and US processes, and increasingly, within the global process as well. As independent media and technology activists become more involved in forum working groups and organizing committees, they bring with them a highly developed sensibility regarding the political nature of software and technology.

In this article we explore what we refer to as the “cultural politics of technology” within the social forums through a comparative analysis of the political goals and struggles associated with ICT use within the global, European, and US social forum processes. By cultural politics of technology we mean the conflicts between different political visions associated with particular uses and understandings of technology. As we shall see, similar issues and debates have surfaced within each of these distinct political and cultural contexts. In particular, conflicts surrounding FS, openness, efficiency, and the relationship between technicians and other forum organizers have been apparent in each case. In what follows, we argue that decisions regarding technology and software should be seen as *political*, not *technical* considerations. Indeed, given that it is non-proprietary, open, and collaborative, FS reflects the goals of the WSF. We further contend that struggles over software and technology reflect conflicts over the nature of the forum itself.

As activists and scholars we have been deeply engaged in the social forums, alternatively as participants, organizers, and researchers. It is our belief that technology constitutes a crucial terrain for practicing the politics and negotiating the conflicts associated with the social forums. This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork as well as interviews conducted before, during, and after the 2002, 2003 and 2005 editions of the World Social Forum (WSF) in Porto Alegre, the 2004 WSF in Mumbai, European Social Forums (ESF) in Florence (2002), Paris (2003), London (2004), and Athens (2006), and the first-ever US Social Forum (USSF) in Atlanta during summer 2007. We begin with an overview of new ICTs and the social forums, before moving on to an ethnographic account of struggles over FS inside the WSF 2004 organizing process. Next, we consider the cultural politics of software and technology within the European and

¹¹ Norris 2001.

US social forums. Finally, we conclude with some reflections regarding the implications of our analysis for the future of the forum process.

Technological Architecture of the Forums

The permanent WSF website is hosted on a Brazilian server and provides information about the history and structure of the forums, logistical and program details, analyses and archival materials, and registration forms for individuals, organizations, and journalists in Portuguese, English, French and Spanish.¹² Users can also sign up to receive periodic electronic Bulletins. Significantly, there are no forum-wide e-mail lists, although International Council (IC) and local Organizing Committee working groups have their own listserves and are experimenting with new ICT tools, including chats and wikis. Separate websites were created for the 2004 WSF in Mumbai and 2007 WSF in Nairobi.¹³ Moreover, since 2004, the WSF has run FS, including GNU/Linux operating systems, on forum-related computers.¹⁴ European and U.S. social forums have committed to use FS as well.

The IC Communication Commission has recently created new interactive tools and has developed a comprehensive communication plan which proposes a more innovative use of ICTs to address the internal and external communication needs of the global forum process. For example, the global portal designed to facilitate coordination around the decentralized day of actions planned for January 26, 2008 allows organizations to sign on to the call as well as upload and share information regarding their projected activities.¹⁵ Plans are also in the works for a World Social Clock, which would provide daily audio, radio, and video reports from actions around the world, resembling Indymedia's open publishing feature. In addition, the new WSF process site,¹⁶ which runs on a FS-based platform called Plone, provides collaborative tools allowing groups to network, plan initiatives, and promote collective proposals promoting decentralized communication, self-organization, and internal transparency.

The ESF website, initially used to provide information regarding logistics, program, local sites, and online registration, has been enriched by a

¹² <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br> (accessed August 31, 2007).

¹³ <http://www.wsfindia.org>; <http://www.wsf2007.org> (accessed August 31, 2007).

¹⁴ GNU stands for GNU is Not Unix (Caruso 2005: 173).

¹⁵ <http://www.wsf2008.net> (accessed August 31, 2007).

¹⁶ <http://www.wsfprocess.net> (accessed August 31, 2007).

new interactive feature facilitating collaboration during the preparatory phase.¹⁷ More generally, the ESF is organized via open meetings in different cities around Europe and is supported by an open mailing list.¹⁸ Similar to the WSF Process site, the ESF has a collaborative workspace that is restricted to participating organizations. European organizers have also developed several innovative projects using wikis and related software to facilitate networking, information sharing, and collective writing, including the ESF Memory Project and Euromovements.¹⁹ This does not suggest an absence of conflict within the European process. Indeed, when members of the London ESF organizing committee objected to open e-mail lists and the official website, a group of activists, who later called themselves “the horizontals,” created their own list and website.²⁰ Moreover, “autonomous spaces” within and around the forums, such as *Beyond ESF* in London or the *Caracol* at the 2005 WSF in Porto Alegre, have built their own interactive web sites and tools.²¹ Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, the USSF website features interactive tools built using Drupal (FS), which facilitate coordination and participation, including an open blog, regional forums, and an innovative registration system.

Finally, forum events also house diverse technology and media projects. Since the first WSF, for example, the International Independent Information Exchange has provided a web-based forum for posting and distributing news related to the forum.²² The 2005 WSF featured a Radio Forum, involving community stations from around the world and webcast 24 hours a day, and a TV Forum, which pooled videos and created a one-hour TV show.²³ Radical activists have also organized projects such as Indymedia Centers, the European Forum on Communication Rights at the 2004 ESF, and the Laboratory of Free Knowledge at the Intercontinental Youth Camp in 2005, a space for creating and sharing audio, video, and

¹⁷ <http://www.fse-esf.org> (accessed August 31, 2007).

¹⁸ <http://lists.fse-esf.org/cgi-bin/mailman/listinfo/fse-esf> (accessed August 31, 2007).

¹⁹ <http://www.euromovements.info> (accessed August 31, 2007).

²⁰ <http://esf2004.net> (accessed August 31, 2007).

²¹ Autonomous spaces are parallel gatherings organized by activists who are against aspects of a forum, such as the lack of democracy within the organizing process or the participation of institutional actors, but generally support the goals of the forums (cf. Juris 2005b).

²² <http://www.ciranda.net> (accessed August 31, 2007).

²³ <http://www.forumderadios.fm> (accessed August 31, 2007).

software. Moreover, forums have also featured panels, workshops, and activities around themes including social change and the Internet, media democracy, independent media, FS, and intellectual property rights.

Free Software in Mumbai

The 2004 WSF in Mumbai was a key turning point with respect to ICTs and the forums: it was the first time the knowledge and information system ran entirely on FS. The 2004 WSF chose to use FS to support the struggles against marginalization, uneven distribution of resources (in this case information/knowledge), and multinational software firms that participating groups were engaged in. However, inconsistencies between the organizational structure of the forum and the ideological and technical requirements of FS arose, often due to contrasting perceptions of the technical and political implications of FS. These contradictions led to conflicts between organizers who valued goal-oriented efficiency characteristic of hierarchical organizations and advocates of more participatory processes.

At the peak of the workload in the WSF office, thirty-seven computers ran GNU/Linux (FS). Three volunteers from the Free Software Foundation (FSF India) administered the system and servers. A Czech programmer joined later. The openness of the office and the use of FS were meant to provide a glance of ‘another world’: a utopian space without hierarchies, where work would be done collectively and implementation carried out by everyone involved; where social borders would be permeable and continuously crossed generating creative hybridization; where frontiers between work and leisure, efficiency and creativity, responsibility and recognition, would not be strictly drawn. As with previous forums, the 2004 WSF fell short of its ambitions.

Many shortcomings were due to a lack of sufficient consideration of the political aspects of FS. GNU/Linux was new to almost everyone in the office. No consistent training was offered to show the potential of FS and the FSF president only gave one presentation to the office staff. Interventions by technicians were contingent and related to troubleshooting, which reproduced a dynamic of dependence between users and technical staff. Behind these mistakes was a lack of coordination in system design and implementation, a miscalculation of the relevance of software in the daily routine of an office, and the fundamental misjudgment made at the coordination level to consider the design and management of the system a

technical issue. When one of us arrived in Mumbai in early October, the WSF office was still coming together but was already a site of conflict. The website was the core of the issue. What was often described as a misunderstanding of the relevance of the operating system adopted was instead a clash of political interests.

Conflicts resulted from the difficult relationship within and among the Indian Working Committee (IWC, decision-makers), the Indian Organizing Committee (IOC, implementers), the office managers (members of and appointed by the IOC), the office staff, and the FS activists. For some IWC and IOC members the knowledge management software used was of marginal interest. Some viewed FS as a way to claim self-reliance against mega-corporations but they still saw it as a technical issue. For FS activists, using FS in the administration of the office was a strategic way to link their software choices to those of activists across the globe (in previous forums participants noted that proprietary software was inconsistent with the values of the WSF). For the office coordinators, such minor details were irrelevant when the real issue was the delivery of the largest civil society platform ever carried out in India. The same perception was shared by many office volunteers and staff who did not appreciate why so much energy was wasted in learning new software and in constantly tweaking an unstable system. Unfortunately, FS activists did not have the chance to provide the necessary orientation to people using the software and to explain its full potential and political value.

Entrusting website development to a company that had no experience in FS was a poorly conceived strategy. Notwithstanding the poor quality of service provided during the Asian Social Forum 2003 (Hyderabad, India) and the conflicts generated in that context, the arrangement was agreed to because of political pressures and practical reassurances by consultants. This decision created tensions that escalated into fierce conflict with accusations of corruption and ineptitude, bullying, and personal interests. Information was not accessible on the website, but it was also not easy to access the website, which was frequently down for maintenance. Website troubles reflected broader issues of transparency and openness.

The international pressure, desire to deliver, and need for a productive work environment induced attitudes and behaviors that were inconsistent with the values of the WSF. According to many interviewees, the IOC should have forgotten about FS and allowed professionals who could deal with business oriented people (the website managers) to solve the problems faced by the office. A consultant who was appointed to evaluate the

faults of the website described what he found in a letter he sent at the end of his mandate to the IOC, which denounced racketeering, corruption, incompetence, lack of accountability, lack of democratic practices, political struggles, hierarchy, and exclusion: the very things the WSF was fighting against.

The consultant's intervention proved inconsequential: the problems with the servers and websites continued. Until the end, the website issues were dealt with in flawed ways, based on contingency and improvisation, by all parties involved. Political and technical misjudgments also generated a grave deterioration of personal relations and produced an atmosphere of suspicion, which undermined the possibility of having an efficient website and a healthy work environment. A few days after the consultant's email, one of the coordinators of the Finance group resigned, stating that his decision was due to the lack of accountability surrounding the website:

My resignation has to do with the continuous, perpetual incompetence of some IOC members in Mumbai and the protection of [them] by lobbying and manipulation by other IOC members... Are we willing to fix responsibility and hold each other accountable or do we close our ranks to protect falsehood?²⁴

When given the chance to discuss these issues, there were strong objections to addressing the GNU/Linux related problems raised at the IOC meeting in November. That meeting would have been an important moment to address the political and technical problems related to office and website management. The opportunity was missed because of the desire to avoid dealing with what appeared to be uncontrollable conflicts and a lack of familiarity with the political relevance of the issues at stake. Few people wanted to risk a serious political crisis over the kind of software used at the WSF. The ICT consultant's accusations led to worsening relationships, already tense, among working group delegates, office coordinators, staff, and volunteers. His allegations regarding the treatment of staff, which had to work long hours and face the wrath of users, and the conditions of stress and insecurity, were never discussed.

On December 13, 2003 office staff members and FSF volunteers had an explosive lunch-time conversation. Many staff felt the volunteers held too much power given their ability to fix their computers. When asked about

²⁴) Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from personal interviews.

specific repairs, the FSF workers frequently offered cursory explanations using obscure technical language. In turn, FSF volunteers often felt alienated and disillusioned by the behavior of office managers. These acrimonious feelings were exacerbated by related conflicts between staff, office managers, and the IOC. At one point during the lunch, an FSF volunteer told the staff they should relax and enjoy the free time when a system was down because they were still being paid. One staff member tried to explain that the mentality at the office was different, but with little conviction. If the system breakdown was a problem connected to what the consultant had denounced in his letter, why should the staff not be happy to have time off from work? If corruption had made its way into the WSF space, why not protest against it by simply crossing one's arms?

On December 26 the contentious issues from the office and an ongoing confrontation between the Media and Communication group and the Finance group reached a boiling point. One of the people in charge of the office system said: "The FSF was attacked from many sides because of the problems we had at the office with computers, servers, and website. Finance issued a strong statement asking us to revert to Windows." This stark assessment did not cause the WSF to revise its stand on information management, but it did reflect the highly contentious nature of software and technology decisions within the WSF organizing process. Ultimately, the use of FS in Mumbai was widely praised. Organizers and users complemented the FSF profusely for the excellent performance of the WSF media center, where 110 computers ran on Gnoware (an ad-hoc distribution of the GNU/Linux operating system prepared explicitly for the WSF). Despite the tensions described previously, this widely perceived success proved not only that the new FS system was efficient, but also that the results when FSF activists work together with managers (in this case at the media center) can be extremely positive.

However, inconsistencies were evident between the culture of the Mumbai office and the values of the WSF. Indeed, the struggle over organizational structure has stimulated much debate among forum commentators, organizers, and participants, ranging from support for more rigid organizational structures and strong leadership to calls for a completely self-organized WSF. The main weakness of the organizational structure of the Mumbai WSF was its incongruence with the principles expressed in the WSF Charter. According to Jai Sen, the organizational culture present in Mumbai was more related to local cultural patterns than the values of the

WSF.²⁵ Against openness, transparency, collaboration, negotiation, and horizontality, the political culture within the 2004 WSF organizing process was hierarchical and opaque, and based on a cult of the leader, to the point of being authoritarian and corrupt. Paradoxically whereas corporations have been able to develop and fully take advantage of diffuse, networked structures and use them as subtle forms of labor control, *some* parties, NGOs, and unions keep organizational structures rigidly centralized based on a form of linear rationality not even supported within the corporate world they claim to oppose. These groups inevitably bring that organizational culture into the WSF.

A clear symptom of the incongruence between aspirations and practice was the conflict over the goals of the office, where the “productivity paradigm” was challenged by the “process paradigm” (stressing the *political* nature of process). As we have seen, this clash was particularly evident in the conflicts surrounding technology. On the one hand, these struggles were related to the classic argument between the old and new Left over technocratic versus political approaches to social change. On the other hand, they represent the clash between distinct ways of viewing politics: the “old” of the traditional Left (political parties, trade unions, large NGOs), and the “new” associated with the FS movement, small anarchist groups, “open space” advocates, and horizontal organizations with diverse ideologies. In this regard, closed, centralized information systems (including closed source and proprietary software) tend to go along with hierarchical structures. By contrast, open, accessible informational environments favor horizontal networks, peer to peer collaboration, and grassroots participation. Indeed, these are the expressed values of the WSF, even if they are not always manifested in daily organizational practice.

Technology, Organization, and Conflict within the ESF Process

Conflicting understandings of the political relationship between culture, organizational structures, and technology also characterize the ESF process. The inherent political dimension of technology has been often overshadowed by choices presented as technical. This has been clearly evident in the creation of ESF media centers (MC). The MCs are key sites where

²⁵) Sen 2004.

information about the forum is produced and disseminated. The organization of MCs during various editions of the ESF has always been problematic. During the Florence ESF (2002), for example, as in future editions, there was no dedicated group in charge of producing official information about the forum. The organizers rejected the idea of an official voice of the forum as this might become a major source of conflict.²⁶ The MC in Florence was equipped with fifty computers operating around the clock. It was set up according to the model developed for the anti-G8 protest in Genoa (July 2001), where Indymedia-Italy played an essential role, providing alternative coverage of the counter-summit.²⁷ Computer configurations were all done in Linux.

The Florence MC was the stage of a struggle between two groups in charge of managing it: one affiliated with Indymedia and grassroots radios, which was responsible for the technical aspects such as computer connectivity, and the other, more closely associated with the ESF organizers, responsible for diffusing general information about the forum and managing the website. The conflict developed over the openness of the MC. Grassroots activists wanted open access, while the others wanted to restrict access to accredited personnel. The decision was ultimately made to distinguish between movement media and mainstream media, reserving two different areas in the MC for each group of journalists. As resources were limited, non-media activists were denied access. Grassroots media activists strongly opposed this decision, arguing that free access to the MC would give everyone a chance to contribute to a collective narration of the forum.

As it turned out, a number of computers were stolen during the ESF, which compromised the ability of the MC to function. According to one interviewee who took part in the autonomous spaces in Florence, the technological resources hosted in the MC should have been open to all:

We were annoyed because the ESF organizers did not provide us with good [physical] space and we had negotiated with them to obtain a series of resources, but in the end what they promised was never accomplished. Then we had to take the law into our own hands . . . we went across the forum and re-appropriated materials from the media center.

²⁶) Mosca et al. 2007.

²⁷) Di Corinto 2001; Cristante 2003.

Despite the goals of this action, the stolen laptops persuaded ESF organizers to further restrict access to the MC in the following editions. For example, an accreditation and pass were required to enter the MC during the Paris ESF in 2003. Zalea TV issued a public statement against what they argued was “reproducing, in [the ESF] organizational practice, the more perverse, castrating model of the surveillance society.”²⁸ Moreover, the organization of the MC was partially outsourced, which meant that computers were not equipped with FS. In response, an alternative Independent Media Center was set up with limited equipment (a few desktop computers and wi-fi connection) within an autonomous space called Métallos Médialab.²⁹

At the 2004 ESF in London, the management of the MC was even more contentious, as ‘alternative’ media were denied access. In the words of one activist: “Press passes for the ESF were to be available to ‘proper’ journalists with National Press Cards”.³⁰ As a result, grassroots media activist established an alternative IMC with over 70 computers in the Camden Centre. A different style of management was finally adopted at the 2006 ESF in Athens, where the MC was open to everyone, although a few PCs were reserved for ‘official’ and ‘alternative’ journalists. The Hellenic Linux User Group repaired old PCs for the forum and configured them with FS.³¹ Wireless access was also provided in the main ESF building, making Internet connection available to every laptop in the forum area.

The Paris ESF: Technologies to Enable Memory

During the Florence ESF efforts were made to keep track of the discussions taking place at the event. More than 100 students were involved in the “Operation Scriba Manent” project, collecting information on workshops and seminars using a uniform grid. They wrote more than 100 reports concerning 50 workshops and more than 80 seminars. In Paris a similar project was set up to build a memory for the forum (500 texts were collected). However, until the Paris ESF the memory projects for each forum were uncoordinated (seen as single events).

²⁸) “Communiqué de Zalea TV sur le média center de Forum Social Européen,” <http://archives.lists.indymedia.org/italy-list> (accessed August 31, 2007).

²⁹) “Media Lab at ESF in Paris,” <http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agn/> (accessed August 31, 2007).

³⁰) Jones 2004.

³¹) <http://www.hellug.gr> (accessed August 31, 2007).

After Paris new technologies were used to build a memory project for the ESF process.³² The Paris forum was funded by the French municipalities of Paris, Bobigny, Saint-Denis, and Ivry-sur-Seine. After the forum, part of this money was unspent and the group managing the funds decided to use them to support a series of groups already working on the development of techno-political tools to facilitate social transformation. In particular, funding was provided to Euromovements and Nomad, an international network “developing alternative technologies aimed at empowering people.”³³ While Euromovements developed a series of tools intended to systematize knowledge within the ESF process and to create a shared memory of past events, Nomad worked on developing a system to enable simultaneous translation in multi-linguistic settings. In particular, Euromovements created an e-library on social transformation with online papers and bibliographical references about European movements, a collaborative space to favor an open collective writing on the ESF process, and a chronology of European protest events.

The work of Nomad was developed in association with Babels, a political network of volunteer interpreters and translators created during the first ESF to affirm the right of everyone to express themselves in the language of their choice.³⁴ Early in the ESF process, interpretation costs were a large part of the ESF overall budget (300,000 Euros were spent for equipment and 100,000 for professional interpreters in the first ESF). In Florence, while volunteer interpreters helped with seminars (interpreting in three languages), professional translators were contracted for the plenary conferences (interpreted in English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish). Costs for interpretation were reduced significantly at the next two forums, where all translations were managed by Babels volunteers. During the preparatory process for the 2006 ESF in Athens, a group of Greek activists along with others from Nomad built on the experience of past forums to develop an Alternative Interpretation System (ALIS), which transmitted interpretations via FM radio waves.³⁵ ALIS was built with FS, providing a low cost recording (and streaming) of ESF talks, which made the discussions taking place accessible to those who could not attend, often because of economic constraints.

³²) <http://euromovements.org> (accessed August 31, 2007).

³³) <http://www.nomadfkt.org> (accessed August 31, 2007).

³⁴) <http://www.babels.org> (accessed August 31, 2007).

³⁵) Gosselin 2005.

Groups such as Alis, Babels, and Nomad argued forcefully that they were not service providers but political actors. On one hand, language should be considered “either a political right to self-expression and democratic participation or . . . a means of pro-actively including and expanding out to people and movements traditionally marginalized”.³⁶ On the other hand, technology should not be delegated to experts. Rather, users should be actively involved in the production process, “Re-appropriating the knowledge of technology and developing alternative technical solutions can enable us to re-think and transform our social relations”.³⁷

The London ESF: How the Vertical/Horizontal Dialectic Manifested in Technology

The London ESF was characterized, even more than previous ones, by conflicts between distinct organizational cultures, involving tensions between so-called ‘horizontal’ and ‘verticals’. The horizontals called for a democratization of the organizing process, emphasizing diversity, direct and universal participation, and consensual decision-making, and accused the verticals of hierarchical and exclusive practices, betraying the principles of the WSF charter.³⁸ This confrontation was also mirrored in the choices related to the use of technology. In the initial phase, the horizontals wanted to take part in the development of the official ESF website. However, the verticals externalized website administration to a private software company at a cost of 40,000 pounds. In the words of one of the horizontals:

We thought the information generated by the London ESF might be beneficial to the whole process. For example, we wanted to have access to the database to collect information concerning the organizations participating in the London ESF because we thought that systematizing it a bit could be really useful. I remember that we called the company and asked to have access to the database, but they replied that we were not among their clients, as they had signed a contract with the ESF office in London. Even the European organizers wrote many letters to the London office claiming that such information belonged to everybody but they did not give in.

As Dave Jones argues, while the e-commerce functionality of the website was considered crucial, “the requirements for the other website functionalities

³⁶ Boéri and Hodkinson 2004.

³⁷ Gosselin 2005.

³⁸ Juris 2005b.

were never opened up for public discussion, all public interactivity was rejected and too few people were trusted to participate and administer the site.”³⁹ For this reason an alternative website (based on wiki technologies) was created by the horizontals. As a consequence of the debate generated by this conflict, after the London ESF, more importance was given to the European dimension of the organizing process and it was agreed that the ESF process website would be developed under the control of the open European Preparatory Assembly. Meanwhile, websites for ESF events (managing registration and providing logistic information) would be administered by national organizing committees.⁴⁰

As this account shows, technology and FS have been used in the ESF process to prefigure “another world” and to implement the idea of the forum as an open space. Resources which were saved using FS in setting up the official websites, the translation systems, and the media centers were used to create a “solidarity fund” aimed at facilitating the participation of individuals and groups from (poorer) Eastern European countries (their presence in Athens was very significant compared with the previous European forums). At the same time, the conflicts reported above were generated by the political nature of technology, illustrating that technical choices ought not be delegated to technicians, but should be treated as inherently political.

Organizing Software and Technology within the USSF

The US Social Forum in 2007 was lauded by participants and observers for its diversity and efficiency. The smooth functioning of the on-line registration system has been singled out for particular praise. New ICTs played an important role within the USSF process, not only in terms of internal coordination, outreach, and registration, but also as a facilitator of interactive communication. Beyond logistics, the ICT Team, a geographically distributed network of volunteers spearheaded by a group of radical technologists in New York City, understood their work as inherently political.⁴¹ In this sense, they decided early on to run FS on the roughly seventy

³⁹) Jones 2004.

⁴⁰) “Istanbul report from the European logistics working group,” www.fse-est.org (accessed August 31, 2007).

⁴¹) The main organizations heading up the USSF ICT team included the New York City-based May First People Link, Openflows, and the Interactivist Network. As technologists

public access computers at the USSF, and built the website using Drupal (see above).⁴² They also developed tools that would encourage active participation, conceiving technology as a vehicle for achieving the goals of the forum. At the same time, new ICTs were also key sites of conflict, reflecting contrasting views of the role of technology within struggles for social justice.

During a series of technology workshops at the USSF and through subsequent interviews, ICT team members articulated a clear vision of the highly political nature of technology-related decisions. For example, with respect to FS, the presenter at one session explained, “It seemed like anything that did not use... [FS] would go against the whole idea of all us coming together and sharing the information in the same space.” Expressing a notion of refigurative politics, another ICT team member added,

By actively using a tool you are making that tool better... when you give that contribution to a proprietary tool, you are helping to build a community around that tool... I would like to see that community build around free tools... that is a key piece of the struggle... we are building infrastructure together that describes the way we want to see the world.

The ICT team also understood FS as reflecting the wider goals of the forum, as one member explained during an interview,

We felt the selection that the social forum makes for its software should mirror the politics of the social forum, which are about the development of a large network and community where there is genuine shared commitment, a sense of equality, respect, and collaboration, and that is what free and open source software is.

Moreover, beyond FS, the communication systems and tools developed for the USSF were designed to encourage grassroots participation and horizontal collaboration. The blog feature on the USSF website provided a clear example, constituting a decentralized mode of bottom-up reporting, as a member of the ICT team pointed out, “blogging is a form of grassroots journalism... you try to get people to write their own stories... If

from around the country became involved, the ICT team began meeting using a chat tool called SILK.

⁴² Although techs working on the European and global forum processes are now using the Plone content management system, and offered to provide their code, members of the USSF ICT team opted to go with Drupal because they had more experience working with that format.

you go onto the site you get a real live portrait of the experiences everyone had at the social forum.” Indeed, the blog was essentially an ambitious collaborative memory project, reflecting a vision of the forum as an open space for sharing ideas and experiences, as the ICT team member continued,

The forum is effectively the collectivized and refined experience of masses of people, that’s what the Forum is all about, and so, that we would blog it that way, that we would take an historical record of it that way I think is appropriate . . . it’s the only way for a social forum to report what happened.

The Media Justice Center, which became a site of conflict, was also meant to encourage participatory collaboration, as another ICT team member explained during a technology session,

We set up six rooms for people doing media, all using open source tools . . . everything for networking . . . so anyone . . . could connect their camera . . . upload [images] to a shared server, and then publish it to the [USSF] media site, which anyone could then use . . . And it was a beautiful thing to watch!

Similarly, tech volunteers also viewed the on-line registration system not only as efficient, but also as a way to get participants involved in running the forum, as an ICT team member pointed out,

If you were already registered you’d walk up to a registrar and they’d take your registration off the computer. You have already registered on-line, so that’s empowerment. If you hadn’t registered, we sent you to a bank of fifteen computers where you could register yourself . . . After that any event people wanted to organize, all that stuff they put up there, they did everything themselves to make the experience their own singular experience.

However, there was also a great deal of conflict surrounding technology within the USSF process, particularly early on in the development of the website. Some members of the National Planning Committee (NPC) were less than enthusiastic about the initial proposals. They were not necessarily opposed to the goals of the ICT team, but they had little sense of the potential of new technologies. ICT team members thus had to raise awareness among other USSF organizers of the capabilities offered by new ICTs and the political nature of technical decisions, particularly with respect to FS. As a tech volunteer confided during a technology workshop, “None of this was a foregone conclusion, these were political discussions, political strug-

gles in some cases, and sometimes very intense, to make sure that FS was the standard for the social forum.”

Tech volunteers also waged struggles to get NPC members to recognize them as fellow *organizers*, as another ICT team member pointed out in an interview, “It took a while for other organizers to recognize we actually *were* organizers. There’s a general sense in our culture that information and communications technology work is . . . a consultant-client relationship . . . ‘I tell you, I want x, y, and z, and you go do it.’” Indeed, some forum organizers were frustrated at the ICT team’s slow pace at the beginning, but rather than emphasize efficiency, tech workers spent a lot of time addressing the political, as opposed to the technical aspects of the decisions they were making, as the ICT team member continued,

We weren’t super efficient initially, because I think we all felt it was important that, you know, this is the US social forum, it’s about another world is possible, let’s not replicate the consultant-client relationship, let’s not replicate the status quo tool set . . . let’s really think about how we can bring new people in, let’s figure out how we can use tools we are comfortable with, that we feel we have a political affinity for.

Although most NPC members came to respect the political work of the ICT team, underlying tensions were never very far from the surface. One particularly contentious exchange occurred on the blog, as a logistics working group member expressed his exasperation at the way he felt he was being treated by tech team members while trying to get basic answers for what he considered a mundane issue. However, his post reflected a more serious critique, as he wrote:

I read all of these discussions of open source code being so much more politically egalitarian than the proprietary stuff, but what good does that do when only a handful of people can deal with the open source, and the rest of us are at their mercy? So we replace our reliance on the already wealthy (who have the resources we want) with the not yet wealthy (who have the resources we want) . . . On the whole, it feels to me that the tech team acts as autocratically as any other bureaucratic organization.⁴³

This unleashed series of responses by ICT team members recognizing his frustration and agreeing on the need for a better relationship between techs

⁴³) “Techno-democracy feels something like autocracy,” <http://www.ussf2007.org/en/node/5063> (accessed August 31, 2007).

and non-techs, but asking for further clarification of the specific issues involved. These never came out on the public exchange, but the logistics working group member did finally reply in a more conciliatory tone, explaining that “While the structure of tech requests may seem natural to you who deal with them everyday to many of us it’s like trying to learn CAD [computer-aided design] software with no instruction manual.” He then clarified the essence of his critique,

I respect the political importance of open source code. The only thing I have a problem with is the assumption that because something is non-corporate or non-proprietary, it evades serious power differentials. At this point, the tech team . . . holds more control over the happening of the USSF than any other single entity.

This intervention gets to the heart of a key contradiction associated with new ICTs, including FS: despite their egalitarian goals and their ability to facilitate more decentralized, interactive communication, they often reproduce social hierarchies, including the divide between those who have certain kinds of technical knowledge and expertise and those who do not. Even more fundamentally, marginalized communities that lack access to basic computing resources may be excluded from technologically driven processes entirely. This is a particular concern for a social forum dedicated to overcoming social, economic, class, and racial inequalities. Indeed, the US Social Forum has been widely praised not only for its efficiency, but also for its racial and class diversity. Organizers made a highly deliberate effort to ensure that the USSF would be a grassroots forum. It should thus come as no surprise that issues related to technology, inequality, and access also arose during the USSF.

During a session on FS, for example, one of the participants, a young African American male, commented that he did not know how to gain access to available FS technologies, and he also noticed how few people of color there were in the room. Ironically, the African American woman who led the workshop later wrote that out of thirty-five participants, seven or eight were people of color, which was “the most diverse crowd I’ve ever talked with or been in for an open source conversation.”⁴⁴ Of course, this suggests that people of color, and as she also pointed out, women, are

⁴⁴ “Gender, race, and open source,” <http://www.zenofnptech.org/2007/06> (accessed August 31, 2007). Details regarding this workshop were also gleaned from Peter J. Smith’s personal field notes.

significantly underrepresented in FS circles. One of the most explosive moments of the USSF came during the Peoples Movement Assembly on the last day when a group of Native Americans protested the silencing of an indigenous leader from Ecuador. Just after their protest concluded, activists from Poor Magazine denounced the lack of accessibility of the Media Justice Center. One of them had publicly voiced their critique the prior day on the blog, “We are running the Ida B. Wells Media Justice Center in a hallway. Everyone has to travel a hallway to get to a room, but when your room is the hallway, it sends a clear message, there is no room for you.”⁴⁵

These anecdotes suggest that unequal access, power, and hierarchy are as endemic to technology as any social field. Indeed, part of the challenge of both open space and FS is to make such resources available as widely as possible across gender, race, and class divides. Another blog on the second day of the USSF captured the challenges that lie ahead:

This social forum has been about creating a space for dialogue and collaboration among organizations, individuals, and communities working for social justice... Nonetheless, at the end of the day, many of us understand that web communication is simultaneously democratizing and divisive; it is open to all, but is inherently limited to those with the economic and social capital to access and create... how do we begin tearing down the walls of accessibility to the internet and begin broadcasting the voices that are most marginalized in these conversations?⁴⁶

Conclusion

We have argued that software and technology decisions are inherently *political*. This is particularly so in the case of the social forums, which are committed to building another, more egalitarian and democratic world. By challenging corporate monopolies and making technology more open, democratic, and accessible, FS, in particular, reflects the political goals of the forum. Moreover, FS and new ICTs more generally facilitate more interactive communication and grassroots participation, employing new technologies to promote an open space ideal. However, technology is also

⁴⁵ “POOR magazine: reflections on my journey to Atlanta,” <http://www.ussf2007.org/en/node/17477> (accessed August 31, 2007).

⁴⁶ “Moving towards a democratic web communication,” <http://www.ussf2007.org/en/blog/1882> (accessed August 31, 2007).

a critical terrain of struggle within and around the forums, as conflicts over software and technology mirror contests over the nature of the forum itself. Moreover, although new ICTs are potentially democratizing, growing dependence on them raises other contradictions with respect to unequal access to technological knowledge and resources across gender, class, racial, and geographic divides.

What we find striking is that such similar issues and conflicts have surfaced within forum processes within vastly different social, cultural, and political contexts. Discourses and struggles surrounding FS within the USSF process recalled similar debates inside the Mumbai organizing process, even though the former went with an all volunteer ICT team (perhaps reflecting its smaller scale). Moreover, conflicts between techs and non-techs were apparent in both cases. Meanwhile, struggles over interactivity and accessibility with respect to the media centers and websites characterized both the US and European social forums. At the same time, as might be expected, specific forum processes did confront particular issues unique to their local settings. For example, concerns about openness and horizontality were more prevalent in the European context while barriers of race, class, caste and gender were more central in the U.S. and India. Still, despite these place-based specificities, the issues addressed were remarkably similar across distinct locales, suggesting the inherently political nature of new technologies and perhaps the increasing globalization of struggles surrounding them as well.

Although the social forums initially lagged behind other expressions of the global justice movement in terms of their ICT use, particular forum processes have made significant strides in recent years. This is evidenced by the collaborative process and workspace sites at the European and global levels and the interactive Drupal-based webpage developed for the USSF process. Moreover, a new WSF communications plan would push these changes even further, making the IC more transparent and empowering local groups, organizations, and individuals to participate in the forum process on a sustained basis. At the same time, to make the most effective use of new ICTs within the global forum process, the uneven patterns of interaction and coordination among tech teams from different regions will have to be overcome, including the need to address software compatibility issues. Another challenge over the coming years will be to make sure that technological decisions within the forums are themselves democratized so that a small number of skilled individuals are not able to exert disproportionate influence and control. This will require a further democ-

ratization of the basic knowledge and skills required not only to use, but also to appreciate the inherently political dimensions of technology and software.

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