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Youth on human rights, youth for open source

RSS



At the heart of the Commons movement is a simple yet powerful concept of sharing information and art for the enjoyment and the betterment of everyone's lives. Much of this sharing is the result of widespread internet access and broadband availability, resources which many people do not have. Bridging the digital divide is by no means easy, though numerous organizations exist with that goal in mind. With organizations and groups like [One Laptop Per Child](#) and the [Digital Divide Network](#), quite a few projects are getting widespread attention.

At the grassroots is a unique youth-led organization called [Five Minutes to Midnight \(FMM\)](#). FMM was originally started in 2003 as a blog about the war in Iraq when it was felt that the youth's response to the war was uncoordinated and for the most part ignored. The blog eventually turned into an online magazine,

published monthly and on topics ranging from malicious business practices to the psychology of torture. International development and politics were the focus and two years later, the website had readers, writers, and volunteers from over 30 countries – it even self-published a book.

Last August, the organization underwent a major change moving from publishing to actively promoting media creation in developing countries. Partnering with [Rafiqui](#), a Chad-based organization running the country's only national youth newspaper, it was decided FMM would run a pilot project to explore how open source software, coupled with intense tutorials and workshops, could be used to engage youth in media development.

From Canada to Chad

Chad is an interesting country to work in, especially in the context of the last few years. Nestled in Central Africa and East of Sudan, its poor economy has taken a hit with large numbers of refugees from that crisis. The youth in the country are optimistic, though they do face a great deal of economic and social challenges. Rafiqui

is an organization that teaches young people about overcoming social problems like violence in schools, it promotes women's rights, and deals with the HIV/AIDS pandemic. It is run by extremely dedicated people, and the magazine is a perfect example of both hard work and openness. It is written by volunteers, and the editorial process is completely transparent: everyone is invited to meetings where writers read their articles. During the process, the entire group works together to improve them, giving suggestions and criticisms. Up until late 2005, the magazine was then finished in cyber cafes around N'Djamena, Chad's capital city.

So where does FMM fit in? In late 2005, Émanuèle Lapierre-Fortin and I spent four weeks in N'Djamena working on a pilot project called the "[Article 13 Initiative](#)", running workshops on Fedora Core, OpenOffice, GIMP, InkScape, and other graphics and editing tools.

The workshops had two goals: to learn whether such software can be taught to non-technical users in a short time frame, and to help Rafigui improve its operations. While the goals were very ambitious, they were achieved within the given timeframe. Workshop participants were eager to learn, and often spent hours with us after attending lectures and classes in their regular schools. While some participants had basic experience with the internet, e-mail, or office applications, many were using computers for the first time.

The trip was considered a great success, and since the workshops, Rafigui has continued to use the tools and skills that were developed during the event. The volunteers now work in an office rather than renting computer time at cyber cafes, and continue to use the software tools, especially Gimp and Scribus.

Successes and challenges

The accomplishments within Rafigui have seen new projects are being undertaken by both organizations involved. Follow-up workshops for Rafigui took place in December 2006 and January 2007. Run by Émanuèle, these workshops were meant for FMM to connect with Rafigui on the ground and complement last year's work. Rafigui also announced it is running its own open source workshops, and is training new volunteers to use the software covered in FMM's original workshops.

The biggest challenge to these projects over time has been the use of Linux itself, as it is technically complex and does not often run automatically with the digital cameras and printers Rafigui uses. Even so, Bruno Fangbo, Rafigui's director, wrote, "What I liked most was the discussion on the presentation of Linux and OSS; it gave us the possibility to learn and give our opinions on OSS, which is a wonder and revolution for computer science."

A constant concern of Rafigui and FMM has also been how to provide technical support in the long run, without adequate communications tools. Internet access in Chad is slow and expensive – as are long distance phone calls. To deal with these problems, the facilitators wrote a "[Guide de l'utilisateur](#)" (User's Guide) as a reference for the workshops. A more technical solution has yet to be found, though FMM and Rafigui have been lucky – Émanuèle now lives in Burkina Faso, a country just West of Chad, and they have been in contact with each other over the year.

Beyond Chad's borders

Following the success of Rafigui's workshops, a second newspaper project was started in Nairobi, Kenya. Run by Shining Hope for the Community (SHOFCO), the newspaper targets youth in the Kibera slum, one of the largest slums in Africa. It has a readership of about 100, and serves both as a way to get youth in the community involved and allow them to learn about social events and issues therein. Indeed, some of the youth there now want to become journalists and reporters when they grow up. Within the next year, FMM hopes to run a similar set of workshops in Kenya with SHOFCO, as their biggest obstacles are editorial and technical skills.

The idea of open source software within such settings is positive, both for what the software stands for and the numerous free tutorials and other resources available for users. The concept of free and open media is even more important: many of the areas FMM is targeting lack varied media sources, and some are overlooked completely. Involving youth in the media development process can teach important skills regardless of where they are, and also allows them to simultaneously improve their lives and their communities.

The students at Five Minutes to Midnight thank the [University of Toronto's Project Open Source Open Access](#) for all their support and help in developing their work.

Photograph: Members of the team in Kelo, Chad, by [FMM](#), [CC BY-NC 2.5](#)

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