

The Monthly GNU Column

Brave GNU World



Welcome to another edition of the Brave GNU World. In this issue we will be looking back to the World Summit on the Information Society. To finish up this month's column we will be investigating society's understanding of software.

World Summit Retrospective

The summit took place in Geneva, Switzerland, in December last year. This month's issue is a retrospective overview of the consensus that the participants agreed on, and the effect this will have on the global distribution of power.

The aim of the summit (WSIS) [5] was to demonstrate that the UNO is interested in the global information society, and that it is taking steps towards a new understanding of politics, "global governance". Viewed from a global context, the conventional approach to government is in flux. A single government is inappropriate; instead a number of stakeholders cooperate.

The three main stakeholders are the government, businesses, and civil societies. Interaction between these three groups is the major issue. In ideal circumstances, governments are legitimated by the population of a country and represent that country. Countries are identified by their geographical boundaries; geographical aspects thus play a vital role for governments.

Geography is far less important to businesses and civil societies, as they are free to choose their spheres of activity. The aim of businesses is to increase profits. Society has a big influence on businesses. Consumer habits can show a preference for a specific businesses.

New Politics?

Civil societies are the organized form of the political currents. Their members are

This column looks into projects and current

affairs in the world of free software from the per-

spective of the GNU Project and the FSF. In this issue, we will be looking back to the World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva, Switzerland.

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representatives of non-government organizations (NGOs) such as the FSF. They are typically dependent on support from government, industry, or donations [3].

This scenario leads to the question as to how authority and influence is divided up. Big business often has a powerful influence on politics. Although the civil societies have more authority in some areas, their influence on fundamental decisions is limited. This is why both industry and government tend to seek the advice of civil societies, but without allowing them to influence decisions.

Tripartism?

The summit aimed to look for new approaches, and used labels such as "multi-stakeholder approach" and "tripartism", which means equal participation of all three groups.

There was little evidence of tripartism in Geneva. The civil societies were typically onlookers. They were assigned small rooms without enough printers, copiers and, ironically, Internet access. There wasn't enough room for the civil societies at the plenary assembly

The civil societies were not even permitted to select their own spokespeople during the summit ceremony. The representatives put a lot of effort into drawing up a list of speakers, but the summit office replaced two thirds of the names on the list with more or less unknown speakers. This is typical of the process in many ways, and the representatives only refrained from taking action to avoid undermining the speakers' authority, and due to a lack of time

There were some positive aspects, as is evidenced by the discussions between the civil societies and the European Union. Many governments stated their support for more participation on the part of civil societies. So some progress was made in the procedural part of the summit, and it is something to be welcomed, although a long way from being true tripartism.

Evaluation of the Documents

As the governments have now agreed on the "Declaration of Principles" [6], and the "Plan of Action" [7] for the information society, it would seem appropriate to analyze both in the context of

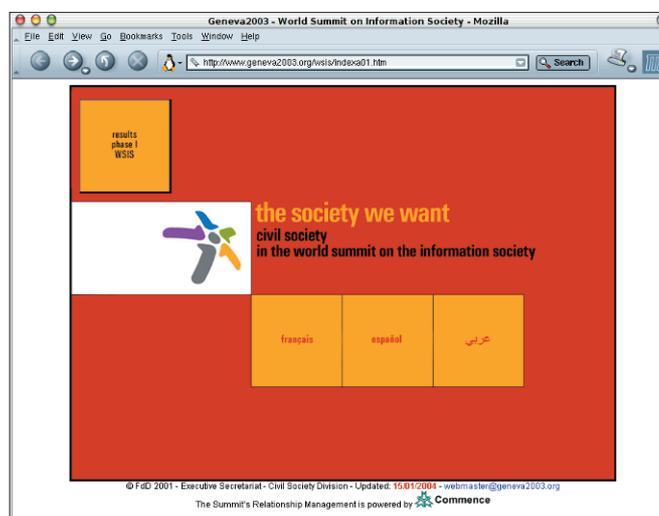


Figure 1: Civil societies homepage for the World Summit. The civil societies had to cope with a few setbacks, but returned some positive results.

free software and related issues. The question of a global categorization of knowledge is a central issue. The majority of the population does not have access to our collective knowledge. This is mainly due to laws on restricted intellectual monopolies, often erroneously referred to as intellectual property [4].

Paragraph 24 of the Declaration of Principles states: "The ability for all to access and contribute information, ideas and knowledge is essential in an inclusive Information Society." To understand the impact of this statement, it is important to be aware of the paragraphs on monopoly law, which changed considerably in the weeks leading up to the summit, due to pressure from Brazil and other countries.

Although paragraph 42 should be regarded critically, two points are worthy of note. For one thing, it mentions the sharing and dissemination of knowledge – this is something quite rare – and it does not reinforce international agreements such as the TRIPS agreement.

This makes it possible to realign the "World Intellectual Property Organization" (WIPO), away from increasing the sphere of influence of monopoly laws, and towards reformation of the system. In comparison with previous stances, it is progress in itself that no barriers to a realignment of this kind were raised. The previous position was to categorically refuse to discuss the issue.

As regards standards, there has not been any progress since the last issue. Although summit attendees continue to stress their importance, the documents are not really suited to promoting open standards. The current phrasing, "open, interoperable, non-discriminatory and demand-driven standards" still allows the usual proprietary pseudo-standards.

Free Software

Fortunately, things are looking quite good for free software. Due to lobbying by the US and its allies it was obvious that a recommendation in favor of free software would be hard to achieve. However, the US lobby was not able to have the question of free software completely removed from the documents. The final version of the documents refers to "increasing awareness among all stakeholders of the possibilities offered by

different software models." People who are aware of the advantages of free software will not want to compromise that freedom. Instilling awareness is a fundamental task that needs to be performed, in order to distribute free software, and this is exactly what the WSIS documents are trying to promote.

The classification of proprietary and free software as software models, rather than as software development models, shows that the choice between these models is not merely a question of technology. While development models are a purely technical issue for software, the concept of the software model is more generic and allows the issue to be viewed from political, economic, scientific and social viewpoints. Thus, the UNO has officially stated that the decision between proprietary and free software is not simply a question of technology and technological quality of the software product.

Deploying the Declaration of Principles

The main thing now is to publish the UNO declaration locally and to insist on its deployment. As regards the perspectives of the summit (part two will be taking place November 16 through 18 2005 in Tunis), it is to be expected that the topics will be less fundamental, and more concerned with deployment or implementation issues. The goal of free software will be to establish its position among the internal civil societies, as both ultimately pursue similar goals.

Software as a Cultural Skill

One of the most interesting discussions in recent months was the question of the role played by software and its influence on society as a cultural skill. Cultural skills are individual skills, or groups of skills, closely linked to a specific cultural development. Reading, writing, and algebra, but also agriculture are all examples of traditional cultural skills.

The use of software is also considered to be a cultural skill. The arguments that support this see software as being a product like a book, which has an obvious connection to the cultural skills of reading and writing. The perception of software as a product has a lot to do with the train of thought purveyed by propri-

etary software. The comparison of software with books ignores the differing characteristics. Books are a passive transport medium, they do not develop activity or allow people to expand their own potential for activity.

The complexity of a computer allows us to transfer our own skills to this tool. Viewed from the human perspective, it allows us to exercise abstract skills that we do not possess ourselves, and collectively improve these skills. A person might be incapable of solving a complex mathematical problem on her own. But a computer allows anyone to solve the most complex of mathematical problems.

Software is the form that our skills assume when we transfer them to a computer. In other words, software is another form of skill, whose use, maintenance and creation require personal abilities, which in turn are associated with the cultural skill of software.

Enough Said

That's it for another month. I would again like to ask you to send your suggestions, ideas, and comments by mail to the usual address found at [1]. If you happen to discover an interesting project, do let me know. ■

INFO

- [1] Send your ideas, suggestions, and comments to Brave GNU World: column@brave-gnu-world.org
- [2] Georg C.F. Greve, "Brave GNU World", Linux Magazine, Issue 36, November 2003 p91
- [3] Georg C.F. Greve, "Brave GNU World", Linux Magazine, Issue 29, April 2003 p91
- [4] Georg C.F. Greve, "Brave GNU World", Linux Magazine, Issue 39, February 2004 p89
- [5] World Summit on the Information Society: <http://www.wsis.org>
- [6] WSIS Declaration of Principles: http://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-s/md/03/wsis/doc/S03-WSIS-DOC-0004!!PDF-E.pdf
- [7] WSIS Action Plan: http://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-s/md/03/wsis/doc/S03-WSIS-DOC-0005!!PDF-E.pdf
- [8] Summit debriefing: <http://www.germany.fsfeurope.org/projects/wsis/debriefing-geneva.html>
- [9] Savannah: <http://savannah.gnu.org>