REPORT FROM QUITO: A LOOK AT FREE SOFTWARE AND FREE KNOWLEDGE AMONG CATHOLICS AND OTHER COMMUNITIES IN LATIN AMERICA AND WHAT OTHER FREE SOFTWARE ADVOCATES MAY LEARN FROM THEM

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Abstract

This paper is a summary of what I learned, directly or indirectly, thanks to my participation to a Congress on Free Software and Democratization of Knowledge in Ecuador and of some conclusions drawn from that experience.

The paper is divided in four parts. The first one shortly describes some Free/Open Source software related activities, all born or largely based in Ecuador, and the status of adoption of Free Sofware and Open digital Standards by the Ecuadorian Government. The example proposed are both technical, that is specific software projects, and management related. The policy of the Ecuadorian government about Free Software is also covered.

The second part starts explaining why and how the Salesian Society, which organized the Congress in Quito, became interested in Free Software and Knowledge well before thinking to a Congress about it. The mission of the Salesians is "educating by evangelizing and evangelizing by educating": in this context, they are doing a lot of research and internal discussion on the role that Free Software, Open digital Standards and "Free as in Freedom" knowledge and teaching should have in their activities. The final paragraphs of this section describe what the Salesians are doing now worldwide as a consequence of the Congress itself. Besides research, the order is already moving from theory to practice, through adoption of Free Software in several websites and classes and by intensifying the experiments with online communication techniques. This section ends mentioning other Catholic organizations which officially use or promote Free Software and Open digital Standards.

The third part is a brief report of some information collected at the Congress about various facts related to its themes, from the Creative Commons movement to the importance of technological independence for developing countries and the rationale for universal access to education in Latin America. I also provide an example of the difference in priorities and interests between Free Software activists in English speaking countries and all the others.

The final part contains some conclusions and suggestions I have collected from all this experience so far. I sum up some important characteristics I have observed in the Free Software/Free Culture movement in Latin America, both among activists and government officials. Starting from there, I highlight some differences between the underlying attitudes, needs and resulting strategies of the Free Software movements in Europe or, in general, the so-called Western World. A first conclusion, or confirmation, coming from the paper may be just the fact that there is no single Free Software/Free Culture movement, but there are so many worldwide as there are countries.

Based on all these observations, the paper ends with two final recommendations. The first is to take inspiration, in Europe and North America, from the non-software, non-technology centered approach to Free Software so often found in the contexts described in the other parts of this paper. The second and final suggestion to the traditional Free Software community in the West is to use this inspiration to reach out. More exactly, the recommendation is to act much more than it has happened so far, even in the recent past, to engage in discourses and practical initiatives all the other communities of people who would benefit from more Free Software, but have no interest whatsoever in programming as a profession or even as a simple hobby.

Keywords: Free Software, Democratization, Knowledge, Catholics, Educommunication, Communities

1 FREE SOFTWARE ADOPTION AND DEVELOPMENTS IN ECUADOR

Population-wise, Ecuador may look like a small country, at least if compared with most Western states, but it is still home to a remarkable amount of Free Software related activity.

The most popular Free Software product based in Ecuador is probably Elastix, a Gnu/Linux distribution containing everything you need to set up and administer all the communication functions necessary to an organization: PBX, VoIP, email, instant messaging, fax with email gateway and custom tools for hardware detection, centralized automatic configuration of phones and billing support. There are also two books devoted to this distribution: Elastix Without Tears by Ben Sharif and Unified communications with Elastix by Edgar Landivar. At the end of 2008, Elastix Ecuadorian users included Aerogal, a major domestic airline, national TV channel RTS and departments of the Ministry of Public Health.

Other developers are working on Melenti (www.melenti.org), a GPL Java CMS compatible with any JEE environment which should become "a friendly, easy to use and fast tool for personal web pages or corporate portals".

Another sector where Free Software activists in Ecuador are particulary active is education. This year, about two hundred students in Quilapungo are being equipped with servers and thin clients running the gNewSense distribution (www.gnewsense.org/). GnewSense was chosen, says project coordinator Quiliro Ordonez, because it is "100% free software, without non-free repositories or blobs in the kernel which promote functionality before anything else, as this would weaken our position for freedom."

During my stay in Quito I also met Juan Guillermo Garcia (bitcoder@gmail.com), a FOSS developer and engineering student at the Escuela Politecnica Nacional who hoped to develop software design workflows with meaningful, reliable methods to measure software quality. Garcia's goal are less heavy and expensive systems than CMM or CMMI which also are, above all, really compatible with the actual economic and social scenarios in Ecuador.

At the State level, in April 2008 presidential decree 1014 mandated that most national Public Administrations of Ecuador migrate entirely to Free Software. The reason for this decision was to guarantee to the State better ICT security, free access to data and software programs, savings on license costs and increase possibilities of employment to Ecuadorian professionals. As a consequence, the default priority in future government tenders from Ecuadorian Public Administrations should become to buy services, not licenses.

The first relevant deployment following from Decree 1014 was testing for a Government digital signatures application running on Gnu/Linux and a unified document management system for 45 central Public Administrations. The infracstructure for keys and certificates, which is the same already adopted by Banco Central del Ecuador since November 2007, uses Free Software whenever possible. The main components are a PostgreSQL database running on CentOS, a LAMP front-end and some Java applets which read the encrypted keys.

Another big step in the process of freeing Ecuador institutions from proprietary software is the formal ratification of OpenDocument 1.0 by the Ecuadorian Institute of Standards (INEN), which took place in April 2009. According to public officials, large-scale usage of this format for public documents is expected to take off in the second half of 2009.

2 SALESIANS, FREE SOFTWARE AND FREE KNOWLEDGE

2.1 Background

The Salesian Society is an institution dedicated to "educating by evangelizing and evangelizing by educating". Due to this focus on educational matters, all members of the Society continuously study how to implement "educommunication", that is education to communication, together with unrestricted access to knowledge and proper usage of new, open technologies and tools, including ICT, which can play an important role in education. It is this mindset that brought Pascual Chavez, Salesian Rector Major, to write in an open letter on June 24th, 2005, that "Open Source is a way of moving towards the democratisation of information and culture".

In the same spirit Fr Julian Fox, secretary to the Social Communications Department of the Salesian Congregation, wrote a couple of years ago a book titled "Digital Virtues". This book is relevant for Free Software advocates because it explicitly mentions and promotes Free Software and because of the *context* in which it puts Free Software. Here are some of the key passages, quoted because of their relevance for my comments in the final part of this paper.

The first one is the definition of the 'digital' in today's life as *"no longer a range of individual things... but a culture, something which calls upon habits or inculcates habits"*. Another essential concept is the fact that we must never escape in cyberspace, but use it to improve the *real* space we keep living in: *"perhaps the greatest service that virtual reality can give to today's culture is the recovery of reality"*. Equally relevant, at least in the medium/long term, is the admission that the Catholic Church must find a way to deal with the same problem facing every other large, traditional organization these days, regardless of its "mission":

"Free/Open Source software (FOSS) also encourages a read-write culture and this, I believe, has considerable implications for us today... the Church's language in this area belongs to a read-only culture, and consequently comes from that mindset. It has not yet come to terms with read-write culture. The Church still sees this whole area as uni-directional, as yet another opportunity for the 'professionals' to give moral instruction to passive receivers"

In 2009 Fox has published another book on the same broad theme, titled "Hacking the Way to Heaven - Education and Evangelisation in a Digital culture", which tries to answer the question *"How can the Church, the teaching Orders, and believers in the message of Christ make themselves open enough so the new generations of digital youth, including its vanguard of hackers, will feel at home, and can co-create a new form of education for the 21st century?"* This book contains about 15 pages specifically covering Free Software and its evangelical, educational, ethical and economical dimensions.

For the record, the Salesians aren't the only Catholics currently studying or more or less officially adopting or promoting Free Software. In 2008 the 9th International Forum on Free Software in Porto Alegre, Brazil, hosted a lecture about Free Software and its applications in Brazilian units of the Marist Brothers order (www.maristbr.com), a Catholic congregation dedicated to "the Christian education of young people, particularly those most neglected". I and other Catholics founded in 2006 Project Eleutheros (www.eleutheros.it) for a Catholic Approach to Information Technology.

2.2 The Congress in Quito on Free Software and Democratisation of Knowledge

Starting from all the principles and concepts described in the previous paragraph, the Social Communication department proposed the organization of an International Congress in the Universidad Politecnica Salesiana (UPS) of Quito, devoted to "Free/Libre Software and the Democratization of Knowledge" (www.ups.edu.ec/portal/page/portal/congresosl) and addressed to all teachers and students in the field of education, communication and ICT. I participated as speaker with two presentations: "The Family Guide to Digital Freedom" and "Perspectives of Free Software as a Social Movement". For the very reasons already explained, instead of technical topics, the Congress fodused on issues like:

- reduction of the digital divide
- relationship between FLOSS and ethics and the evangelical, ethical, educational and economic motives behind FOSS adoption;
- clarification of ideas on open source such as open code, a culture and a movement, a complex of attitudes

In practice, this led to a program based on four themes:

- Production and consumption of knowledge at the frontiers of the "digital world"
- Ethical and political dimensions in the culture of free/libre software
- Rights and equity in the democratization of knowledge
- Educommunication perspectives in the "third sector"

Each theme had half a day devoted to it. The rest of each day was reserved to presentation and discussion of specific experiences and projects.

During the Congress, Fr Filiberto Gonzalez Plascencia, Salesian Councillor for Social Communication, pointed out how Salesians as an order want to promote Free/Open Source software because of its role in democratization of knowledge and in educommunication. Dr Edgar Loyola, Vice Rector of UPS, renewed the committment of his University to the same goal.

The magistral conference held by Prof. Ismar de Oliveira Soares, of the University of Sao Paulo, on the last theme, that is "Educommunication perspectives in the Third Sector", was particularly relevant in the context of this paper. One of its key slogans was *"comunication que no es democratica no es comunicacion"* (*"communication which isn't democratic is no communication!"*). The consequence, Prof. Soares continued, is that in order to make the world a better place it is necessary to enhance the "communication coefficient" of all citizens, to allow everybody to participate to the construction of a society where everybody takes advantages of modern technologies. To make this work for the common good, Soares noted, it is also necessary to favor formation of people who dialogue, rather than compete against each other.

2.3 After the Congress

According to Fr Fox, there are several important things that have come out of the Quito Conference. The first is a much stronger realisation, in the Salesian world, that the issues associated with FOSS, especially for education, are really important. After the Congress was reported in Salesian media, other Salesians, especially in Latin America, started to ask for more information. Fr Filiberto Gonzalez confirmed that considerable interest continues to live during his visit to that continent in May 2009.

UPS is already thinking to a second edition of the Congress in 2010 and, instead of traditional Conference Proceedings, is producing a video which they will distribute worldwide. Rather than being a mere 'reportage' of the 2008 Congress, they intend the video to be a training aid, with a kind of philosophical touch, for people interested in these topics. What is interesting here is that this slant for the video is the one which has been explicitly requested, according to Fr. Fox, by many of the receivers, because *"they're not interested so much in the how but very much in the why"*.

The Salesian web masters of South America met in a special session during the Congress. This year they are formalising their commitment to the guidelines discussed in that occasion. Further developments in favour of "Free Software and Democratization of Knowledge" should happen in the 56 local editions, published worldwide, of the Salesian Bulletin (SB). Some of these newsletters already have an online presence, but so far it has been limited, in almost all cases, to static PDF versions of the paper edition. In the last year, however, discussion about *how* to publish on the Web and *why* is sensibly increased, according to Fox. The Argentinian version of the bulletin, for example (www.boletinsalesiano.com.ar), has been internally proposed as a case study. The website and its editorial strategy are presented as a "good example of a major step taken in the Salesian world in the direction of a truly online version of the SB", in order to "arrive at a much better new social media product". Another paper recently written by Fox, not published yet outside Salesians, starts from the assumption that "Salesian publishing on the web today needs to take account of, and abide by the

conventions of new social media publishing." As a justification and a basis for this effort Fox reminds the invitation to the young people of the world made by Pope Benedict XVI in his 2009 message for World Social Communications Day: "evangelize the new continent", that is the digital culture where youngsters spend a not negligible part of their life.

The realisation that much can be achieved more easily and naturally through the use of Free Software rather than proprietary approaches, which are very expensive and much less customizable, is just a side corollary of the real issue for Salesians, that is the attention to social media publishing and educommunication.

3 OTHER NEWS

3.1 The Tragedy of Creative Commons

One of the consequences of the contacts established in Quito was lots of feedback from all of Latin America a few months later, when I asked for comments about an article I had to write about the worldwide adoption and achievements of the Creative Commons (CC) movement. Most of the people who answered from Europe or North America had positive feelings about CC, and most of the real world example they provided where about "artistic" endeavours more or less related to entertainment, from music and video to fashion. All the answers I got from Latin America (and Asia), instead, completely ignored this side of the movement. The only thing that came to their minds were the opportunities or the problems created by copyright and CC in the education field, that is open production and access to teaching material at the smallest possible cost. Incidentally, some of them hesitate to propose CC to authors who never heard of copyright, because when they did in the past, some of those authors eventually preferred to go the "all rights reserved" route, instead of CC.

3.2 Other information

There are a few other facts which, while not directly related to each other, are worth mentioning because they are relevant for the final part of this paper:

- in Brazil, 25% of computers are now sold with Free Sw and, in 2008, regularly sold computers outnumbered for the first time those sold on unofficial/black market channels (source: presentation in Quito of Claudio Machado, Chief of Staff at Ministry of Planning, Brazil)

- what several of the most active FOSS activists in Latin America do isn't programming: people like Peruvian Daniel Yucra and Ecuadorian Quiliro Ordonez spend lots of time to localize Free Software in the Quechua language.

- an employee of a Latin American Public Administration who I met at the Congress told me that the more or less official reaction to the norms in one EULA about not using some software or redistributing it to Cuba, was something like *"there is no way that a foreign private company can tell our Country who its friends can or cannot be or what relationships there could be among us and our friends."*

- For several Ecuadorian Public officials with which I talked, lack of unified, local, reliable source for support, with predictable, if not guaranteed, response times, creates more problems than they expected. There may be quite a business opportunity here for local FOSS entrepreneurs.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The facts described in this paper and, above all, the conclusions, comments and suggestions in the rest of this last paragraph are not based on, and don't consitute by no means, an exhaustive, rigorous analysis. Nevertheless, I am confident that such conclusions have their value, even if only as a stimulus for further reflection and study.

Michel Bauwens, founder of the Foundation for P2P Alternatives and keynote speaker in Quito, said of the Congress: *"What I found most inspiring in the conference, was the discovery that the free software movement in Latin America is not just a technical movement, but a real social movement,*

with a very high political awareness. I never had this experience, certainly not where I live in Asia. You could just feel that a deep tranformatory process is taking place in that region."

My own experience, both at the Congress and after it, fully confirms this statement. At the political and economical level, there seems to be much more interest in technological sovereignty than in most of Europe. As Claudio Machado put it, there is an acute awareness that *"the greatest benefit from public sector usage of FOSS are not the sure economic ones but the cultural ones"*. By and large, among activists and government officials, I have found much more focus and interest towards FOSS and Free Culture as tools for open, universally accessible education than in Western countries.

In my opinion, at least part of the differences between these visions about Free Software and the most effective ways to promote or use is simply demographic. The birth rate in Europe, North America, Australia, Japan... is much lower than in most developing countries. Most nations of the first group are aging rapidly, while the others have much more students than middle aged or retired people to deal with. Therefore, even when goals are equal in both places, rationales and communication campaigns to get there cannot be the same. Where youngsters are much more numerous than adults, telling them "when you'll be grown up, use FOSS" may be the fastest way to achieve generalized adoption of Free Software. What if, instead, the most relevant population block, that is the one which can make the biggest difference in the shortest possible time, is made of adults who already vote and have money or decision power in the workplace, *but have little or zero interest in software*? In such places it may make more sense (without neglecting education!) to directly target those adults with specific initiatives.

Going back to Free Software development, there is at least one common motive in all the projects I've reported and the others which didn't find space here: the ability of Free Software to provide local solution to local actual needs and the wish to use it exactly in this way. I've found people who think that Free Software is good because it makes it much easier for them to solve *their own real problems*, not those induced or imposed by consumerism, international market pressures and so on.

The immediate consequence is another concept which is very, very clear to many Free Software activist I've met in Latin America: Free Software is just a tool, one of the means to a greater end. Both inside and outside the Salesians, I've found the wish, or need, to start from the actual human being, ignoring or delaying talks about source code, programming, licenses and all that as much as possible.

The final suggestion for all FOSS activists, especially in the Western countries, could therefore be to realize that there is much space and a lot of positive potential for cooperation between the current Free Software community and other (much larger!) ones which have some goals in common and may be interested to work together with them, if it were possible to step around prejudices and, sometimes, self-insulation.

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