Computer Enabled Social Movements? Usage of a Collaborative Web Platform within the European Social Forum

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Abstract Networks of social activists traditionally lack financial and human resources, resulting in low interest in employing sophisticated IT. There are not many studies describing the development and use of computer systems for networks of social activists. Especially with regard to web 2.0 applications, it is interesting to analyze how social activists appropriate social web platforms. In this paper we describe the usage of a collaborative platform called "OpenESF" by social activists taking part in the European Social Forum. The results of this study will provide us with an understanding of the needs of social activists for effective computer support and highlight directions for the redesign of OpenESF.

Introduction

IT appropriation in civil society organization is a socially highly relevant field of research. Most of these organizations lack financial and human resources to establish and maintain IT infrastructures and they are more or less dependent on volunteers for setting up IT resources which hampers IT sustainability [1]. There is not enough research that documents how this community benefits from new features of the social web like blogs, wikis, etc. In the absence of empirical studies it is a bit early to proclaim the advantages of these applications for this sector. Keeping this in focus we analyzed the interaction of the social activists with a computer supported collaborative applications called "OpenESF".

World Social Forum (WSF) is a regular event of anti-globalization movement involving international networks of NGOs, labor organizations, trade unions, social movements and other activists. The success of WSF resulted in many thematic,

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regional, national and local forums having independent organizing processes. In this paper we focus on the European Social Forum (ESF) which attracts activists from all around Europe. Different organizations propose different activities for the event and these activities are merged with other various activities to keep the program manageable. Organizations and other interested activists participate in the workshops, seminars and discussions at the event and establish networking to do future actions. In order to make this event a success, large scale planning, organizing and mobilization efforts are required. This ultimately leads to extensive collaboration among the organizations and activists. The last ESF event was held in Malmo, Sweden in September 2008 and was attended by approximately 13,000 activists. We have been investigating the role, technology serves in this community. In our earlier paper [2] we analyzed the work practices and usage of IT in organizing the Malmo event and in this paper we looked at collaborative practices of activists and their interaction with the collaborative application "OpenESF" to highlight the design deficiencies. "OpenESF" was developed to prepare for ESF events as well as a continuous platform for communication in between the events. The fact that this community of social activists comprises of organizations and activists from different cultural backgrounds will enable us to better understand the computer supported collaborative needs of this community. In this study we are mainly interested in findings about how social activists are using this collaborative technology, how this technology is being setup and what the main problems are faced by them during the use and establishment of technology. The empirical findings highlight some insights for the future design of better web2.0 based collaborative systems for civil society networks.

The structure of remaining paper is as follows: Section Related Work describes related work. The third section focuses on the research methods applied in this study. Section Importance of Collaboration highlights the importance of collaboration for the social activists whereas Section Evolution of OpenESF describes the evolution of the OpenESF platform and Section Appropriation of "OpenESF" discusses how social activists interact with this system. Section Problems with OpenESF discusses problems faced by activists due to the system and Section Design Concepts presents a discussion of our findings and the last section focuses on conclusions with regard to further ICT development for CSOs and civil society networks.

Related Work

Many different studies have analyzed the use of traditional web applications and IT artifacts in different voluntary organizations in different geographical locations [cf. 3–11]. These studies have been carried out where intercultural and inter-organizational differences were not so obvious. Similarly there have been participatory design efforts by some researchers for achieving technological appropriation in this community [cf. 12–14]. There have been similar efforts at Penn State University to empower regional volunteer organizations by involving them in

design process [cf. 15–17]. Rohde applied participatory design methods to electronically network an Iranian NGO community [18] and Mclever worked on supporting collaborative legislative work among NGOs at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) [19]. As anti-globalization movement is an important platform for voluntary organizations, there has been recent interest in the movement's use of new technologies. Aelst and Walgrave analyzed the Internet use in organizing protests in the anti-globalization movement [20]. Kavada investigated the use of email lists in the organizing process of the European Social Forum event of 2004 [21]. Fuster Morell has carried out a study to analyze the advantages and problems associated with the adoption of collaborative platforms for social forums [22,23]. In our earlier work we analyzed the organizing processes of ESF 2008 in Malmo, Sweden and also at the WSF 2006 event in Karachi, Pakistan to analyze the work practices and the use of IT in the organizing process [2,24]. Furthermore a study of knowledge transfer practices among different organizing committees managing the ESF is also carried out [25]. Despite these research efforts a design focus on collaboration processes in a multi cultural and heterogeneous organizational environment of non professional voluntary settings requires further exploration. So in our current study we are focusing on the use of a specific web 2.0 based collaborative application "OpenESF", which is currently available for use by the activists, and our intention is to improve the system design. This study will help in understanding the collaboration needs and practices of activists. The collaboration needs of this network differ from traditional organizations due to the multilingual and multicultural nature and the heterogeneity of participating activists/organizations coupled with weak organizational structure. The result of this work will help in improving the system design so that the interaction among social activists and "OpenESF" system could improve.

Research Design

In the organizing process of ESF there are two important actors, the first being the European Planning Assembly (EPA) and the other being the organizing committee. EPA is an open meeting and anyone could participate in this meeting and participate in discussions. This regular meeting of activists and organizations, interested in European Social forum activities takes place after every 3–4 months in a European city. This platform is responsible for political discussions, campaigns and future of the ESF. There are some self-constituted thematic groups established around specific themes like education, public services etc. to discuss campaigns and plan common actions around these specific themes. Normally a day before the EPA meeting these network meetings take place where organizations and activists interested in these themes participate and discuss future plans, which are further reported in EPA meeting, too. A local organizing committee is responsible to plan and carry out practical activities. The organizing committee can have further sub-groups to better coordinate the work. Our study started in 2008 and as the ESF 2008

was scheduled for Malmo, Sweden and accordingly the local organizing committee was the Nordic Organizing Committee (NOC), though now it has changed to the Turkish Organizing Committee (TOC) since the next ESF in 2010 is taking place in Istanbul, Turkey.

The empirical data presented in this paper are part of an ongoing study and some of this data has been used in earlier papers [2,25], but in this contribution we have a different focus than earlier papers, a focus that is only limited to computer supported collaborative activities with the "OpenESF" platform. Moreover, the empirical data increase continuously. The empirical data are collected by using multiple methods such as participant observations, field studies, content analysis and semi-structured interviews. The participant observations were carried out during four field visits. These field visits helped to understand the work practices of the activists. The first visit was conducted in February 2008 during the European Preparatory Assembly meeting in Berlin whereas the second visit was at the European Social Forum event in the Malmo during September 2008. The third visit was carried out in March 2009 at the EPA meeting in Athens and fourth visit was at the EPA meeting in Vienna during June 2009. During this period the online activities were also observed to analyze the usage and content by joining different projects at the "OpenESF" system. As the activists come from all over Europe it is difficult to have only onsite interviews, so the interview data are a mix of onsite and telephonic interviews. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed with a recorded content of approximately 12 h from 22 different people. The semi-structured interviews consisted of questions concerning work practices, evolution of IT infrastructure, and the problems faced in their use of the IT systems.

Importance of Collaboration

In order to analyze the success of computer supported collaboration, it is important to understand whether social activists need to indulge in collaborative activities in their work practices. As the core objective of organizing a social forum is to learn from the experiences of other organizations/activists in anti-globalization campaign and to take part in joint activities (demonstrations, protests, etc.) for future, this makes collaboration an important activity for the activists participating in the process of ESF. Describing the objective of collaboration between the social activists, one of the interviewees described similar views:

> A national and international cooperation is very important for us. It is to exchange information, to share experiences and to do common actions.

Describing the importance of collaboration in the European social forum process, one Greek activist described as follows.

> The most important in the ESF is to collaborate with different organizations …it was not so obvious before for a lot of organizations, to put themselves together with the other and try to find common solutions and to organize common activities.

During the start up process of an ESF event different organizations (trade unions, labor organizations, foundations, grass root movements etc.) propose to organize different activities (workshops, seminars, cultural activities etc.). Due to logistical problems it is not always possible for an organizing committee to schedule all those activities. In order to minimize the number of activities the organizing committee puts up different suggestions for organizations, proposing to merge different activities with each other. As a result of this complex negotiation process involving collaborative discussions, different activities are merged with each other and as a result single activity is normally hosted by multiple organizations. As an example of the magnitude of the number of activities there were almost 800 activities proposed for the last European social forum and the final program comprised of 272 activities. The moderators of each activity then collaborate with each other to prepare activities. Furthermore as the organizing committee of ESF keeps on changing so there is a need to transfer knowledge around organizing activities, which results in collaboration among the current and previous organizing committee members. There are also different thematic networks which are constituted by different activists around a specific theme like education, public services etc. to do common activities around its theme. One activist who carried out a workshop at the ESF 2008 in Malmo described the collaboration practice as following:

> We make new collaborations, especially with organizations we know; we have contacts in the movement I work, and we know a lot of international organizations, some we met and become connected in World Social Forum or in European Social Forum… and we have an exchange of information not only in the social forums but it (European Social Forum) is a (one) possibility to meet and to exchange experiences and planning.

It was also observed that *trust* is an important parameter before indulging into the collaboration activity. Describing the collaboration practices one French activist mentioned:

> This is the common use I won't get in touch with you without any recommendation; I am in France and interested to work in Pakistan for instance, for instance in women rights, but I don't know your organizations, though maybe you have a website. Ok, I can go to your website, but I don't know who are you? Which relationship you have with government etc. I don't know. So I only begin to work if some other organization which is already in my network says this is a good organization.

Evolution of OpenESF

After ESF 2003 in Paris a memory project was launched and as a subproject of this, a collaborative website was proposed. Since the merging (the process to decrease the number of proposed activities) is a complex process, the first idea of setting up collaborative space came to support this process. Describing the objective of the tool one French activists involved in this project described as following:

> We wanted to make a collaborative tool to help the merging process … It was the first point which decided that we need a collaborative tool. Because very quickly forums had lot of

demands, lot of activities that people wanted to make and we had logistical problems, not so many rooms for people to meet and not so many money so people must merge. This is one of the key points of the social forums' difficult thing to solve. And collaborative tool should help people to negotiate between them and try to make common activities around the issues.

The workspace was built using Plone content management system. This workspace allowed organizations to register themselves but this initiative was not very successful as the activists did not use it much during the organizing process of 2006 European Social Forum. One French activist working in the "webteam" described this in the following words:

When we decided to leave the first workspace and having this new one (openESF), it was first of all in Lisbon in March 2007. We showed the results of our work and tried direct evaluation with participants and the majority of the participants said we do not want it, it is not useful, it is too complex. So when we had EPA in Stockholm in September 2007, we officially decided within the web-team group to leave it, to abandon the workspace and to create a new tool from free software, small, simple and people feel it is more useful.

Another activist of "webteam" described the late launch of the website, another factor in the low response. He commented as following:

It was too late and it was not very well conceived, so people didn't use it at all.

The "webteam" is a group of volunteers who try to help European social forum in their personal capacity by advising which kind of IT infrastructure would be required. These are mainly a group of volunteers who have technical knowledge and they establish networks with other people and try to carry out their activities. This is mainly volunteer work and is derived on the personal motivation but some work is partly financed by the organizing committee. The Greek developer who developed the event website for ESF 2006 in Athens met some volunteers from WSF and the same application was cloned for the 2008 World Social Forum event. On the basis of his experience he proposed to use a new platform for ESF as there were many problems in this application. The main problem was that the website was based on an older version of Plone and, secondly, the workspace was modeled in UML by a tool "Gentleware Poseidon" and code from this model was generated by ArchGenXML tool. The code is extended by doing manual changes in code or by changing the model. Gentleware Poseidon was not open source and the people who developed the workspace used a free of charge version of the system, which expired in 2006. Furthermore the UML model cannot be exported by any other modeling tool from this proprietary software [26].

He established an initial website for free to give people an impression of the system. This website was based on the "OpenPlans" system, which is an open source system developed by the Open Planning Project [27]. The objective of this website was to support collaborative discussions in merging and other organizing processes and also serve as a communication platform in between the two events. As voluntary networks are mostly short on finances and try to employ cheap available alternatives, one activist of the "webgroup" sums up the evolution of this platform as following.

OpenESF was not developed, it was copied. It was copied from OpenCore because we do not have the capacity to develop anything.

Later he developed the full system and it was launched on 27 November 2007 and currently there are 197[1] projects and 946 registered users. This web system is to support the ESF but it is not the official website. The system is called "OpenESF". The server is Linux based and all of the software is open source. It is an open website where anybody could register themselves and register their projects. Every project could have multiple mailing lists, wikis, blogs and mapping tools to have collaborative maps. Every user had a profile page where he can give his basic information, picture and a list of all projects in which he is added. The page also shows the activities of that profile on the OpenESF system. The system also allows sending an email message to that profile once you are logged in. By opening any project page one could join the project, browse wiki pages, summary, mailing lists, task lists, list of members and contents. On the other hand the third button "Start a Project" allows you to start your own project. A snapshot of the system is shown in Fig. 1. The OpenESF was promoted through information on different mailing lists
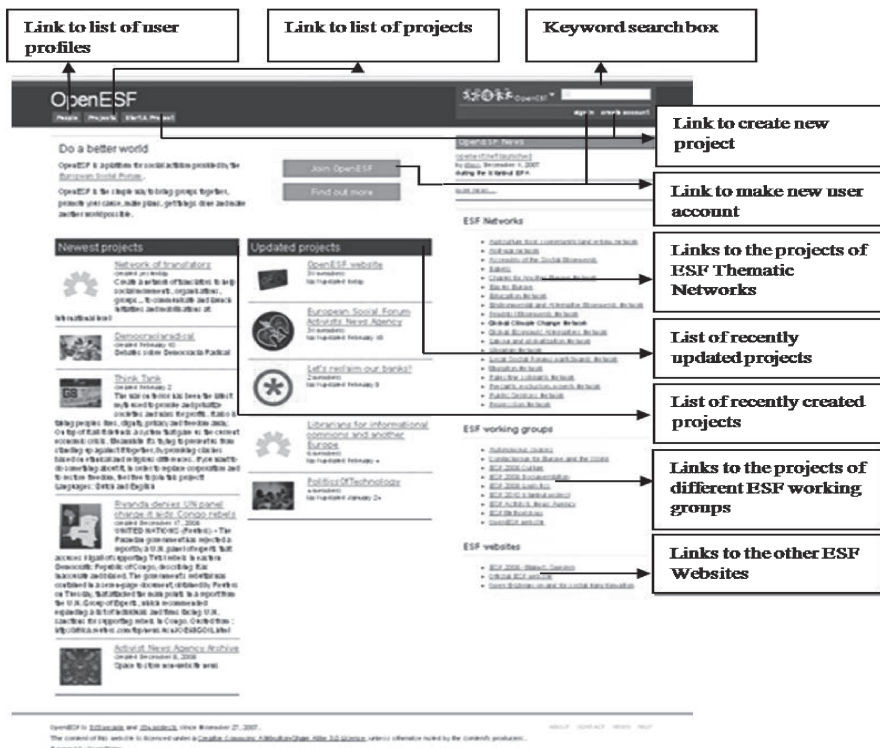

Fig. 1 Snapshot of OpenESF

[1] There are 30 private projects whose data is only visible to the administrator. So in our paper we will discuss the statistics of 167 projects.

of social activists and at the EPA meetings in Berlin and Kiev volunteers helped people to make their accounts and showed them how to use the system. It was also advised to describe a website for all the proposed activities at the Malmo forum to promote OpenESF but not many organizations used it effectively. Currently there are three volunteers who intend to work with Turkish organizing committee members to help them in using this system.

Appropriation of "OpenESF"

We were interested in analyzing how this collaborative system is being used by the activists as this platform is open for everyone to join, initiate and participate in discussion. A member of "webteam" described the OpenESF as following:

> OpenESF is a space which can be used by a lot of people; they can organize groups, they can organize discussions (and) they can organize meeting, so it is very important to use it.

Different European Thematic networks like antiwar, public services etc., which focus on specialized themes, have their projects on the website to describe their activities. One activist participating in "anti war" network described that they are using this platform as an information publishing tool, but sometimes due to the sensitivity of information it is not possible to write everything here. He cited that they organized discussions against war in Georgia during ESF but it was not possible to put all that information online. He described as following:

> There is some information about NATO stored there and we will try to provide [information about] the activities against NATO.… First of all we have to collect the information, especially the appeals and what is proposed in the European Preparatory Assembly meetings and then we can make documentation about this[at OpenESF].

As different thematic networks and working groups have created their projects on this website it provides information about their activities, which is quite helpful when one could not participate in all of the physical meetings. One activist from Turkey described the advantage of OpenESF as following:

> I found different networks and working groups over the website. I found it very good because I did not have the chance to join many of them; I can see what is going on in the working groups.

Different working groups of the Nordic Organizing committee opened their separate projects on OpenESF and used this platform to coordinate activities. The Voulanteer working group launched a project on the OpenESF where volunteers could socialize with each other before the forum so that they could work in a better and more coordinated way during the event. One member of the organizing committee of the 2008 event described the use of OpenESF during the merging process that was coordinated by Program working group.

> What happened, which was really cool, when there were proposals about to be merged, they (the organizations) never met before and they started communicating well before the forum. They formed an OpenESF project and they already formed the network before the forum, which, I think, it what's really cool to see because we were off course. I mean one of the aims with ESF was to make new networks and contacts for future action and then if you already see this because of merging process.

Since most of the activities organized at the ESF were managed by more than one organization some activists used this platform to prepare for their seminars/workshops at the forum. They discussed the pattern and structure of their seminars. Seeing how the next European Social Forum is going to take place in Turkey, there are some spaces being used for planning and coordination for the next ESF and, in doing so, transferring previous knowledge to the Turkish organizers. There were also many projects opened on specialized political debates like Energy poverty and consumers' rights, Feminism and neo-liberalism, Eastern experience, financial crisis seminar etc. There are also different country chapters of social forums like the Hungarian Social Forum, London Social Forum, Romanian Social Forum, and these are processes that have a presence on OpenESF. These describe specific information related to their geographical location. One activist from the United Kingdom described that they are going to use this platform as a tool to coordinate the activities in their country.

> We are planning to use OpenESF as a wiki now because we could develop and make a project on the OpenESF website and then put it on the other [official] website when it is finished. For example, when we have a meeting we can put the minutes on OpenESF, then people can edit the minutes and then after a certain amount of time it could go to official website.

As one of the objectives of setting up this space was to provide a platform for continuous discussion in between the social forums as well, it is interesting to monitor the activities of users over a period of time. In order to find out this aspect we analyzed the joining pattern of new members and the creation of content at OpenESF on the monthly basis. Table 1 describes the number of new members, projects and mailing lists created every month. As in September 2008 the European Social forum took place, the maximum number of new people joined the OpenESF platform also in the same time. There are not many people joining the forum and also there is not much activity in terms of creation of new content, presumable because there is some time left until the next forum which is scheduled to take place in July 2010.So these statistics show that the creation of new content still revolves around the physical event and its objective as a communication platform in between the event is somewhat lacking.

We further investigated the users who are already using this platform, how often they participate in discussions and activities, so at the end of each month the statistics were analyzed in three categories. Firstly there are active users, who have logged in at least once in the last month, whereas inactive members are those who never used their account after first 24 h. The third category was of dormant members who were active users at some point in time and later they become inactive. As the following graph shows that after the September 2008, when the ESF took place,

Table 1 Monthly statistics of OpenESF

Month	New members	New projects	New mailing lists
December 2007	80	11	14
January 2008	43	7	10
February 2008	84	28	28
March 2008	93	15	13
April 2008	70	21	24
May 2008	54	18	20
June 2008	88	23	23
July 2008	72	9	8
August 2008	90	9	10
September 2008	130	9	10
October 2008	58	7	6
November 2008	24	3	7
December 2008	15	4	4
January 2009	10	0	0
February 2009	13	2	2
March 2009	13	0	0
April 2009	9	1	1
Total	946	167	180
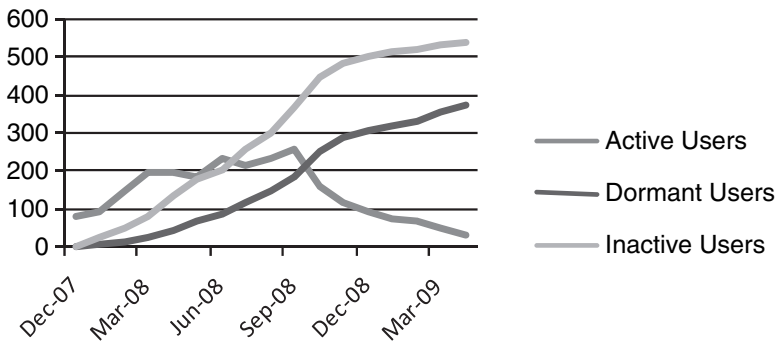
Fig. 2 Members statistics

the number of active user kept on decreasing and on the other hand a major number of users were inactive since the start so they made their accounts once and never returned back while in the case of dormant users, the curve is not so steep as is the case with inactive users (Fig. 2).

Our next point of investigation was to look at the presence of activity at OpenESF, as users may be interested in participating in pre-existing projects rather than creating new projects. So similarly projects were also divided in three categories, active being modified in last 1 month, Inactive being not updated after first 24 h of project creation, and the dormant category showing projects which remain active for some time but then turned into inactive. The graph in Fig. 3 again shows
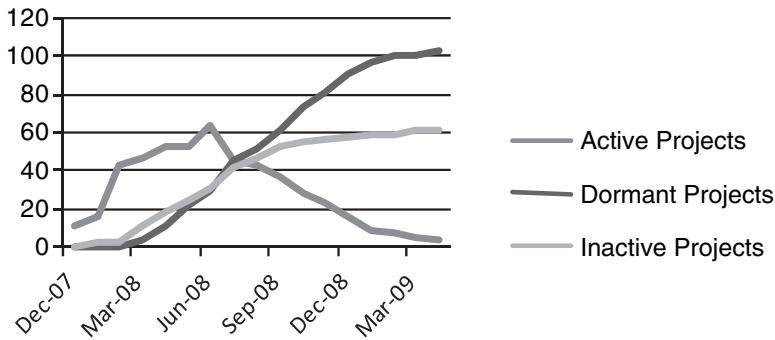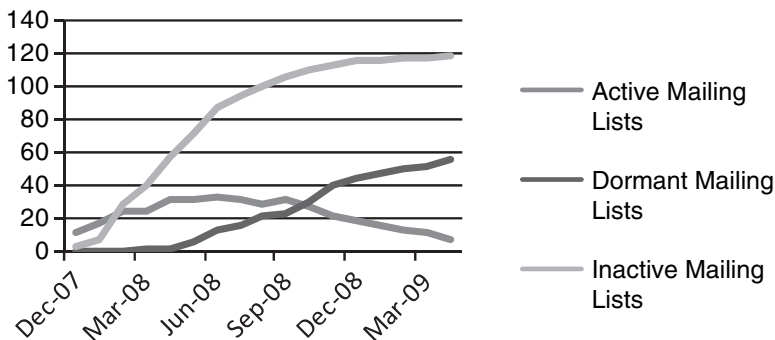
Fig. 3 Projects statistics

Fig. 4 Mailing lists statistics

that there were many active projects before the forum and June 2008 being the month where the maximum number of projects (64) were active and after the event collaboration, activity has turned to almost zero, despite the fact that regular EPA meetings take place every 3–4 months and the preparations of next ESF by Turkish the organizing committee are also under way.

During the empirical studies it was observed that activists are more accustomed to using the mailing lists and there were also instances where only the mailing lists were used instead of using other features like wiki pages, blogs etc. So we also monitored the activity on the mailing lists present on the platform. The following graph describes the status of mailing lists, which were again distributed in three categories. Active mailing lists being the ones having at least a single message in last 30 days and inactive being never used after first 24 h of creation and the dormant mailing lists are also shown. Here again the similar patters persisted and after the ESF 2008 not many active mailing lists exist (Fig. 4).

As the statistics point out the relatively low traffic on the platform and also the users who are using this system are in a somewhat inactive mode. Most of the initiatives taken by creating a user account or creating a project/mailing list could not

really be followed up and ultimately never used beyond the 24 h after creation. Moreover, the relationship between the number of users who take part in the events and the use of this space is very weak. For example there were nearly 13,000 participants at the last ESF, but the number of people who actually used this platform is much lower. The Greek developer who developed this website associated the lack of activity with the lack of parallel physical activity, weaknesses in platform and the low skills of activists.

> There were last month (February 2009) probably 650 people who logged into the website and there are like 900 visits per day. So around 900 people visit website everyday and some of them actually use it but, yeah, there is not too much activity I guess but it has to do with the fact that there is not parallel activity.

He further said

> Most of the people involved in the ESF process are not used to such tools or haven't been using it. I think this is a cultural problem and of course there are some technical problems or bugs which can be discouraging to people and they have to be fixed. There is also a need for more new functionalities to be developed.

Problems with OpenESF

As the activists participating in ESF activities come from quite diverse cultural, political and organizational backgrounds, it was interesting to find out about their perceptions of technology. Some activists find the technological support for the ESF very important. One activist who is also participating in the "webgroup" described her views as follows:

> I think it is a good tool but is used underutilized – not everybody in the process is using this tool, not everybody knows how to do it and at the end of the day it is more that when we meet, we say things and not during the time when there is not an EPA…. People are afraid of using something like this or they don't know how to use it but we have done so many demonstrations. It's not very difficult to use. Now it's very open stuff and maybe it's at the end of the day, speaking is always better but as we are so far from each other we have to start using this kind of things.

Another French activist who is also participating in technological support commented in the following words:

> The technology can help us to simplify the necessary work the people want to do. So first you have to know what people want to do exactly and then you find the simplest technology because they don't want to be bored with technology. They only want to click, click and that's all.

On the other hand there are some activists who are skeptical about the role of technology in the ESF. One activist working in the Nordic organizing committee described his views about technology in the following way:

> I am a bit skeptical because with these organizations in NOC we have nothing in common. There is no basis for the Internet tools. Among them there are maybe a dozen who are really actively interested in the European Social forum. There is no need for anything else

other than this email list, that's perfect. It works perfectly and that's what people look at. More and more I see now that these kinds of grand Internet website things do not work and people go back to make email lists because everybody opens the email box but people don't go up to a website to find out things.

The similar concerns were raised by another Greek activist. He gave the example of this while they arranged an EPA meeting in March 2009.

Sometimes, even now, I receive phone calls from colleagues and friends and hear 'you didn't call me to inform me that European preparatory assembly is taking place' and when I said, 'but it's on the website,' they respond with 'but I don't see that; I was waiting for your phone call'.

Describing the reasons for this behavior one volunteer of the web group described following:

I think it is a generation gap. Here the people are quite old and they don't know how to use technologies. It is not that they don't want. I mean for example my mother; it is not that she does not want she does not have skills to use it.

In order to find the problems in the system we tried to find the experiences and problems faced by activists in their interaction with the system. One of the criticisms of the system was less content creation in the projects and most of the projects do not have meaningful, updated information after their start. One Swedish activist described this situation as follows:

There is a phenomenon with the Internet and I call it the wardrobe phenomenon. You never create large enough public space for people to be able to participate and it becomes sort of specialized in a very small corner. If you look through the OpenESF.net, you find that there is very, very little participation in the different projects.

As it becomes difficult to reach people when there is no response on the emails or discussion forums, he recalled his previous communication practices and said:

Before, immediately when something started, address lists with telephone numbers were immediately produced so everybody could reach each other; now only email lists are produced and it is very hard to get into contact with the people because telephone numbers are not reachable and you can't get direct contact with them. And they do it by these emails and with the emails you never know if they will respond or not because only a few respond, creating a very different kind of culture in terms of knowing what is going on and people are less interested in really preparing a meeting, deciding on a meeting and following up.

Another important factor contributing the low adoption of this platform is the digital divide among the activists. Activists, especially from eastern European countries, have low accessibility to computers and, furthermore, a significant number of activists have language problems while communicating in English and they prefer to initiate discussions in their native languages. As a result there are always translation arrangements at physical meetings of ESF. One activist from Turkey described his views in the following lines.

I personally use OpenESF but we are not using so much as a general social forum of Turkey.… You need to have very good connection with the Internet and the language, because OpenESF is in English but in Turkey (there are) not many people who can use English on the website.

The similar concerns were raised by another activist from Hungry while discussing the potentials of this platform.

> It [OpenESF] can improve [our working] but it is a slow process. It means people must learn foreign languages or another alternative is to have good translations, good people who are ready to translate Hungarian material into English and back and this is one point, and other point is people should use the Internet but people who are poor have no access to this fancy thing.

As the number of projects grows some activists reported difficulty in finding interesting projects, although at the main user interface the list of recently created and updated projects are shown. One German activist described the problem which she faced with the interaction with the OpenESF system as follows:

> In my view there is no comprehensible navigating system; the only way to find something is the function "search" and under the list of projects by alphabet letters ….. There is no real structure. It is like a big sum of information but it is very difficult to find the information and many organizations opened projects and there is nothing in the project and … there is no visible and understandable structure. It is a summary of anything and everything.

The similar concerns were raised by another Swedish activist.

> I think it is difficult to find the spaces that I am interested in. What if I search a specific topic, specific region or specific country? It can be quite difficult to find. You have to search by index, by the first letter of the name of the space and there are also many spaces that are not active so that becomes discouraging in that not so much is going on. I think the front page could be much better; I think the explanation on how to use it could be better and more visible.

She further described her preferences for user interface as follows:

> I would like to have information on how to navigate the web pages, how to find what I am interested in and how to use it.… The spaces with more members or more active spaces should be on the first page.

Another activist described that she would like to see a list of projects in which her friends are collaborating, so on the basis of those suggestions she may choose to join them. The heterogeneous nature of the organizations and activists involved in the process has also implications on the acceptability of the system. One activist who has participated in IT initiatives described the reasons for not using the collaborative application as following:

> The problem in my opinion is cultural.… We have here big networks and they only exchange (information)by email and send documents etc. and sometimes they use phone, but the two mentors are meeting (Physical) and email, so they don't see what decent use we bring to them first. The second thing is that those tools are very useful for individuals and used by individuals, but here we have two logical (identities). We have one logical (identity), who is individual. How can I myself with my culture and my technological background and can I use the electronic tools? But on the other side I am not only an individual, I am also part of an organization and as part of the organization I cannot do what I want, i.e. put text in the wiki. I cannot, because my organization is behind me and you cannot combine the two logical (identities) … and they cannot solve this problem and they leave it.

The similar concerns were raised by another Swedish activist.

> OpenESF is supposed to be a decentralized process where any person can participate, but if you are representing a trade union or an organization you can't just write what you want, you have to check with your organization.

On the one hand activists are interested in providing everyone equal chances to create and initiate a political discussion, but on the other hand some activists are skeptical and think that this is the main reason of the lack of interest of people in this platform. One French activist described this in following words:

> As an individual you have no legitimacy. I mean in a political sense you can be somebody whom I appreciate, I can like you. There is a difference in you as an individual and you as a member of an organization.

An activist involved in the NOC described his views about this as following:

> If you will look through it (OpenESF) there is an enormous amount of projects started by one, two, or even three people and nothing happens again, so the whole process seems to be fragmenting rather that creating/accumulating, because you never know if it is an individual saying something or if it is an organization saying something … for me as a public movement person I am totally uninterested in starting individualistically nice and cute discussion forums myself because I know that this is not the way it works. So to start a discussion forum it has to be a lot of organization's interest in doing it, so then it could become some kind of general political debate.… They don't even understand the problem because they believe that every individual takes his initiative and then the question whether there will be a response on that or not has only to do with quality of the initiative, if it is good quality then it develops, otherwise it will disappear but this is a market concept; this is the newly created world market culture, which is totally against any kind of responsibility for the process, and it doesn't work. So that's also why you have this.… In terms of knowing how much effort is behind a certain initiative, then it becomes important to know what it is and what it is not.

Similar concerns were raised by another activist, too.

> The process of the social forum does not have to be this because the idea is that people come here, they discuss the things and they do things together, but there are still people who come here, who always talk with their organizations to understand what they have to do. This is not the spirit of the social forum, but yes, there are people here who think that it is very important. I think that we have to remind ourselves all the time of the real spirit of the forum.

As the majority of the activists in this community are not expert users of the computer systems, it is very important that the technology deployed should be simple and easy to use and that it have a clear objective. Some of the activists are not clear enough about the objective and the focus of transforming this space into a platform for continuous interaction among the European Social Forum events. One German activist described this in following words:

> After the ESF in Malmo, the OpenESF for the first lost all relevance. It is not a tool to organize activities or to give information. The OpenESF is not connected to the movements; therefore the movements filled in information before the ESF, but they don't use it as an information source and network tool and database. There is no input about the current activities against the NATO summit, the finance crisis or the G20 Summit or local activities connected to social forum movement. The OpenESF is in my view a tool that the Swedish organizers demanded to use, but it is not used by the movements. Activists are looking anywhere and everywhere to get information, but not in OpenESF.

Another activist described the reason for this behavior as a conflict between the social forums itself. She described that some people/organizations are not sure whether it is a continuous process or just an event which takes place after every 2 years.

Design Concepts

Appropriately designed technological systems could improve the technological usage in voluntary organizations [cf. 13–26]. So in order to reap the benefits of technology, there is a need to improve the system design. The empirical findings from the presented ethnographic case study seem to be quite useful in deriving some design requirements for technological support of the ESF process and the involved activists. As is the case with voluntary organizations there are many different IT projects undertaken in ESF as well. Some of them have been used at some point in time and some of them just faded away without being used by anyone. Since most of these initiatives are taken from different people at different points in time and with different motivations, there is need for appropriation efforts to make them more active. As in this contribution we have been focusing on collaborative website mainly we will focus only to the design appropriation of OpenESF website.

Improving User Interface

As most of the activists have limited IT skills it is important to optimize the user interface of ESF. As some of interviewees described that language barrier is resulting in low participation, user interface in major European languages could facilitate the activists in using OpenESF. Furthermore, some of the interviewees also reported problems in finding interesting projects. Instead of just displaying the lists of recently launched and updated projects on the main interface, a list of projects the user may find interesting based on his previous involvement in different projects could be helpful in locating interesting project spaces at OpenESF. As it is visible in the user interface snapshot that some of the user interface elements are redundant, multiple user interface elements point to same pages, and hence add confusion to the user. Furthermore, while browsing through some pages users could get lost as there is no way to navigate back stepwise, so you have to either use browser back button or skip to the main interface; thus, a redesign of user interface is required as well.

Designing for Multilingual Collaboration

As it was observed that majority of activists need native language support while communicating, a mere interface in multiple languages is not sufficient. There is need to carry out automatic translations of the contents so that the information

could be localized and collaborative work could be carried out in multiple languages. Yamashita and Ishida [28] (2006) looked at the effects of machine translation on collaboration. While perfect machine translation is not available for practical and theoretical reasons, the functionality of existing online tools could be integrated into ESF. Computer supported back and forth translation could increase the quality of the translated items. The number of languages which need to be supported by the system is a complex issue, as the ESF focuses on activists all over Europe. Additionally, whenever ESF moves to a new location the participation of activists from host countries increases, the need for translation and that specific language becomes important. So as a first phase at least major European languages need to be supported by automated translation features.

Supporting Recommendation and Enhanced Searching

As the number of projects increases, it is difficult for the distributed actors to keep on top of the decision process. A major problem resulted from the complex structure and the limited search functionality of the www-site. The search capabilities could be enhanced by employing a tagging mechanism, so whenever a new project is created, it could be associated with different tags and also managed within a tag cloud. Furthermore when the search results are displayed a visual relative grading mechanism of the projects on the basis of their relevance could help in determining better keywords. Moreover, it could be helpful to have a recommending system which could give suggestions to join certain projects based on the personal network analysis of individuals. Email is the most commonly used tool among activists and they prefer to work with collaborators with whom they have (indirect) personal relationships. Therefore, a social networking tool linked to their email address book could be beneficial. It could be used, for instance, for recommending projects which most of their contact persons have joined.

Personal and Organizational Profiles

A further domain to explore technical support is making the institutional and personal background of the different activities more transparent. While organizational directories [cf. 29] and yellow page systems [cf. 30] have already been discussed, these functionalities need to be tailored to the specific needs of the ESF. In OpenESF there is not any mechanism to distinguish among organizational and personal content and this could be one of the reasons leading to low participation at the site. At some point it is important to understand whether certain content is initiated by an organization or an individual, so there is need for establishing organizational profiles as well in OpenESF. The individual profiles could map to these

organizational profiles to show their affiliations and to deal with certain ambiguities between institutional and personal standpoints. Specifically in fluid structures, such as the ESF, organizations and the organizational personal background or actors may change; new actors will become part of the process and leave again. Therefore, techniques for semi-automatic profile generation need to be explored [cf. 31].

Conclusion

The recent interest in technological support for voluntary organization by different researchers has benefited this specialized sector in technological appropriation [cf. 20–22]. The characteristics of weak organizational structure, limited technical background of the volunteers and the shortage of financial and human resources to design and maintain IT infrastructures differentiate this sector from other traditional organizations. As these organizations become more diversified in their structure and functioning, ranging from grass roots organizations to professional transnational NGOs, it is very important to look deeply in their organizational structures and practices to achieve technological appropriation. In our current case these traditional weaknesses of voluntary organizations compounded by the heterogeneous nature of the participating organizations in ESF process makes it more interesting. The paper shows that the activists need to make collaborations to do their work in a more effective way, but the computer supported collaboration in this kind of heterogeneous network is a complex process. The empirical analysis highlights the benefits of using the OpenESF system by some activists, but the quantitative and qualitative data show that most of the projects were only created and there is no further discussion. Though this platform was also supposed to serve as a platform for continuous discussion, the data show that no new users are joining the system since the event held in September 2008 in Malmo and also the members who have already joined the forum become passive. Although there are regular EPA meetings, many different mobilizations initiatives and preparations for the next ESF by the Turkish organizing committee are going on, there is no active visibility of these initiatives at OpenESF. The problems faced by the activists in interacting with the system have highlighted some design deficiencies, which need to be improved to facilitate activists. Although there were some cases when the sensitivity of the information and lack of technical skills hindered the use of technology, some positive use of OpenESF advocates that if the design issues could be dealt with, this could act as a major discussion point for the ESF community. The empirical data suggests that distinction among organizational and personal identity is important for some activists while collaborating on the web. It is also important to find interesting projects joined by the people in one's email network that could provide suitable choices and tags associated with different projects thus helping in improving upon the search results. Furthermore, multilingual interfaces and automated content translation could attract a larger majority of activists in collaborating on the web.

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