



Open Office and Free Software: The Politics of the WSF 2004 as Workplace^{*}

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abstract

Is free software likely to help address issues regarding the complex politics, often factional and fragmented and informed by strong power dynamics, of complex organisational events of global civil society such as the World Social Forum (WSF)? The question is addressed in the paper by investigating the organisational, political and technical interactions at the level of the office of the organising committee of the WSF 2004 and with reference to the management of the WSF 2004 website. It is argued that the adoption of free software is an important political step towards the construction of the forum as an open and inclusive space, but there remain significant impediments to its effective use. In particular two main issues have been encountered: 1) that free software carries a political relevance that cannot be reduced to its use as a technical instrument and 2) that problems with free software in the WSF are often linked to the deployment of the 'efficiency discourse' on part of some forum organisers with the result of pre-empting the strength of the free software (FS) movement and therefore limiting the political incisiveness of the implementation of an information management system that relies fully on FS.

Introduction

A fundamental achievement of the WSF 2004, as proudly stated by a member of the Indian Organizing Committee (IOC), was that "all information management of the WSF was done without Microsoft".¹ It was not only a success against the most powerful corporation of the information business, it was also a success of a different way of thinking regarding technology² and software as product of human creativity, as civil rights, and as instruments of emancipation for the global citizen of the information society. Choosing to use GNU/Linux³ in all computers used in the organisational setup

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- 1 Notes taken by the author at the evaluation meeting held in Mumbai, 28th and 29th of February 2004.
- 2 For an important debate on the role of technology as a political process in the modern information society see Hand and Sandywell (2002). For a thorough discussion of the role of the new technologies in the global civil society see Bach and Stark (2004).
- 3 GNU is a recursive acronym that stands for GNU is NOT UNIX. Linux is the name of the kernel of the UNIX-like operating system GNU/Linux.

was a political choice made by the organizers of the WSF 2004. It was not just a technical or economic decision that referred merely to the highest quality of the GNU/Linux software and to it's being practically free of cost as well. The WSF chose free software (FS) as one more way to support people's struggle against marginalization and uneven and unfair distribution of resources (in this case information) – struggles that all the groups involved in the WSF process are conducting in their aspiration of building another, more just, world.

I will analyse here the importance of the achievement referred to by the organizers of the WSF 2004 with reference to some of the most striking inconsistencies between the declaration of intent of the organizers and the application of FS in the WSF 2004. I will explore the complex political and organisational dynamics that took place in the WSF 2004 process with reference to the use of FS. These dynamics were informed by different and often contrasting perceptions of the technical and political implications of FS carried by the organizers of the WSF, activist of the FS movement, users, participants of the WSF and actors involved in its organisation, and volunteers.

The conclusion of this paper are twofold. Firstly, I suggest that a set of loose but coherent guidelines set up in advance would have helped reduce the stress produced by conflicting interpretations of the political meaning and implications of using FS in the organisational process of the WSF. I argue that a more detailed political reflection on the implications of using free software, might have avoided the conflicts that emerged between views and behaviours of some IOC members that often were incommensurable with the political and ethical positions sustained by the activists of the FS movement. Such thorough political analysis conducted beyond the simply technical considerations of the quality and the characteristics of FS, which too often are built on the 'efficiency discourse', might have allowed for a more satisfactory and less confrontational approach to material and human resource deployment. Perhaps more importantly, this would have contributed towards maintaining the working space of the WSF office as a more consistently open space, thereby meeting more coherently the guidelines embodied by the Charter of Principles of the WSF. Secondly, the case study shows how crucial is the role of education in the use of appropriate technology if a more aware approach to technology has to be expected from users. In a broader sense, the material of the case study analysed here provides also some insights regarding the implications and potentialities of using free software beyond the WSF process within the broader arena of global civil society and the building of new 'creative commons'.⁴

Introduction to the Case Study: Free Software

The organizers of the WSF 2004 chose FS and the Free Software Foundation (FSF) India, to design and build the information system of the WSF 2004, to make a strong political statement on the implications of the use of alternative technology in building 'other worlds', as advocated in the principle slogan of the WSF. Both information

4 The website www.creativecommons.org is built under the inspiration of Lawrence Lessig and his work on FS and property rights.

management and information system configuration and management imply fundamental issues that directly affect the rights of dispossessed and marginalized people. In this particular case, the dispossessed people are those whose access to information and information management technology is limited by the business policies of transnational corporations as well as by strict patent policies and copyright legislations.

In the information age,⁵ societies are increasingly based on access to and control of information to conduct business or take informed political decisions, the condition of those who do not have access to the necessary technology can become extremely weak and therefore marginalized. The gap between those with regular access to information technology and those without such access is often referred to as the 'digital divide'.⁶ This digital divide is therefore a direct deprivation of large strata of the world's human population of access to information and, indirectly, to material resources that increasing information sharing would allow to secure. This amounts, in the elaboration of the FS activists and in the political statement made by the organizers of the WSF 2004, to a limitation of a fundamental right comparable to the right to free speech and free press as maintained by the founder of the FSF, Richard Stallman.⁷

Bridging the digital divide would allow for a better and more sustained global information exchange avoiding the creation of elites who can access and exchange information and a vast majority of people who will be forced day after day in an anachronistic information blackout. A more intense exchange of information among all actors of global society would favour the creation of an aware global citizenship based on common knowledge, shared access to material and immaterial resources through free access to information and information management technology. Moreover, access to information technology would allow the global citizen to take part in the new experiments in global democracy that heavily rely on virtual participation.

Although the commitment to the FS political and philosophical approach was fully embraced by the organizers of the WSF, the actual enforcement of this choice in the daily practice of the WSF was not completely consistent with this radical choice. Many aspects of the organisational structure of the WSF, and the main political implications of the use of FS have not been fully assessed by the IOC. Issues related to the politics of technology and the access to information have been undervalued in the daily practices of the WSF 2004 organisational process generating contradictions, misjudgements and misunderstandings, which need to be thoroughly assessed.

As a participant in the dynamics of the office and as a volunteer myself I took part to all these dramas and had the chance to interview the actors involved and to take extensive notes. I worked in the Mumbai office from October 2003 to January 2004 during the

5 Castells, 1997

6 "The digital divide is understood as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing three different aspects. The *global divide* refers to the divergence of Internet access between industrialized and developing societies. The *social divide* concerns the gap between information rich and poor in each nation. And finally within the online community, the *democratic divide* signifies the difference between those who do, and do not, use the panoply of digital resources to engage, mobilize, and participate in public life" (Norris, 2001: 4, italics in original).

7 For more detailed discussion on this, see www.fsf.org/philosophy and Stallman (2002).

fieldwork for a PhD research on the WSF 2004. The documents collected during that period will help me draw some reflections and formulate some conclusions on the strong link between the use of FS and its consequences on the office dynamics. This assessment promises to create important understanding of the role of free technology in the context of global civil society and in particular of the use of FS to empower the users and to ensure their total and unrestricted access to information management systems. In particular, in the context of the WSF, the political understanding underlining the struggles for FS needs a specific and careful implementation: the WSF is an organisational setup where the need to access and process information in an open way is not only an organisational necessity but an ethical and political statement.

The overall question that I will address in this essay is the following: is the strategic shift to FS likely to restructure the systems of power related to the ownership and access to knowledge, making access to technology more open and inclusive for all global citizens? This question will assume a slightly different form in the present analytical context: is FS likely to help address issues regarding the complex politics, often factional and fragmented and informed by strong power dynamics, of complex organisational contexts such as the WSF? In other words, are FS and free information systems able to help bridge the consistent gap between the actors involved in the WSF process in their access to information and, therefore, in their decision-making processes? What are the conditions for this to happen? The lessons learnt from this case study will show how to assess some of the shortcomings of the use of FS in an open organisational setup and how to offer suggestions for a better implementation of a fully free information system that benefits all the participant of the WSF organisational effort and enhances their participation in the whole process. The broader consequence of the findings of the present paper refers to the development of a set of guidelines to be used beyond the space of the WSF and in other organisational spaces of the global civil society.

Free Software in the WSF 2004

On the 15th of November 2003 Dr. Nagarjuna, director of FSF India, was called to support the person in charge⁸ of the information system in the Mumbai office and to design the system of the media centre of the WSF in January. The moment in which Nagarjuna joins the WSF process was a very difficult one in the Mumbai office. Conflicts were exploding more and more frequently and they were more and more virulent. The obvious consequence of these conflicts was that the work did not get done while the time of the event was approaching fast. Too many technical issues seemed to need thorough attention by specialists and the hope in their technical knowledge was great. Nagarjuna's approach to the use of FS went beyond its technical aspects, and although he started immediately helping solving the problems afflicting the office system and the website, he worked at a different level as well. In order to make sure that

8 Brian is the FSF India member who is responsible of all the information system of the office and the technical aspects of the website and their implementation by IntSys. He is 19 and is managing all alone a system of high complexity, political more than technical as is evident at that point.

the staff and the volunteers working in the WSF office understood the reason to use FS instead of proprietary software (PS), and in order to smooth the dissatisfaction created by the complexities of the new system, Nagarjuna designed a presentation and gathered all personnel to introduce everyone to the ethics of FS. His approach had a central pillar, education.⁹ He proposed¹⁰ to oppose the current dominating paradigm of PS with Swatantra Software (SS).

He defined FS and SS as synonymous but he stressed the need to use a concept dear to Indian activists.¹¹ He explained what software was and why to it applied different conditions than to material goods when it came to define the limits of its use and commercialisation. SS is not a commodity but knowledge¹²: this is, Nagarjuna claimed, the main difference to PS. As a consequence, with SS copying is not illegal or restricted; it is, in fact, encouraged. Knowledge creation is based on sharing; so software must also be based on sharing. Nagarjuna made a distinction between those who wrote code/software in the two different dimensions of SS and PS: “In SS, the hackers are like poets, who, as soon as they write a small piece of ‘verse’, look for ‘listeners’. In PS, software engineers sign a contract when they join a company, that the code that they produce will be the exclusive property of the employer and they disown all the rights”. The effect of the presentation on the audience was enlightening. When Nagarjuna asked who discovered the theory of relativity everyone could produce an immediate answer, but to the question who wrote MS Office, the silence was complete. In SS all the authors, poets or hackers, have a name. Moreover, in SS “the users are participants, and they have a role to play”. They can test the software, report bugs and fix them as well, or adapt the software they use to their needs and then show their creation to others. Nagarjuna explained that “PS thrives on the ignorance of their users (properly called customers or clients). SS is technology shaped by community and belongs to them. PS is made by a company and belongs to the company”.

The core of Nagarjuna’s presentation was articulated around the four freedoms of FS: “Freedom to run the program for any purpose; freedom to study how the program works; freedom to redistribute the copies; freedom to improve the program”.¹³ Free doesn’t mean free of charge: “FS is a matter of liberty not price” (Stallman quoted in Nagarjuna’s presentation).¹⁴ The rights and freedom of FS users are protected by the GNU Public License (GPL), stressing the link between knowledge, software, rights,

9 “It is good to use free software, and it is good to teach people about the philosophy of free software. To do the utmost good (in this area) one needs to do both”, Richard Stallman (personal communication).

10 The presentation, that lasted almost one hour, had 49 slides. All references in this paragraph are to the text of those slides unless otherwise indicated.

11 Swatantra in Hindi means roughly ‘following one’s own way’.

12 Nagarjuna insists that “we should treat software as scientific knowledge”.

13 For a thorough discussion of these freedoms see The Free Software Definition on the FSF website, (www.fsf.org).

14 See www.fsf.org/philosophy, and on an interesting and coherent extension of Stallman message see Lohr (2004). In this article the author builds a chain of similitude that goes from free software to free speech to free press; a Tocquevillian approach to the issues discussed is immediately evident and requires further investigation, see http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/toc_indx.html.

patents and licenses.¹⁵ The crucial message was that the right to free speech must be ensured to everyone, whereas proprietary software limited drastically the number of operations that users can do on and with the software they bought. As a consequence, software is in relation to knowledge what speech is in relation to knowledge. Software is knowledge and knowledge is power, therefore control over software creates imbalances of power and intolerable limitations of the chances of citizens to access resources through informed economic, social and political actions.¹⁶

This approach to rights and to ethical issues defines what Coleman has called the *informal* political scope of the FS movement (2004). She describes, in the terms defined by Marcus and Fisher (1996), the FS movement and analyses the way in which its actions and political critique create a contrast, with the mainstream dominating one, by exposing different understanding and practices around questions of software coding, patenting and copyrights. This strategy is able to constitute a strong political critique of the established understanding and offers solid and viable alternatives.

After examining the political implications of the use of PS and the importance of using FS, Nagarjuna, moved to the technical and economic level. He showed how FS is convenient and technologically more advanced than PS. The reason for using SS were 'stability, security, virus free, open standards, scalability, good for education, economical, ethical, socially relevant'. The list was impressive and produced an intense debate in the halls of the Mumbai office in the following weeks. Finally, the message and the political reasons for the use of FS made their way between staff and volunteers. It was, however, too late to leave a durable sign in the memories of the users and it was not sufficient to erase the image that depicted GNU/Linux as inefficient, difficult, esoteric. But everyone remained fascinated by the last message in Nagarjuna's presentation: "SS is not good because it is economical, it is good because it keeps you independent and self-reliant. Even if you gain this virtues at a price, please run for them (...) SS is not owned by a company, it is a social movement and a self-organised system": these were the reasons why FS was the software of the WSF, no other choice was possible without incurring irresolvable ambiguities and contradictions.

After making this strong point, Nagarjuna went through the technical and economic reasons to prefer FS. PS often carried with it prohibitive prices, FS was free of cost and offered a valid alternative to the continuous increase in PS prices. Further, the continuing necessity to upgrade the hardware to support the increasing requirements of processor power and computer memory by new proprietary software also drove up costs on the part of the users. The possibility of choosing less demanding software was jeopardized by the *de facto* status of standard carried by applications, such as Microsoft Word or Excel. In this case, it was possible to observe a clear imposition of dominance

15 Stallman has written an illuminating paragraph in which he shows that, in the US constitution, the natural right of the author has been rejected, privileging the right to knowledge. The struggle of the FSF is in line with that of many other social movements fighting for the civil rights of citizens and directly involved in the WSF process.

16 See in particular the work by Foucault on knowledge and power (1980); and by Bourdieu on domination (1988) and (2001).

by the Microsoft Corporation over the users that greatly limited their freedom of choice regarding both software and hardware.¹⁷

The technical aspects related to stability, security, protection from attacks by viruses, openness of standards, scalability. PS proved to be of lower quality when compared to FS.¹⁸ This low quality was sustainable in the world market because of the dominant position of the software corporations and self-reinforcing standards maintained by their products. This state of affairs compromises progress in the field of software design with negative outcomes for the users. The efficiency shortcomings of corporate software production as opposed to 'open source' development, have been analysed by Raymond (2000).¹⁹ He demonstrated how a closed source code and a closed designing and development strategy did not permit timely software development. The latter would be possible if the global community of hackers could access, test, rewrite and redistribute, the software they use. At the same time security and privacy are hampered through this poor software development. For example, some software produced by corporate actors, Microsoft Internet Explorer being a case in point, presents innumerable security holes that allow for easy access to the user's computer by crackers.²⁰

These so far were the consequences of a wrong political approach to software writing and commercialisation that directly affect end users. There were also more general consequences that affect the global information society as a whole. The consequences were socio-political, economic but also environmental. The economic argument referred to the fact that a reduction in the disparities in the access to information and information management system would consequently favour a fairer competition between actors in the world market, ensuring a more even distribution of both material resources and knowledge, a more just productive and distributive global system, and a continuous progress in technical innovation not limited by monopolies. The socio-political consequence of a fairer redistribution of material and immaterial resources, Nagarjuna stressed, would help address the political disparities among those social actors who benefit from a privileged position in accessing information and those who were cut off from those resources. The environmental clause referred to the fast replacement of hardware to support the requirements of new software. Whereas machines have an average life span of eight years or more, the time of obsolescence of home and office machines was much shorter and usually calculated in three years. This created a serious

17 Most PS is linked to a specific hardware platform. The scalability of FS makes it more versatile expanding the options of the users for what concerns the choice of hardware platform.

18 A very detailed comparative study of several operating systems and their performances compared to FS has been conducted by David A. Wheeler (2005). In his study he thoroughly assesses the dimensions of market share, reliability, performance, scalability, security, total cost of ownership, and a number of non-quantifiable parameters like flexibility and innovativeness.

19 See also the work by Anita Chan (2004) on the debate about the use of free software in public administration. In this article, the author analyses the reasons of the free software movement in Peru and of its institutional allies, showing how relevant the use of free software, that can customized freely, is to state administrations and state security. Interesting as well in this context is the work by Christopher Kelty (2004).

20 Crackers are those who use their knowledge of programming to access other's computers and, sometimes, disrupt them. Improperly they are often called hackers, who instead are those who write code but do not perform intrusions or attacks to private or public machines.

environmental problem: the increasing amount of techno-waste is due to an improper use of the electronic hardware. Although some amount of scepticism remained in some of those who followed the presentation, it was clear to everyone that something important had been missed so far in the WSF process with respect to the software used.

The WSF Website and the Mumbai Office

The four domains where FS was used during the WSF process were: the office of the organizing committee, the website, the media centre and the translation system. By analysing in detail the vicissitudes of the website and the work dynamics in the office, I will highlight how a common feature acted in those domains causing major shortcomings in the way FS was understood. This seems to be related more to the social and political domain than to the technical one as opposed to a general approach shared by many (especially in the IOC) according to whom the failures related to the information system were due to technical errors. These indicated inappropriate technical choices made by humans or general faults of the equipment and it usually signified something that could be fixed with the appropriate technical knowledge.

A number of misunderstandings gave a very contradictory picture of the use of the FS in the WSF. Why was it so? I suggest that the most crucial misunderstanding was due to a non-perfect correspondence between the perception that organizers, users and FS activists had of the role of FS in the struggles for civil rights, democracy and global citizenship and their understanding of the necessity of a daily implementation of FS at the organisational level and its political implications.

The programming of the website was a major locus of contention for political and technical reasons. I will state at the outset that it proved a poorly designed strategy to entrust the development of the website to a company that had no experience in developing websites using FS. A politically aware implementation and use of FS has much more to it than merely with customer's financial remuneration. The relationship with the company in charge of the website was tumultuous since early in the process. Notwithstanding the poor quality of the service provided by the same company during the Asia Social Forum (ASF) and the conflicts generated in that context, and notwithstanding the decision taken in a meeting held in Mumbai on the 3rd of July to "discontinue our arrangement for the Website with IntSys given our experience over the past few weeks",²¹ the arrangement was finally confirmed.²² This decision produced tensions that escalated into a fierce conflict.²³

21 Message posted on the IOC mailing list.

22 In fact, not only the contract was not discontinued but a much more important contract is signed. On 2 August a new deal is offered to IntSys that replaces the one agreed in April for 18,000 rupees per year for "all HTML changes in the existing website". In this new deal the functional specifications provided by IntSys few days earlier (on 17 July and 2 August) are accepted fully and a new offer is made to IntSys: 220,000 rupees for "design and development of our website and backend database".

23 In an interview with a member of the IOC, I asked about his interpretation of the furious conflict between the Media and Communication group and Finance. His ideas were clear. It is because of the

On the 8th of August 2003 in an email to the IOC list, but with special attention to the Media and Communication group (M&C), a member noted that “the website has been down for three days, when will it be up again?” On the 20th of August the Delhi office of the WSF 2004 sent an email to the IOC providing a thorough assessment of the website. Not much is working and many documents provided to IntSys for upload are yet not online. On the 29th another IOC member wrote that she has tried for three days, to “have a look at the events registered, but (the website) was not accessible at all”. On the 1st of October the Delhi Programme office sent to all IOC members the following instructions: “Please find attached the event registration form. Fill it up and send it to us by post”. But the website received not only internal criticisms, on the 10th of October, M&C received the following email: “please forward detail as to the venue and registration and accommodation formalities plus costs for both Indians and foreigners! Getting into and finding anything on your site is not easy!” The most relevant information were not accessible on the website, but it was also not easy “getting into” the website that was most of the time down for maintenance.

Who, then, was in charge of what? Who was to blame if these dysfunctions were not fixed? On the 22nd of October Deepa²⁴ sent an email clarifying that “I deal with IntSys and [M&C] deals with the content”. It could be legitimately asked why those responsibilities were not clearly stated at an earlier stage. But something else was happening in those days. The server was going to be transferred to a more powerful installation. This process was creating further frustrations. Delhi office on the 23rd: “One would question the wisdom of switching server during the most critical part of the Programme registration. Since it seems to be going through with minimum glitches (fingers crossed) ... One of the problems we are having is that we do not know whom we should look for answers. So our frustration.” So it is not only ordinary members who were not sure about who was in charge of what, but also the Delhi office had no idea of what was happening in Mumbai.

On the 24th of October, and in direct response to the previous email, Deepa wrote to M&C. “There are some urgent issues regarding the website that need to be discussed in your group and decision taken very urgently. Right now M&C seems to have washed its hands of the website ... the site is always out of date”. The situation reached such a state that seemed to require the intervention of a specialist external to the IOC. On the 25th of October two members of the Mumbai group asked Rakesh to provide his professional advice. Rakesh consented to undertake the task to solve the problems that the website was facing. The tasks will be divided in the following way: “The content and general website responsibility will still be part of M&C. The Venue and Logistics group (V&L) will have to cooperate with Rakesh and give him all the help he needs. Also Finance.” Everything seemed clear in the minds of the IOC members: the website was showing technical problems and only an external IT professional like Rakesh could solve them.

website. During the ASF the same company produced a very poor service so people are not accepting that the same company had the contract for the WSF. In fact, even more than this, Finance knows how the company is close to the consultant who has been put in charge of the website by M&C, who at the same time is considered to be responsible for the choice of the FS solution.

24 All names in this paper are fictitious.

All the involved functional groups of the WSF process must cooperate with him. The whole process will take one week.

The following day the publisher of an activist newsletter joined the debate. “This business of ‘open space and everyone working’ means no one is responsible or contactable for any specific needs. I have been around for last 6 months volunteering my services It is extremely frustrating to just hang around in the office. ... No more meetings, just action, I think is what is needed. Fast.” According to her and to many who I interviewed during those days, it was high time that the IOC, for practical reasons, forgot this whole story of open space and FS and gave space to professionals and business oriented people who could deal with other business oriented people (the manager of IntSys) and solve the problems that were affecting the WSF process in Mumbai.

Accountability, transparency, responsibility. These were the main issues affecting the website and many other aspects of the WSF 2004. On the basis of the agreement negotiated with Deepa and some members of V&L, Rakesh started with energy and good spirit. However, he soon realized that things were different from what he expected. On the 27th of October he sent an email to the IOC in which he described what he found. “I have not as yet to date seen such gross negligence in a system. (...) Given the date of the conference and the date today, as well as the arrogance in the face of absolute incompetence, as displayed by IntSys and related entities, is a cause of grave concern.” What he meant by ‘related entities’ will become clear in a following email reported below. What seemed to be a trivial problem risked instead to jeopardize the entire event. The technical explanation did not convince him anymore. After few more days into the process Rakesh finally decided to declare all his findings. On the 31st of October he sent his ‘*j’accuse*’. This letter exposed the level of conflict that the WSF India was able to make explode first, and control subsequently, and which were the issues that would detonate such apparently irreconcilable conflicts. He stated

that the work (...) has been completed (...) in 6 working days, despite lacunae severe enough to initiate civil and criminal prosecution (...) What are you there for? Who is accountable? Most importantly, is any one of you competent or even trivially qualified, given the total absence of any professionalism, crony corruption and the least of it is plain incompetency in any manner whatsoever to undertake a task of this magnitude? (...) The staff there is working under absurd conditions! (...) What is the total travel and ALL related expenditure of all the key personnel? (...) BEFORE any OTHER disaster of this magnitude happens – and there are at least several dozen possibilities. Choose one – Perhaps a STAMPEDE. (...). If this is not done (“it’s too late”, “you find me another person”, “it’s the process” and yes of course lets move him/her to another committee, split up the committee and such other balderdash are nonsense. J’ ACCUSE”

Rakesh’s intervention²⁵ proved almost irrelevant: problems with the server and the website were continuous.²⁶ Finally the server was moved on the weekend between the

25 Only one email is sent in reply to IOC list by a member who wonders what is Rakesh talking about, and alleging that “something rotten smells in Mumbai”. All the others must know what Rakesh is talking about.

26 On the 16th of November one of the coordinators of the Mobilisation Groups complained that as the previous week the server is down and he couldn’t send the invitation for the meeting of his group. On the 18th the communication groups sent two emails regarding the website. The first to Brian, details

5th and the 7th of December. This painful operation did not have any substantial influence on the performance of the website. In the evaluation meeting held in Mumbai on the 28-29th of February, a member of V&L in her report, provided a clear picture of the extent to which the unreliability of the website caused major dysfunctions in the WSF process. She focused on the effects on the accommodation part of the website.

Wrong calculation of monies to be sent by delegates for booking of room/rooms; duplication of ID numbers; missing data; receiving of blank forms after input from various individuals from across the world; mess up in data transfer: part of the data sent without any prior intimation to original website (...); Double code on accommodation because of which while other sites received information/emails, accommodation did not; Back end of exhibition stalls was a big mess. The stall were not even numbered sequentially. after several attempts at persuading IntSys to do the needful it was decided that the data be manually handled. (...) That the website did not crash and the Media Centre worked was a result of WSF efforts under the supervision (...) of FSF (...). Their commitment and hard work enabled the 'bugged' website to remain functional despite the consistent recurrence of many avoidable problems and the presence of IntSys.

From the political point of view, the choice of the specific company that was in charge of the development of the website was consistently criticized. It would have been a wiser solution, it was maintained by many members of the IOC,²⁷ either to choose a more professional company committed to FS or to have the staff working on the website in the WSF office with, if necessary, one coordinator (Dr. Nagarjuna could have played such a role) to supervise the most critical aspects of the payment gateway and the registration and accommodation databases. This would have allowed the publication in real time of all material needed, better content management with a consistent amount of information readily available in the website for the hundreds of thousands of users around the world, it would have also allowed multilingual translation of the content that was mainly in English and, moreover, this arrangement would have avoided furious political fights within the IOC and would have built on the previous experience of the ASF where the same problems were faced. It is not easy to rewind the film to understand when these lacunae were generated in order to assess the technical origin or again the political causes. When the 'severe lacunae' of the website became visible to anyone it was already impossible to stop the vicious cycle that was generated by the recursive pattern of technical and political motivations and causes. Until the end, the problems of the website were dealt with a great amount of improvisation, contingent patching and severely flawed approach by all the parties involved. This generated a deployment of material and human resources not consistent with what stated in the WSF Charter of Principles. Moreover, severe political and technical misjudgments generated grave deterioration of personal relations and produced an atmosphere of suspicion that

some of the problems with the free lancer registration form: "1. Its not an individual reg. form; 2. the deadline has not been given; 3. translation – no method of choosing English as an option; 4. Areas of interest – tick box option required – if I want to select more than one; 5. Use of media centre – if I select NO option – then the rest of media centre options should get disabled; 6. A lot of options are not numbered; 7. website is an compulsory option; 8. Visa letter – if I select NO option – then the rest of the options should get disabled." And this is only one registration form.

- 27 In the 10 and a half months I spent in India I had the chance to discuss extensively this subject with many of the actors involved from all sides, IOC members, users of the website, developers and volunteers.

undermined the possibility of having a fully efficient website and a healthy work environment.

Few days after Rakesh's email, one of the coordinators of the Finance group resigned stating that his decision was due to the lack of accountability for what concerned the website. From this moment on, the decision not to tackle with strong commitment the serious malfunctioning of the website and the already aggravating situation in the Mumbai office made the two explode at the same time by exposing the intertwined nature of those confrontations and their direct link with the system of information management chosen by the WSF 2004. Technical and political issues converged to create one greater problem that shook the very foundations of the WSF in Mumbai, and how, at the same time, the crisis represented a fully creative moment. However, the distress caused by these recurring crises could have been reduced if a set of collectively negotiated guidelines had been defined and periodically renegotiated by all members involved in the running of the WSF office.

The Open Office

The office of the WSF in Mumbai was an exciting experiment in openness. The doors of the different sections were always open as were the external doors. It did not have a very clear hierarchical structure²⁸ or specific people to refer to for task distribution or reporting of work done, but very loose coordination and that, as well, changing constantly. Late afternoons the atmosphere was surreal with an average of 50 or 60 people in the vast central meeting area and in the slightly more demarcated office space doing anything from socializing to green room politics to any other 'normal' office task. In the office there were at the highest peak of the workload, 37 computers running GNU/Linux. Three people of the FSF India were in charge of administering the system. The same people were handling the servers; two of them were contributing to the publication of the website. One volunteer from the Czech Republic joined the group later to contribute his precious programming skills.

The openness of the office and the FS were meant to give to the people involved in the organisation of the WSF 2004 a glance of what 'another world' could look like. A 'horizontal' world, where hierarchies were not present and where the coordination of the work was done collectively and the implementation was orchestrated by all the actors involved in the organisational process; a world where social borders were permeable

28 However, there was a vertical separation between political and operational tasks and actors coordinating those tasks. Power struggles were evident at all levels of this hierarchy: at the political level, at the managerial level and at the staff level. Later in the process it became clear that there was also a clear imbalance of power between those who were in charge of the system and those who operated it. But other issues also became evident. The disillusion on the open office that was shaking all the members of the staff and all the volunteers of the office, made them realize that other positions were subjected to a hierarchical articulation. A vast number of young boys were employed to put registration forms into envelopes. Two office runners took care of all minion tasks. The cook and her family spent their time in the kitchen and rarely talk to the others.

and continuously crossed generating complex processes of creative hybridisation; a world where the borders between work and leisure were not strictly drawn.

But the Mumbai office of the WSF, gave also a clear idea of what should not happen in a free world. A series of shortcomings were due to inexperience, improvisation at the organisational and coordination levels, lack of thorough consideration of the political aspects involved in the management of an open office and in the use of FS. This open process, which was experimented with in Mumbai, came with almost no documentation attached. The management of the system caused slowness and innumerable sudden halts to normal work as documented above. Most important of all: GNU/Linux was a new system for almost everyone in the office. No consistent training was provided to show its potentialities and only one presentation was given by Dr. Nagarjuna to the staff of the office. All interventions of the technicians of the FSF were contingent and related to troubleshooting. This never solved the dynamics of dependence between users and technical staff.²⁹ At the origin of the mistakes mentioned was the lack of coordination at the level of system projecting and realization, the miscalculation of the relevance of the software in the daily routine of an office, and the fundamental misjudgment made at office coordination level (and at the IOC level) to consider the project and management of the system a technical issue.

When there was the chance to discuss all these issues, there were strong objections to discuss the GNU/Linux related problems that were put forward by some IOC members at the general meeting the 3rd of November in Mumbai. That meeting could have been an important moment to try and address politically and technically the problems related to office and website management and to avoid many future problems. The opportunity was missed and in the following weeks things continued to be dealt with on an emergency basis with all the consequences that this comporta. Moreover, the accusations voiced by Rakesh provoked a sudden worsening in the relationships, already tense, between coordinators of groups, coordinators of the office, staff and volunteers.

Anuj's Resignations

On the 7th of November, one of the coordinators of Finance resigns. Anuj's resignations shook the process further. These were difficult weeks of the process in Mumbai. The stress was growing day after day, the differences between actors became more and more obvious and some dysfunctions were simply too important not to oblige people to take

29 From an interview with a member of staff : "I got used to the basic Linux features pretty soon...the only problems that I always faced was with the printer. In fact, everyone in the office seemed to be having the same problems, and at that time all the technical help that we had gave some technical explanation which I could never understand...solved the problem in a jiffy only to have it messed up again in half an hour. At that time I thought it was because Linux is new...plus these guys must be recently trained in it...but they have not been trained to communicate with the user. Their attitude always gave the vibes that the problem was too small to bother them and that we were a dumb lot to solve it ourselves. The natural reaction was that the staff shifted from being polite and understanding to rude and bullying the technical help".

position. Rakesh denounced in his email racketing, corruption, incompetence, lack of accountability, lack of democratic practices, political struggles, hierarchies not exposed: the WSF office seemed to be the place where all the issues that the WSF was fighting against were concentrated. These are the most important extracts from Anuj's resignation email:

My resignation is to do with the continuous, perpetual incompetence of some IOC members in Mumbai and protection of it by lobbying, manipulation etc by some other ioc members. (...) I want to state here that it is Bhopal's unaccountable, arrogant and boastful ways, unfortunately protected by some IOC members who has contributed to a large extent for the present mess in the office, website and communication group crisis. (...) This applies to issues raised by Rakesh too. Are we willing to fix responsibility and hold each other accountable or we close our ranks to protect falsehood is the question that "we the dreamers of another world" need to answer.

Arun from Delhi writes a long email that reflects on the deep problems within the WSF process, that this crisis exposed.

(...) If we insist upon a pluralist and inclusive culture in the WSF, there is a price all of us have to pay for it. (...) The WSF was not meant to be a "project" or an "event". It was meant to be something much beyond that -- a vision, a dream. You can opt out of a project, but can you opt out of a vision? (...) First, we are aware that in a process such as the WSF nobody is indispensable, but the participation of everybody is critical -- even crucial. (...) Third, (...) do we need to allow things to reach crisis proportions before we react by taking precipitate actions and inflexible positions? (...) I am aware that all differences that we have within us do not relate to the WSF office. But it is also true that the flash point in these differences at the moment appears to be the office and its functioning.

It was in moments of crisis like this one that the most important reflections are made and the longest leaps in such processes are taken.³⁰ It is true that crises could end up destroying the process forever, but strong processes are, in fact, reinforced by crises. This is the case of the WSF India. The letter reported above is one of the most important documents produced during these days and clearly defines the complex framework of the WSF process in India. This won't be the end of the negotiations opened by this crisis but it starts an open and deep process of conflict resolution that will last a full week. On the 13th of November Anuj responded to the exhortations of many IOC members withdrawing his resignations and reporting back on the meeting that the Mumbai based IOC members had that morning. At that meeting many important dynamics took place and the same nature of the meeting was completely different from every other meeting of the WSF process. For the first and only time there was a call to have a closed meeting. The motivations were reported in the minutes of the meeting: "Since this meeting would discuss the resignation of one of the IOC members it would be confined only to IOC members". The first item of the agenda was Anuj's statement. In the minutes the statement was reported in the following way: "he pointed out that he had three reasons for his resignations, namely, problems with office functioning, website and M&C group".

A full restructuring of the office takes place during that meeting, with many new people getting involved, and others changing roles. The overall changes in the structure of the office involved the relations between coordinators of the office and coordinators of the

30 See Caruso (2004).

Functional groups and their new task in the office. All this restructuring was meant to reformulate the conflict between Finance and M&C. However, one of the coordinators of the M&C group makes clear that “he has been involved in running the office from May onwards and he would continue in that capacity although he would work with the team of IOC members who had offered to devote time in the office”.

These are not the most important outcomes of that meeting. A new important issue, latent so far, has been exposed in its most evidently incoherent way with the vision of the WSF, but much more in line with some of the actor’s belief on human behaviour and human resources management. The first point highlighted by Deepa made reference to “some complaint regarding the content and wording of communication that goes out of the WSF mailbox. She therefore proposed that in future when office staff responds to emails a copy should automatically be marked to Arun for reference so that some amount of monitoring from our end can be carried out”. Moreover, “some guideline on protocol when receiving phone calls should also be laid out for the office staff”. The discussion then escalated further: “There was some discussion on the email of [two volunteers] to the IOC list serve and it was felt that although the staff should have certain autonomy in office functioning that does not preclude office discipline. Members decided that when the steering group on office functioning meets it should also draft guidelines of functioning of office staff including disciplinary issues”. After exhausting the current item of the agenda the following was tackled: the website.³¹

An important chapter of the WSF process closed with that meeting. It is likely that those conflicts will reappear at the next opportunity. However, it is also likely that this continuous negotiation process, as also maintained by some in their attempts to make Anuj withdraw his resignations, will build a net of trust that will help move beyond the present crises, perhaps toward other and creative crises along the path. Rakesh’s accusations about the treatment to the staff has not been solved or not even negotiated during that process. This opened a deep fracture in the office dynamics between the next group of coordinators and the staff. The staff resented the exclusion from the meeting, and resented even more the reference to disciplinary codes. The mention made by Deepa about the communication protocols was a clear attack towards one particular member of the office staff. In a month’s time the accusations about her behaviour translated into an official letter sent by one of the coordinators of the office to Anupama, an office associate. In Anuj’s letter Anupama’s behaviour was described as unprofessional, not nice and unpolite behaviour and was strongly sanctioned. In that letter Anuj asked for a written reply for the same day in response to the letter from one of the auditors. In that other letter it was mentioned that Anupama demonstrated a strong bias towards one of the contractors. In the letter therefore was provocatively asked to Anupama: “whose side are you on?” The response to that letter was a joint staff action against the coordination of the office. On the 9th of December a petition was circulated to stop the “systematic harassment” against Anupama. The text of the petition

31 From the Meeting minutes: “Naresh pointed out that (...) Rakesh’s evaluation of the website was that it was professionally poorly designed with several structural problems. In addition to limitations in software design the hardware inputs of the website were also too low for the load we were carrying. (...) It was decided to invite Dr. Nagarjuna (...) to advise us.”

letter deserves thorough attention because it exposed some fundamental issues regarding the politics of the workplace in the WSF India office in Mumbai.

The real responsibility of dealing with issues concerning the entire office has been lost in the midst of the continuous jugglery of the responsibility for office functioning. (...) we need clarification on the following: a) who is being appointed, b) how have they being appointed, c) what is the scope of their work. (...) It is only because of our strong belief in what the WSF stands for that the staff has never resorted to expressing concerns in such an explicit manner. However, it is evident that this sort of harassment that we undergo is contrary to all the principles of the WSF. We demand an immediate stop of the systematic harassment and also an explanation for the above. In absence of an immediate and appropriate response, we would be forced to take up the employment practices of the WSF 2004 with the entire IGC, IWC, IOC, BOC, IC and the funders of the WSF 2004.³²

After signing the petition we all took part in a meeting with the coordinator of the office on the 10th of December. The main issue highlighted was that of personal accountability. IOC had severe difficulties in allocating resources and individuals to the right place. Anuj said that this is “part of the process”. Appointments were made by raising hands in meetings and have nothing to do with personal skills for specific tasks. But, according to him, the question of the office was different: in this case management in the office and accountability were tackled in a much more serious way, and in what he called “a much more professional manner”. A clear distinction between the office (the operational department) and the political organisation, the IOC, was illustrated by Anuj. But other fractures started to take place in the office as a consequence of the new divisions of roles, responsibilities and blames.

On the 13th of December some of the members of the staff had, over lunch, an interesting conversation about the people who were in charge of fixing the technical aspects of the office information system. Many felt that they could keep the staff on their toes because they could fix the computers. No one understood anything of what they did when they pretended they were repairing something and they, when asked, explained things in a very cursory way and with an incredible show of technical terms obscure to almost everyone. All machines were not working properly, the system was being redesigned in those days (the servers were shifted the previous weekend). The feeling of frustration was high, the new efficiency, business-like, professional approach started creating problems. These feelings added up to those caused by the other conflicts between staff and management, between the different people involved in the management of the office and between them and the IOC. The tension seemed at times unbearable in the office.

On the 18th of December registration, accommodation, backend, email accounts didn't work yet. The staff wandered in the office, trying to do their best, the technicians worked hard to do something, everyone mentioned Dr Nagarjuna like the saviour, and waited for him to come. Some general consideration were made on the relative power that technical people had in the office. However, not much could be discussed around this topic: whenever this conversation started everyone realized that this could create problems for at least one of the techies: he was a friend of most of the staff, his position

32 IGC (Indian General Council), IWC (Indian Working Council), IC (International Council), BOC (Brazilian Organising Committee).

was not easy, he was young, he did not deserve more problems than he had. One of technicians told the staff that they should relax and enjoy the fact that if the system was down they were allowed not to work, they could rest, but they were still paid. Someone tried to explain that the mentality in that office was different, but with not much conviction: doubts were starting clotting in the minds of many: if the malfunctioning of the system was a problem linked to what Rakesh had denounced, why should the staff not be happy to relieve themselves from work?

On the 26th of December all the issues of the office and the confrontation between M&C and Finance are taken to the extreme level from the perspective of this article. This seemed to be the obvious outcome of two months of draining conflicts in the office all centred on the website and on the FS used in the office. In my notes I reported a conversation with one of the people in charge of the office system: “He says that there was a very heated meeting about the management of the office and the media centre at the venue. The FSF has received attacks from many sides because of all the problems we had at the office with computers and servers and because of the website. Finance asks with strong voice that we revert to Windows. They said that with Windows we wouldn’t have had technical problems and confrontations between those sustaining FS and those opposing the lack of accountability and the shameful incompetence of the people who were implementing those systems”. The attack was not reiterated and the obstructionism did not lead to a full reformulation of the WSF stand on information management. The media centre ran on Gnoware (a distribution of the GNU/Linux operating system prepared by the FSF India for the WFS) and was a major success.

Conclusion: The Lessons Learnt

The analysis of the use of FS in the WSF 2004 exposed some incongruence in the articulation of the claims by the IOC and those of the FS activists for what concerned the use of FS in the WSF 2004. Moreover, I showed that the conflicts exploded in the office were also centred on conflicting understanding of the role of technology in civil society organisational setups and the political nature of the decisions taken with respect to it. Moreover, the incommensurable nature of the efficiency and open space discourses illustrated one of the major inconsistencies in the daily practice of the WSF 2004 with the principles of the WSF and the quality of the conflicts that built on the unresolved nature of those ambiguities. In the following paragraphs I will summarize the findings of the article.

In the office, roles and responsibilities were never clear, they used to move from people to people, tasks were never consistently assigned. Due to this, the coordination was often not efficient and caused frustration, inefficiency, and waste of human and material resources as voiced by many IOC and staff members. Although the main discussions related to software and information technology were informed by efficiency arguments, the implementation of the different information system designs never really responded to the demands of the ‘efficiency requirements’. Insofar the efficiency argument was the *leitmotiv* of the discourse on system management in the WSF 2004, it exposed the necessity to assess deeply what are the consequences of this discourse when applied to a

politically defined environment like the WSF. It was in fact the case that the efficiency argument became too often the way to displace crucial discussions on the political reasons of the failures observed.

At the same time, when the efficiency argument was used, the open space argument was opposed. This argument maintained that the WSF is an open space where it is difficult to impose rules and where other principles must inform the work mentality other than the efficiency one. All sorts of mismanagements, wastes, frustrations, and political dynamics were explained as the colours of the beautiful rainbow that is the WSF. It will be noted here that the concept of open space is ambiguous and difficult to define, yet it has served successfully the purpose of resolving many conflicts in the WSF 2004 process.³³

Building on the issues discussed so far, it is possible to draw some important lessons. The technical and the organisational aspects were not closely articulated, giving to the technical staff of the organisation the status of service providers. Also, the staff of the FSF were never really put in the condition to provide an efficient system. A well planned modular system should have been put in place since the beginning with a solid core that would have allowed adding workstations and further servers at any stage without the need to rethink the whole structure when some changes needed to be implemented. This would have avoided the several patches applied to the system in conditions of stress, lack of time and pressing necessity.

Notwithstanding the many technical issues reported above, the commitment and the passion of any single person working in the office, from the coordinators to the technical staff of the FSF, the desk officers, and the volunteers have made the WSF 2004 an exhilarating experience and have left everyone with the feeling of having been part of an extraordinary experience. These passion and commitment solved every problem whenever they occurred. Yet passion and commitment can be sustained only for limited periods and did not help to avoid considerable frustration and emotional distress.

In some circumstances differences tend to radicalise, as happens in moments of stress as those that precede important events such as the WSF. This happened in Mumbai for what concerns the office management and the website development. Whose responsibility was it? This question bears scarce relevance in the present context. What could have been done to coordinate in advance all the energies involved in the different processes to avoid the failures and to maximize the outcomes of an overall extremely inspiring experiment of FS application? It is on this question that I will put forward few suggestions built on the case study analysed here.

First, there is a political and strategic necessity to keep the use of technology and political activism very close, in global civil society organisational setups. In the WSF there was a wide gap between these two aspects: this caused ambiguities, frustrations and unlikely hybrids between corporate and activist mentality, between efficiency oriented and the 'open space' discourses.

33 See, for instance, Caruso (2004).

Second, careful attention should be paid to the designing processes of the organisational structures and the systems to process the information produced within them and exchanged with the outside. System design is not merely a technical issue but involves important political aspects as claimed by the activist of the FS movement.

Third, together with a politically informed technical design of the open office, a set of flexible guidelines must be consensually agreed in order to help smooth the process of interpersonal and intercultural negotiation in moments of acute stress and in contexts of crucial information management. Such a set of guidelines and organisational precautions should be carefully implemented along with an ongoing process of assessment of the openness and inclusiveness of the system in its daily performance to make sure that all the power dynamics at play could be timely exposed and dealt with appropriately, carefully avoiding to rubric them as mere technical issues. The mentioned guiding principles are not strict rules that could risk jeopardizing the openness of the process and the freedom within the organisational space: instead they will make sure that the process keeps its openness against the tension to factional behaviour and power dynamics that can be often observed in organisational processes like the WSF.

The openness and inclusiveness of FS in an organisational setup like the WSF is not inherent or achieved if simply stated. The complexity of the personal, social and political relations involved in the access and use of information and information technology creates barriers that limit openness sensibly hampering the perception of the social and political relevance and of the difference between FS and PS as in the case analysed here. To fulfil its promises, to help build a more aware and empowered global citizenship, FS needs to be implemented with a thorough attention to its political implications and along with a system of guidelines that enhance its role in global civil society. Otherwise, the risk of the trend towards FS to be reverted as a consequence of the market position regained by PS is always present. Moreover, it is necessary to reinforce the political and ethical meaning of the daily use of this technical instrument to avoid the hijacking of the FS message by the “efficiency” discourse that informs PS. Surprisingly, as observed in the case study, the efficiency discourse seems to be linked not so much to the environment where the technology is used but to technology itself. As often declared, in the WSF process there was a diffused belief that software should be considered, because of his technical nature, merely deserving technical attention.

The dedication and the commitment of all the people involved at the organisational, technical and political levels of the WSF can get wasted if poor political decision making processes are associated with that commitment. Weak and generally unaccountable outcomes, poor interpersonal and intercultural management, obtuse and illegitimate beliefs that simply stating openness in the organisational setup would magically open gates and tumble fences are also counter-productive. These irresponsible and often naïve practices had too often brought the whole process into unconstructive chaos and had handed it to usual hegemonic practices (that happily proliferate in the undefined territory of the gentlemen’s agreements).³⁴ The lessons learnt in Mumbai could help start a process of thorough revision of the practices and perceptions related to the domain of the information technology used in the WSF

34 See Caruso (2004).

context and help limit the shortcomings observed in the Mumbai experiment. Moreover, the important lessons learnt in Mumbai could offer important material for reflection to those organisations of global civil society that decide to engage in the struggle for FS by implementing FS information systems in their organisational setups.

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