

Global JAM on Collaborative Technology Requirements for Social Change

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GLOBAL JAM FORUM -> WORKING -> Re: WORKING - about a community telecentre in Mauritania

by Lars Soeftestad - Thursday, 19 July 2007, 11:22 AM

My company has for a number of years been involved in a World Bank project located near the small town of Aioun in the Southeast of Mauritania. The project addressed natural resource management and property rights relations in 2-3 large wetland areas (it closed only last month). The German bilateral aid agency GTZ has worked in this area for a number of years, and it was my great luck that GTZ, in collaboration with UNDP in Mauritania ("Programme des Nations Unies pour le Développement en Mauritanie" – PNUD, at www.pnud.mr) had just started a small project, actually a community telecentre (or "cybercommune," which is the term used in Mauritania), in Aioun, namely "CyberCommune du Hodh El Gharb." This became my favored – at times only – way of communicating with the outside world, as telephone and cell phones were largely unreliable, and because most of my needs were work related, incl. sending and receiving documents. Not that this was a reliable means of communication – half the time there was no connection (via satellite up-link), and when it worked it was mostly extremely slow.

That aside, this was always a pleasant place to come to, so different from the world outside, more relaxed, more accepting of a foreigner, and, more importantly, of women. For the focus of this project was on training women to use computers and the Internet. The project tried hard to accommodate women, which at least initially meant to get the men to understand that this did not represent a problem, and would not cause problems in the relationships between men and women, etc. In this it appears that they succeeded, at least initially. Even so, it was a wise idea to locate the telecentre on the premises of the GTZ offices, so that it was not clear to men walking past on the street whether the

women were visiting the GTZ offices or the telecentre.

The project closed around 2005, and around this time a private Internet cafe opened. Continued operation beyond the closure of the project was an issue, and there was some hope that this outfit would take it over, so to speak. I haven't been in touch with the situation in Aioun lately, and do not know what has happened. One thing is for sure, the quite nice and large website the project set up (it provided hosting opportunities for a number of local and regional initiatives, including development projects and civil society activities), at www.cybercommune.mr, is off-line since a few months (you can find it at www.archive.org, though).

To find out what really happened, I guess one would have to go to GTZ. It is my hunch, though, that the key goal of empowering women turned out to be too much of an uphill battle, so big, in fact, that no local group or NGO wanted to take it on alone. Addressing gender issues in a country like Mauritania is, to be true, exceedingly difficult, and needs a very long-term perspective. To what extent community telecentres – or this particular approach at any rate – is the way to go, is an open question. Mauritania is a basket case as far as addressing gender issues, so they could hardly have found a more difficult place to try this out!

As we are lucky enough to have a Jam participant from Mauritania in our midst, namely Oumoul Tall, I would like to ask you whether you know anything about this particular cybercommune? That aside, do you have any insights to contribute on telecentres in general? Speaking personally, I would certainly like to hear about your own work!

There is an aspect of this project that befalls many projects, namely that the victory is sold before the facts are in, so to speak. During the lifetime of the project, a number of journalists visited it (mostly Germans), and filed enthusiastic and near panegyric reports back. Images of women sitting in front of the computers were disseminated widely, and one even made the front cover of a prestigious annual World Bank publication. I have attached such an account (in German, there is unfortunately no documentation available in English, and, to my knowledge, not even in French). Several pictures are available online at www.maurifemme.mr/aioun3.html, including the one that made the front cover of a World Bank publication. If anyone is particularly interested in the attached document I will consider translating it.

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GLOBAL JAM FORUM -> WORKING -> Re: WORKING

by Lars Soeftestad - Thursday, 19 July 2007, 09:32 AM

Good morning Nancy!

Interesting comment. Whether they are called cybercafés or telecentres they should be assessed for their ability to be "socially connected internet connection points." But, to be fair, we should differentiate — cybercafés/internet cafés are, on the whole, and certainly those I've frequented in diverse countries in the south, private sector based. That is, the owners care only about making a profit (and a nice one at that - being entrepreneurs in an exploding market where costs are low and user fees are, relatively speaking, very high). Thus, it is fairly predictable who frequent these places, as well as what they do (according to my own participatory survey activities based on a sampling technique that clearly leaves something to be desired): they are mostly young men, and they spend hours and hard-earned cash (as they mostly come from elite backgrounds one suspects that it is their fathers that in many cases have done the hard work), on three main types of activities: online games, trying to find employment and education opportunities abroad, and chat rooms. The latter largely amounts to chatting with women that I suspect are mostly located in developed countries. Is this a harsh judgment? Anyway, my 2 cents worth on your final question.

Telecentres are different altogether. Partly because they often are located in rural areas, and partly because the management cultivate and nurture specific foci, as well as address specific segments of the population. Lower prices means that the less well-to-do can afford it, and catering specifically to women and to local NGOs is a common feature. I will mention some details about such a telecentre that I know a little about in a separate post (it is located in Mauritania, where they go by the name of "cybercommune").

Now to your concern with individual vs. group perspectives. This is very basic indeed. As you rightly state (and as I have touched upon in one or two of my earlier postings), what you call the "group experience" is much more common in developing and transition countries (btw, it occurs to me that "transition country" may not be a familiar term to you all, and it should perhaps be included in the glossary). Where we in the West are individualized to an almost extreme degree, the group or the collective (meaning, the family, the extended family, the tribe (and several intermediary steps), the neighborhood, the village, etc. etc.) are of vital importance. I work mainly with natural resource management, and thus experience the very vital and complex patterns of communal or collective property rights systems to various types of natural resources that are found in these countries. Such common property resources (CPRs) are, by the way, closely connected with what is called "indigenous knowledge," "local knowledge," or "traditional knowledge."

You are very right that we, in our wisdom (or lack thereof), largely think of property rights' issues in terms of our own experience and reality: one person own a piece of land and everything on it, ownership is the same as the right to use, and natural resources can be sold and bought just like that without asking anybody's advice or permission. The realities outside the West are rather different: collectives of people own natural resources jointly, different resources are separate from each other (e.g., different groups can own the land and the trees

that grow on the land), there is often a division between owning a natural resource and having the right to use it, sale of natural resources is anathema, and the word "ownership" does not really apply (many languages do not even have a word comparable with the English words "to own" and "owner" (the word "custodianship" is closer to the perceived reality). An to top it, many countries experience, as a result of their colonial history, a complex legal situation where different legal regimes are layered, as it were, on top of each other. In Mauritania, to take an example, we thus find traditional law, Islamic law, and a modernized version of the Napoleonic Code.

Here is the million dollar question to you all: managing natural resources in this way is fast disappearing, and for obvious reasons. Can online communication and related tools contribute to stopping this trend, and, if not, contribute to adapting the local and the globalized realities to each other, thus ensuring a more amicable relationship between tradition and modernity? How to devise tools that function within such a communal and collective reality and setting? Put differently, can this be done? And, to be the Devil's Advocate, if so, should we bother, and even if a solution is found, should or could it be implemented?

A final comment: I have earlier commented in support of one among you (sorry, can't recall the name) that questioned with software engineers and the industry in general have not considered collaborating with people that are knowledgeable in these matters. If nothing else, I hope that this post has gone some ways towards explaining why this would be necessary. Enough said!

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GLOBAL JAM FORUM -> WORKING -> Re: Great summary Bruce - thanks!

by Lars Soeftestad - Thursday, 19 July 2007, 07:14 AM

Jen,

Your outside view into your own society (and, by implication, my own Norwegian society) is well taken, and, might I add, something we (meaning, our species as a whole) are not very good at. Being an anthropologist, this quality of being able to take on the role of an outsider – or, alternatively, an inside stranger – is, I guess, a question of a professional hazard. Anyway, your dualistic argument is so true. And, in a cross-cultural perspective, it ranges even wider: we (Westerners) largely create separate boxes for many facts and features of life: religion, education, family life, inter-generational relations, etc. While there still is the rural-urban divide among us, the question becomes one of to what extent this makes us experts on assessing, pronouncing judgement on, and giving advice to other cultures (here, specifically: assessing needs for, and development of appropriate technologies for online communication)?

As for your A. Einstein quote I'll par that with one of my own, applicable to most

of my work in development cooperation as well as guiding my work on networking and managing online communities: "If it was people that caused a problem in the first place, than these very people have to be involved in order to solve that problem." In other words, increased participation (leading to increased equity and transparency) as both a means *and* a goal. Which means I would seem to disagree fundamentally with Einstein – how weird and strange, come to think of it!

Finally, you lament the fact that you have to "learn hundreds of different programs with all their nuances," and wonder why this is so? I guess we all agree with you on this. As to the reasons, well, in the case of programs that are proprietary, I guess the short answer is that this is private sector and profit driven. In the case of the open source movement, the simple answer is that a guy comes up with a really bright idea, and decides to build a new piece of software around it. In general, software come and go, though. As you rightly state, the good service that events like this Jam can do it to discuss the pros and cons of different programs and contribute to reaching some kind of consensus as to what works best for our community. For example, as a newbie Drupal user, I find is reassuring that several among us have given it a thumb up.

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GLOBAL JAM FORUM -> WORKING -> Re: WORKING

by Lars Soeftestad - Thursday, 19 July 2007, 06:28 AM

Nancy,

Your point about having to "consider access and power dynamics" is well taken, not just in connection with online collaboration vs. F2F arguments, but very generally

Still, I disagree with you, partly at least. It may have to do with our various points of departure, and our constituencies. In my case they are rural folks in developing countries, and for these people to meet F2F has nothing to do with resources and power - they meet F2F on a general basis. That they cannot meet F2F with somebody in a different country, or even in the capital, is a different story, and this certainly has to do with lack of resources (thus, as a rule, when such encounters happens, it is the outsider that comes to them). But then again, most of these people do not necessarily crave to meet outsiders, neither F2F nor online (we should perhaps discuss why this is so). Thus, your point about the problems of getting online certainly applies to these people too, for the reasons you mention as well as for other reasons.

On your little story: in rural areas in the countries where I work (incl. most recently Cameroon, Chad, Ghana, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Yemen), the

situation would seem to be the exact opposite: The chances of getting women online are mostly very slim indeed (with Ghana and Nigeria being exceptions), while NGOs (in the countries where there are alive or even emerging NGOs and civil society) are usually eager adopters.

Accordingly, in these places it is usually not a question of either F2F or online. Rather, it is to start at a much more basic level and begin by nurturing civil society and support F2F communication (which, by our standards are still lagging behind - e.g. as connected with lack of equity and transparency). And this is, as you will all appreciate, a long process.

I cannot resist relating a little story myself: Some years back I was involved in evaluating a World Bank project in a country in Africa. My team was led into the office of the Project Director, who was a local person. The project had one computer with internet connection, located in the Director's office next to his desk. All staff could, in principle, use it. There was, however, some formalities around this right: they had to officially request it from the Director. And the Director would always be in the room. When he was away, which was quite often, the office was locked and nobody could access the Internet. While the Director may have had good intentions for this kind of control, I do also see a strong element of control and power being used here. And, to connect this with the argument above, NGOs and civil society in developing and transition countries are clearly early and eager adopters, while the public sector is equally clearly lagging behind.

As for more general aspect of power, powerlessness and empowerment, I may get back to that in a later posting.

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Reception -> Meet and Greet -> Re: Meet and Greet

by Lars Soeftestad - Wednesday, 18 July 2007, 11:38 AM

Dear Ari,

Your discussion of "online community" vs. "community of practice" is helpful. You seem to imply that, as the technologies/tools available are mushrooming, the meaning that these terms have in peoples' mind are also changing. Right? Your point that in this process we tend to place less and less emphasis on "creating good discussion tools" is well taken.

A couple of weeks back I gave a presentation at an internal World Bank seminar in Washington DC on networks and Communities of Practice (the Bank's Rural Dept. plans to explore the use of ICT-based networks and CoPs in their own work). Here I suggested that a network that places increasing emphasis on knowledge management (including production and dissemination) may be termed a community of practice. Do you folks agree?

This apart, for those among us into definitions and concepts, what actually is the differences and overlaps between online community, network and CoP?

Regards, Lars

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