The Monthly GNU Column

Brave GNU World

But before we go into politics, let's introduce one project: UDPKIT [5] by Sylvain Nahas from France. UDPKIT offers two command line tools that allow you to use IP/UDP to transmit strings across a network.

Welcome to another issue of the Brave GNU World. This issue focuses on current political events, looking into current affairs that might otherwise remain unnoticed by many readers, as they hardly receive the mass media attention they deserve.

BY GEORG C.F. GREVE

UDPKIT

For those of you who are not familiar with networking, let's quickly review of some basic networking principles. The two most popular data transmission protocols on networks are TCP and UDP.

The Transmission Control Protocol (TCP) is a connection-oriented protocol that creates and uses a dedicated link between two endpoints, before terminating the connection. This protocol's major advantage is its reliability, as it provides re-transmission facilities in case of transmission problems.

The User Datagram Protocol (UDP) is a connectionless protocol. Data transmitted by UDP can be read by any number of recipients, but UDP does not allow you to check if a transmission has actually reached any of them.

This obviously makes the protocol less reliable, but it has its advantages in some situations. One of the machines in Sylvain Nahas' internal network does not have a monitor or keyboard, for example. Although the machine is only powered up occasionally, Sylvain needs to ensure that it is shut down, whenever he shuts down his regular desktop machine.

Using UDPKIT, his regular machine can post a message to the network before shutting down. If the other machine is alive, it will see the message and also shut down. Otherwise, the message just disappears into the void.

Let's look at a similar scenario using TCP. Imagine that the desktop machine tries to initiate a connection to the other machine. If the machine is available, there should be no major differences. But if the other machine is down, the desktop will wait for a while for the other machine to reply.

UDPKIT is useful where you want to transmit a message, but are not interested in feedback from the recipients. This is similar to radio transmissions, where there is no way of knowing who, if anyone, has heard your message.

The project was initiated on an idea by a radio amateur who searched a French Debian list but couldn't find a suitable tool. Written in ISO C, UDPKIT reflects the classical Unix paradigm, providing two powerful tools that can be used on the command line or within shell scripts. This is the project's major advantage, as the author sees it.

UPDKIT was released under the GNU General Public License, and the current 0.6 version is already quite stable. Futur plans are to internationalize the project, implement CRC checksums and provide a Debian package.

Help with all these tasks and more testing in particular is very welcome.

World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

Most of you will have read about the earth summit, the "UN Conference on Environment and Development", commonly known simply as the Rio-Conference. The "World Summit on the Information Society" (WSIS) [6], which is currently looking into defining the structures of the global knowledge and information society, is less well-known.

Figure 1: Part of the German delegation in Paris. (Left to right) Georg Greve, Michael Leibrandt (Ministry of Economy and Labour), Christian Maler (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and Diermar Plesse (Ministry of Economy and Labour)
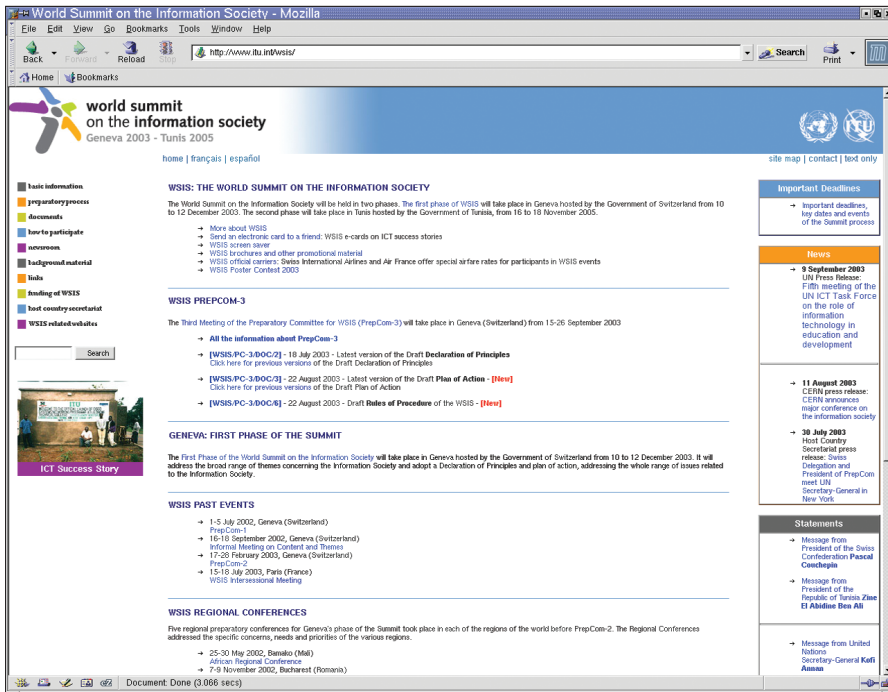
Figure 2: World Summit on the Information Society homepage

Issues of controlling, accessing, and disseminating knowledge will essentially shape the future of human society. Although people may rightly object that these questions are secondary while basic requirements, such as food or medicine, cannot be guaranteed, the issue will become crucial as soon these prerequisites are fulfilled.

Access to knowledge can sometimes help fulfill basic demands. Or as Louise Szente from Africa said: "Woe is the life of the modern day student living in 'Darkest Africa' for obviously we are still being kept in the slave quarters of the world. Harsh words? My friends, try and live in a society where such Acts as the Intellectual Property Acts of the world impede your advancement in life."

This is a quote from a study by Prof. Alan Story, which was written for the Commission on Intellectual Property Rights [7]. The idea behind the commission originated in the UK Government's white paper, "Eliminating World Poverty: Making Globalisation Work for the Poor", with the aim of investigating central issues facing developing and least-developed countries.

Prof. Alan Story's study was the starting point of a round table discussion on "Copyright, Software and the Internet". If you are interested in the details, the minutes of the workshops, the studies and the full report are available online on the Commission's web site. [7]

The aim is to fix some of the visions and rules of the information and knowledge society within a global context by 2005. Deviating from that consensus later on national level may become very hard, so the after effects of this summit will be with us for some time.

The WSIS is split into two phases. The first will take place in Geneva, December 10 - 12 2003. The second phase in Tunis, from November 16 - 18 2005. Two preparatory conferences ("PrepComs"), have taken place to pave the way for the Geneva summit. The final preparatory conference (PrepCom-3) will take place September 15 - 26, in Geneva.

Between these conferences there are also working conferences, so-called "intersessional meetings", to handle major documentation work. The last of these intersessional meetings took place July 15 - 18 in Paris, hosted by the UNESCO, with the aim of providing a more compact, clear and concise form of documentation, as many comments and addendums had begun to impact its readability.

As a United Nations event, only governments are admitted to the WSIS and the connected conferences as fully accredited participants, although representatives of trade and industry play an important role in some government delegations. In highly complex areas requiring a lot of specific knowledge, large corporations typically have a lot of freedom to implement their policies.

One internal source informed us that the U.S. delegation to another UN forum, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), regularly includes a number of Microsoft representatives.

Small and medium-sized enterprises can only exert a limited amount of influence through industrial lobbies where larger companies again hold sway.

So-called civil societies are the third leg of the political process. Generally, this term includes all non-government organizations that influence or express public opinion to a large extent. These include churches, unions, schools, foundations, and clubs. Organizations like Greenpeace, the WWF, and also the Free Software Foundation (FSF) are typical examples of civil societies.

Within the UN hierarchy, civil societies traditionally have a difficult position. Civil societies were even ousted from the conference room at some of the WSIS preparatory conferences, preventing them from even listening to the considerations that were to shape the information age. Although, in retrospect, most governments agree that this was a mistake.

But it is difficult to do justice to the civil societies, as they still do not have the right to participate in important discussions on some issues. In Paris, all the civil societies were allowed 30 minutes of the morning session to address the delegates, for instance. This allows for general comments, but is only of limited use for more substantial discussions.

One of the governments in favor of better representation for civil societies is the German government, which is represented by the Ministry of the Economy and Labor (BMWA) in the WSIS process.

When planning the meetings it was agreed to have not only representatives from trade and industry – in this case Siemens' Dr. Rainer Händel to represent BITKOM – but also to add a representative of the German civil societies to the German government's delegation for Paris.

The coordinating body of German civil societies for WSIS then drew up a

ranked list of candidates for the German delegation with the mandate of the coordinating body. And in the end, Georg Greve, the President of the FSF Europe – and the author of this column – was admitted to the German delegation. [8]

This makes Germany one of the few countries (Switzerland and Denmark are the others), that formally include civil societies in the WSIS process.

Intersessional Meeting in Paris

Any attempt to give a detailed report of the events at the intersessional meeting is definitely beyond the scope of this column. But let's at least look at some of the most crucial discussion topics.

Communication Rights?

One of the most hotly debated questions was that of "Communication Rights" or even a "Right to Communicate". Many countries – for instance Egypt, China or the U.S.A. – vociferously opposed a draft on this right. Only Brazil really proposed an explicit discussion on communication rights.

Those countries opposing the draft mostly argued that such a right was not defined anywhere, and the WSIS was not equipped to define new human rights.

Unfortunately, they do not seem to have understood that information technology may infringe on some rights, even though you may still have them on paper.

An example of this is the European Copyright Directive (EUCD), and its equivalent in the U.S., the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), both of which derive from the World Trade Organization (WTO) TRIPS agreement, which envisages some fair use rights. [9]

As it has now become an offense to cross certain lines – usually referred to as "technical protection measures", technology providers have been empowered to take control over previously public spaces and remove them from the control of democratic legislation.

The DMCA, for instance, provided the grounds for censorship of web sites that criticized the Scientology movement, as the information provided on these sites was subject to technical protection measures, and acquiring it was thus in violation of the DMCA. To put it bluntly,

the DMCA and EUCD both replace democracy by company-controlled technocracy in essential areas of public life.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) [10] states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

As these rights are increasingly dependent on control over media, they are as much in danger of becoming hollow as Article 27, which assures every human being the right to participate in cultural life.

A discussion on communication rights would therefore not have meant defining new rights, but rather protecting existing rights from technocratic erosion.

Industrial Information Control

The area of industrial information control, usually referred to as "intellectual property" was grounds for lots of discussion. Many sides – especially the USA, but also the German Ministry of Justice at the co-ordination meetings before Paris – demanded that this area be kept out of the WSIS entirely, since it is dealt with by other organizations, specifically WIPO and WTO. That would mean the failure of the WSIS.

These questions cannot be separated, as the question of control knowledge and information is obviously central to a knowledge and information society.

Leaving the Internet aside, it is obvious that the legislation in this area needs reworking. Rather than pursuing the interests of the rights holders in trade and industry, we should be looking to uphold the rights of artists, authors and society as a whole – especially in developing and least-developed countries. Failure to do so will only aggravate the social divide between poor and rich. And it will become even more pronounced in financially stronger countries.

These are only two of the topics that were discussed. In case you're interested, there is a more detailed debriefing about the events and political currents during the intersessional meeting in Paris available on the FSF Europe web page. [11]

You are needed

As individuals within a society, we cannot rely on other people to deal with these issues, if we remain inactive ourselves. Organizations active in this area require help in lots of ways – even if it is "just" by showing public support.

A good contact point for the FSF Europe is the discussion list. [12] If you would like to get directly involved in the WSIS process, more information is available at [13].

This work also depends on funding – if only for travel expenses, which many activists pay themselves. As regards my trip to Paris, I would like thank the Linux-Verband, which covered most of the travel expenses, as well as the Böll-Foundation, which also substantially contributed.

Enough

I would like to encourage everyone to get in touch with comments, questions and ideas to the usual address. [1].

INFO

[1] Send ideas, comments and questions to: *column@brave-gnu-world.org*

[2] Home page of the GNU Project: *http://www.gnu.org/*

[3] Home page of Georg's Brave GNU World: *http://brave-gnu-world.org*

[4] "We run GNU" initiative: *http://www.gnu.org/brave-gnu-world/rungnu/rungnu.de.html*

[5] UDPKIT download: *http://www.sylvain-nahas.com*

[6] World Summit on the Information Society: *http://www.itu.int/wsis/*

[7] Commission on Intellectual Property Rights: *http://www.iprcommission.org*

[8] Press release about the WSIS: *http://mailman.fsfeurope.org/pipermail/press-release/2003q3/000052.html*

[9] Save fair use! initiative: *http://www.privatkopie.net/files/pk_english.htm*

[10] Universal Declaration of Human Rights: *http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html*

[11] Debriefing on World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Intersessional Meeting: *http://fsfeurope.org/projects/wsis/debriefing-paris.en.html*

[12] FSF Europe: *http://mail.fsfeurope.org/mailman/listinfo/discussion*

[13] World Summit Civil Societies: *http://www.wsis-cs.org*