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FOSS: Fostering Knowledge, Development and Communities

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by Precy Obja-an

People's Communications for Development (PC4D) may not have found new information and communications technologies empowering for grassroots women, owing to the practical constraints of equipment cost, intermittent electricity, and specialised skills and the structural constraints posed by the patriarchy project. But new ICTs are here to stay, forming the very backbone of modern communication systems, media production, trade and various services. And for intermediary groups such as women's organisations, they are among the effective ways of pursuing advocacies and reaching out to more stakeholders.

As the study noted, "[PC4D] does not signify that new ICTs cannot be useful or empowering for grassroots women or the people in marginalised communities. Some intermediary groups do see the potential of new ICTs for grassroots women's empowerment. Perhaps in the same way that the advent of mass media shaped social reality in the past, the entry of new communication technologies will do the same in the future. The question is how new ICTs will shape and reflect the everyday life of grassroots women."

The past decade has shown how new ICTs have been seen as an opportunity in forwarding private interest, especially in the spirit of neoliberalism. Market players have reinforced the technological neutrality of these new ICTs, thus contributing to the gender-blind appropriation of these tools, among others. The hype over these tools and the so-called "information society" has indeed glossed over the political, economic, social and cultural specificities of communication tools.

But new ICTs have also been a field of contestation, where at one end of the spectrum are forces squeezing profits

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out of these tools and their derivative services and at the other end of the spectrum, communities which keep information and communications free and abundant.

Free Open Source Software (FOSS) is an output of such constestation. Based on our shared values on knowledge-sharing and collective learning, FOSS is increasingly becoming a political imperative for women's groups and social movements in light of the shrinking democratic spaces and the public domain brought by neoliberalism and other forms of fundamentalism.

Why should we use FOSS?

FOSS are programmes whose licenses give users the freedom to run the programme for any purpose; to study how the programme works and customise it to our needs; to redistribute copies of the programme; and to improve the programme and make these enhancements available to the public.

It can run on any computer, including a computer in a commercial organisation, without paying for licenses nor programme upgrades.

By open source, it means that the source codes or programme statements used by the creator of the programme are available to the public. FOSS is reliable and flexible since software developers may analyse these codes and rid them of potential weak points or unwanted codes such as spyware. FOSS also encourages a faster pace of software development since more eyes are involved in studying the software and documentation on any modification is available. Developers need not create a

programme from scratch. They only have to modify the source codes to add the enhancement they desire or remove the unwanted features of the programme. Translation of the software's user interface into another language can also be initiated by other people and need not rely on the original creator.

FOSS is often based on open standards which prevents vendor lock-in. Users are able to use other software to access the same files they have created with FOSS without so much fuss.

We have listed below some FOSS programmes that work on Windows environment. These programmes work in conjunction with proprietary software. For example, if you have MS Office installed in your computer, you can still have OpenOffice.org and not affect the functioning of MS Office. You can try these programmes and see for yourself how they perform with the equivalent proprietary commercial software.

OpenOffice.org

URL: http://www.openoffice.org

OpenOffice.org (OOo) is a suite of programmes for word processing, spreadsheets, presentations, databases, drawings and the creation of mathematical formulae. It is an alternative to the Microsoft Office Suite which can cost around US$400. It can read and edit MS Office documents. It is also available in many languages.

Mozilla Firefox

URL: http://www.mozilla.com/en-US/firefox/

Firefox is a cross-platform web browser, allowing a user to search from the toolbar. It also allows one to open severals URLs on the browser window using tabbed browsing. Firefox also has the capability to block pop-up windows. It helps users manage passwords and defend these and other sensitive information such as credit card details against malware and theft. Users may also customise the browser by adding themes and extensions. Themes define the look of the browser, while extensions are small add-ons that add new functionality to Firefox.

Mozilla Thunderbird

URL: http://www.mozilla.com/en-US/thunderbird/

Thunderbird is a multi-platform e-mail, news and RSS (Really Simple Syndication) client developed by Mozilla. It offers tools for detecting junk mails, tagging messages, filtering messages and spell-checking. It can handle multiple email accounts simultaneously including Gmail. It has a built-in protection that warns users when you click on a link which appears to be taking you to a different website than the one indicated by the URL in the message. Like Firefox, you can also customise Thunderbird with add-ons to fit your needs.

Mozilla Sunbird

URL: http://www.mozilla.org/projects/calendar/sunbird/

Sunbird is a multi-platform calendar and task management application. You may add Sunbird calendar feature to Thunderbird by installing the lightning add-on in Thunderbird.

GIMP and GIMPshop

URL: http://www.gimp.org; http://www.gimpshop.com/

GNU Image Manipulation Program (GIMP) is a multi-platform programme for tasks such as photo retouching, image composition and image authoring. On the other hand, GIMPshop is GIMP that has been made to look and feel like Adobe Photoshop.

Scribus

URL: http://www.scribus.net

Scribus is a multi-platform page lay-out programme for producing documents such as brochures, newsletters, and posters. It supports professional

publishing features, such as CMYK color separations. It can also produce documents in Postscript and PDF formats. Scribus has been translated into more than 25 languages.

Workrave

URL: http://www.workrave.org

If you work with computers and type a lot, you become prone to Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI). RSI is a general term for disorders that occur from prolonged, repetitious use of the hands doing damage to tendons, nerves, muscles, and other soft body tissues. The best way to prevent RSI is to take periodic breaks from typing. Workrave reminds you to take these breaks. It also includes a set of exercises that you can follow during breaks. It also has a statistics tool that tells you how much time you have been active, how many breaks you have taken, and how intensively you have used your keyboard and mouse.

Open Workbench

URL: http://www.openworkbench.org

Open Workbench is a project management and scheduling software. It enables users to schedule and track status of tasks, define and assign resources such as people, equipment, materials or expense to tasks.

PDFCreator 0.9.5

URL: http://www.pdfforge.org/products/pdfcreator

Enables you to create a Portable Document Format (PDF) file from any Windows programme that can print. It works like a printer but instead of a producing a printout, it creates a PDF file of your document. Aside from its capacity to create documents in PDF format, it can also save documents in PNG, JPEG, BMP, PCX, TIFF, PS, EPS formats.
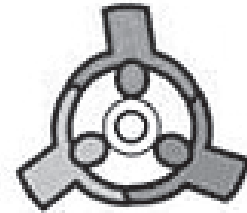

7-zip

URL: http://www.7-zip.org/

This is a utility for creating compressed archives. It has its own 7z compression format but it also supports ZIP, GZIP, BZIP2 and TAR formats. It can also unpack RAR, CAB, ISO, ARJ, LZH, CHM, MSI, WIM, Z, CPIO, RPM, DEB and NSIS compressed files.

Audacity

URL: http://audacity.sourceforge.net/

Audacity is a multi-platform programme for recording and editing sounds. It is perfect for converting analog sounds (e.g. cassette tapes) to digital (MP3 or WAV) You can add effects on your sounds such as echo, fade in/out, bass boost, reverb etc. It also supports MP3, WAV, AIFF and OGG audio formats.

Kompozer

URL: http://www.kompozer.net

Kompozer is a web authoring tool that enables users to create web pages without the need to know HTML (Hypertext marked-up language).

Organizers

URL: http://www.organizersdb.org

Organizers Database is a programme for managing contacts and contributions. It is designed by a nonprofit for nonprofits. It enables you to search and print mailing labels and email lists. It can be used in a networked environment. It also has a built-in backup system. ■

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