

SOCIAL FAIRNESS OF SOFTWARE

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Introduction

Sustainable and non-exploitative e-Governance that would cater to the needs of the 'society' have far lesser chances of surfacing, owing to the conflicting power equations operating within the system. Figure below illustrates slim chances for true e-Governance initiatives to take off smoothly, without hinderance. The combined power of 'influential minority' to force Government to include their needs at top priority and the power of closed source technologies to force their way through cannot be easily overcome, given the low political awareness on different options within technologies by the society, and the low-key marketing efforts of open source technologies.

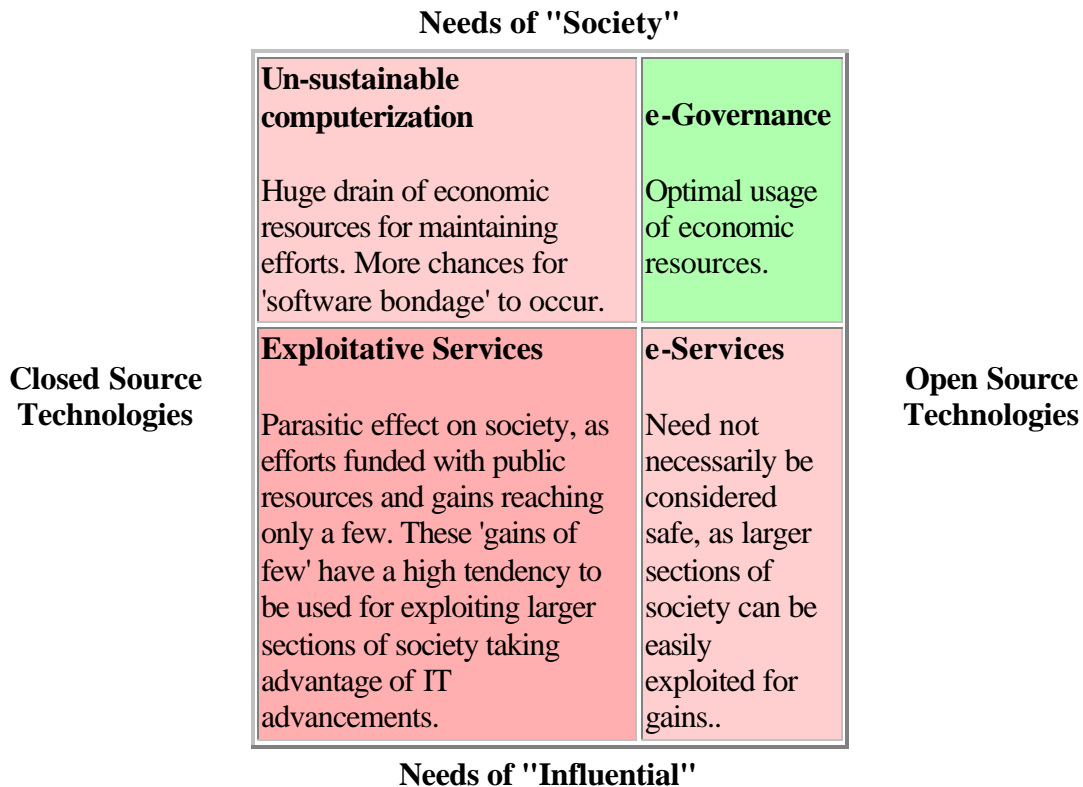


Fig : Different possible ways of projecting e-Governance

The resulting balance of equilibrium would be loaded to favour an onset of highly exploitative services, under the theme of e-governance, which would have a negative impact on the prosperity of any State, given the acceleratory effects that information

technology components are known to possess. These issues have received serious attention in many developing (exploited and non-exploitative) nations, where legislators have woken up and worked at preventing further exploitation by framing legal scriptures on the nature of software that is to be used for public institutions. Peru, Argentina, Brazil, China, European Union etc all have adopted this line of thinking.

The hypothesis that only Open Source technologies can initiate e-Governance efforts are justified by exposing the crucial limitations of closed source technologies. Succeeding paragraphs are an attempt to place the limitations of closed source technologies.

Surveillance

Revealing the source code is the only known concrete proof to ascertain for sure that the software is not treacherous, and has no spy code inside. Whether the 'recent court victory' approves of the worst confirmed fears of such technologies being misused to foreign sleuths to gain access to systems located worldwide, is something that our 'national security experts' should study in detail. The dual role of citizens over their data, firstly, being the legitimate owners of their data and secondly, being that of its consumers, should make the State concerned about the guaranteed accessibility to such public data, its permanent availability of such data and ensure that there are no transmission of such data to third parties without the explicit knowledge of the State. Closed source and proprietary software licenses fall short of these essential requirements to be considered for any e-Governance initiatives involving public data.

Dependency

That proprietary software licenses have a life -period after which they expire, haven't yet caught the attention of general public. Since proprietary firms have the freedom to fix the life-period of the software that they license and sell, they enjoy the rights to alter the life-period at their convenience. Most End User License Agreements or EULAs are drafted to ensure that these rights of proprietary software vendors can be legally enforced with the help of anti-piracy laws existing within any State. As closeness with the prolonged usage of software gradually increases the dependancy factor, States having adopted closed source technologies often remain wedded to the software suppliers, unable to break free even if it wants to.

Abuse of Market Share figures

It has become a common practise to see proprietary software vendors attempting to influence decision makers quoting 'market share figures'. The existence of two distinct software market components, namely, the server market and desktop market, where results are conflicting, are carefully concealed while such figures are projected. While desktop market allows technical features like stability, reliability and security to be adequately compromised, mostly due to the fact that desktops continue to be used for non-serious official work the same is quite the reverse with server components. Hence it is common for proprietary software sellers to capture markets, concentrating more on

'user-friendly features' rather than on the factors mentioned above. Server components call for extreme reliability, stability and strong security features which require extreme R&D investments, that usual proprietary software vendors are yet to produce. Server market share has seen increased adoption favouring Open Source technologies (Netcraft surveys). To avoid suspicion, proprietary vendors often 'produce' proof to their claim of superiority in (overall) market share, eventually forcing State to allow computerisation using their systems and components.

Corporate Trend

Information Technology with its inherent ability to accelerate operational efficiency when assigned crucial roles in association with 'developmental' tasks, can produce results in either extreme, within a short period. Though the very thought of reducing humanity to mere statistical instruments, that can be looked down as 'objects of study' can scare committed social scientists, development economists can produce empirical results in support of such digital 'reforms'. The challenge that emerges is that, unless very sure and thorough of the results and the side-effects, there exist a possibility wherein the technology can play havoc with the social fabric of the human community. Powerful corporations having amassed immense wealth, have embedded within themselves, a tendency to encourage and promote all efforts that produce short term profit maximisation, giving least regard to the collective aspirations of the human society. There are ample instances wherein side-effects have been conveniently passed on the community. Rewards and honors are reserved for those managers who toe this line of thinking, while others have to face the firing line, no matter how highly placed they are in the corporate ladder. Hence the word of corporate managers should not be taken as the ultimate, more so, as the education received by such managers, come to their assistance in producing 'scientifically proven methodologies'.

IT Enabled Services

There appears to be a strong bias within public minds in identifying IT packaging industry with the IT industry, contributed mostly due to continued projections through the media. This is akin to treating pharmaceutical outlets with health service industry. While the core content of IT remains embedded with other operational arms of the industry, this fact is conveniently forgotten and sops declared for the IT packaging industry, which as per common surveys available worldwide, account for housing less than 5% of the total IT professional workforce. Hence this minority group (that too identifies themselves with the IT industry) often picks up total turnover projections, while arguing for their case, and sometimes even succeed in bagging over-attention, that may be detrimental to the interest of the society. A call service centre transplanted to India (IT enabled service) would displace a definite workforce from its place of origin. Though the transplantation process may succeed in 'raising ' technical job opportunities, this workforce may become vulnerable when another nation steps in and offers service at much lesser rates (or de-value their currency), causing an increase in idle workforce, worldwide. Our political leadership has a huge task ahead, if this has been chosed to be the mainstream sustainable

form of income-generation avenue using IT tools, especially considering the fact that nearly 70 percent of the nation's economy is agro-based.

Growing Disparity

Quest for money widens the gap between family and community, resulting in a deepening alienation that is known to create an inner sense of social emptiness. The situation favours 'solution providers' to step in and offer services promising that it would end this malady, which again sets the cycle for increased quest for money. The huge disparity emerged over the last few decades had been reflected in the global income distribution in 1991 by reports of UNDP. Reports point out that 82.7% of the total world income was owned by the richest 20%, while the poorest 20% received only 1.4%. It was also reported that this disparity had increased significantly over the last five decades and would increase with the passage of time. The report also point out that 37.4% of the wealth held in 'stock' in US was owned by the richest 0.5% families. Whether continued usage of information technology tools would increase or decrease this disparity and whether such disparities are the cause for growing social disturbances world over, should be a cause of serious concern to any State. While resources continue to deplete at fast rates, one should work to see that in the resulting struggle for the remaining resources, the poor are not alienated any further.

Task Ahead

Human civilization that has thrived for thousands of centuries, appear to get disintegrated with each passing year, where rewards and honours favour only a biased line of thinking, a minority, that is increasingly getting more influential and powerful. That information technology played a major role to this awkwardness, would be something that the IT fraternity should get worried of.

David Korten observes, " There appears to exist a highly corrupted global economic order that is gyrating out of human control, acquiring gigantic proportions, strong enough to engulf anything that offers it a resistance. Proponents of free markets, economic globalisation and liberalisation should seriously evaluate whether the tendency to consume, is the highest expression of humanity, whether relentless pursuit of greed and consumption leads to socially optimal outcomes, and whether it is in the best interest of society to encourage, honour and reward these values."

That 'free markets' are not 'just markets' can be amplified with a single example on how much it cost for one kg of tea to the rich and the poor. While the poor, almost always is forced to adopt piecemeal purchases, the cost overshoots for a single item. If this is the case in all its uniformity across all essential life-sustaining commodities, as poverty sets in, the danger of the poor, further slipping down becomes all too imminent, resulting in a complete isolation without any hope. Political leadership should wake up to this reality, while allowing 'economists and planners' to go about boasting that 'opening up of frontiers and allowing free flow of commodities would help revive the economy, and facilitate establishment of relations between geographically separated habitations'.

Encouraging critical thinking at all levels may perhaps help in exposing such handicapped growth, so that efforts to neutralise them may achieve some success, even while acknowledging the general cynicism, that the chances for such a turnaround are truly minimal.

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