



Social Source Commons: Strategies for Live Events and Beyond

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Overview

Over the past five years, Aspiration has been developing the Social Source Commons web platform (SSC) with the support of the Open Society Institute. The goal of SSC is to map out the universe of software that exists for supporting the work of NGO and civil society organizations, and to aggregate relevant knowledge about each tool in the universe.

The SSC platform architecture is informed by a range of “web 2.0”¹ values and conventions, including a focus on user-supplied content (sometimes referred to as “crowdsourcing”²), collaborative “tagging”³ of software tools in the SSC database in order to create a “folksonomy”⁴-style categorization of those tools, and a rich and highly configurable set of RSS⁵ feeds to allow each user to customize exactly what information they track about tools relevant to their work and organization.

In parallel, over the same time period, Aspiration has developed an innovative and unique convening model focused on maximizing knowledge transfer and knowledge capture between live event participants⁶. By eschewing traditional session formats such as “keynotes” and panels, and instead emphasizing dialog-driven sessions focused on the specific interests and needs articulated by the participants themselves, Aspiration events yield rich and unique outcomes for those in attendance, while building capacity and strengthening social networks among communities of practice.

While there have been several projects focused on entering specific types of tools into the system, SSC community managers have taken a largely ad-hoc approach to tool mapping, electing to let the users architect the platform content, and allowing the contributions of active users to shape the scope of the database. After more than three years of user contributions, a critical mass of inventory is being achieved, with 3000 tools in the database and more contributions being made each day.

There remains a related set of needs, voiced by a various groups of NGO software users and on many of the mailing lists dealing with NGO technology, to develop a more rigorous process for enumerating tools within a specific category of functionality, or targeted at the needs of a specific sub-sector of civil society (e.g., human rights or environmental justice), as well as for maintaining such lists over time.

This paper begins with an overview on the current state of SSC, and brief enumeration of features and functionality. It then goes on to describe a specific effort to utilize the Aspiration event methodology in order to map out and capture knowledge about a specific category of software tools. “Mapping” refers to enumerating and categorizing existing tools and associated functionality, in this case open source software tools that support language

1 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web20>

2 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crowdsourcing>

3 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tag_\(metadata\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tag_(metadata))

4 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folksonomy>

5 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rss>

6 <http://facilitation.aspirationtech.org>

translation. Furthermore, this paper assesses the suitability of SSC as a tool for supporting this process. A larger goal is to document a general process for such “tool mapping” convenings in order to reapply the model in other software disciplines and NGO sub-sectors.

Finally, this paper lays out strategy points for extending SSC's reach and relevance. The strategy includes integration with other projects, as well as increased marketing, community engagement and platform improvements.

Current Status of Social Source Commons

Platform usage

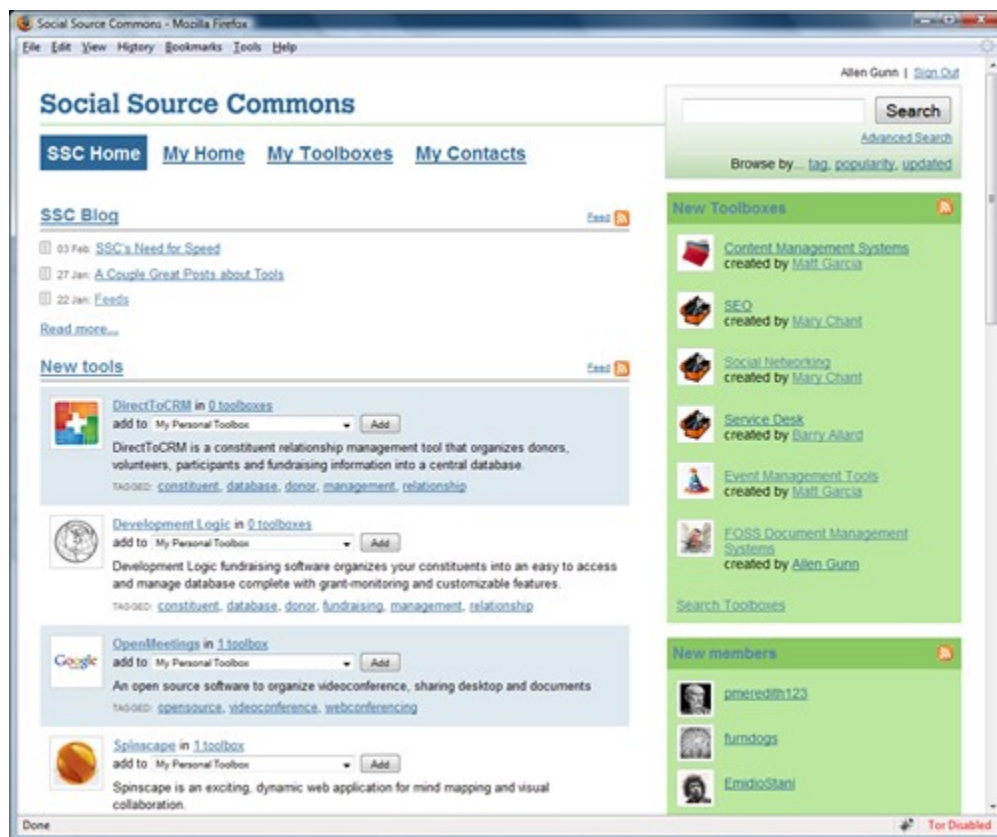
SSC has been live as a production web site for slightly over 3 years, since January 2006. In terms of site metrics, the following statistics provide a basic profile of site usage and content:

- The database now contains information on over 3020 software tools
- There just over 1500 registered users, though the vast majority of site usage is via anonymous traffic
- Site traffic averages between 5000 and 7000 unique visitors per month

Platform features

SSC is designed to provide rich searching and browsing support to anonymous site visitors, enabling them to find tools and associated supporting information.

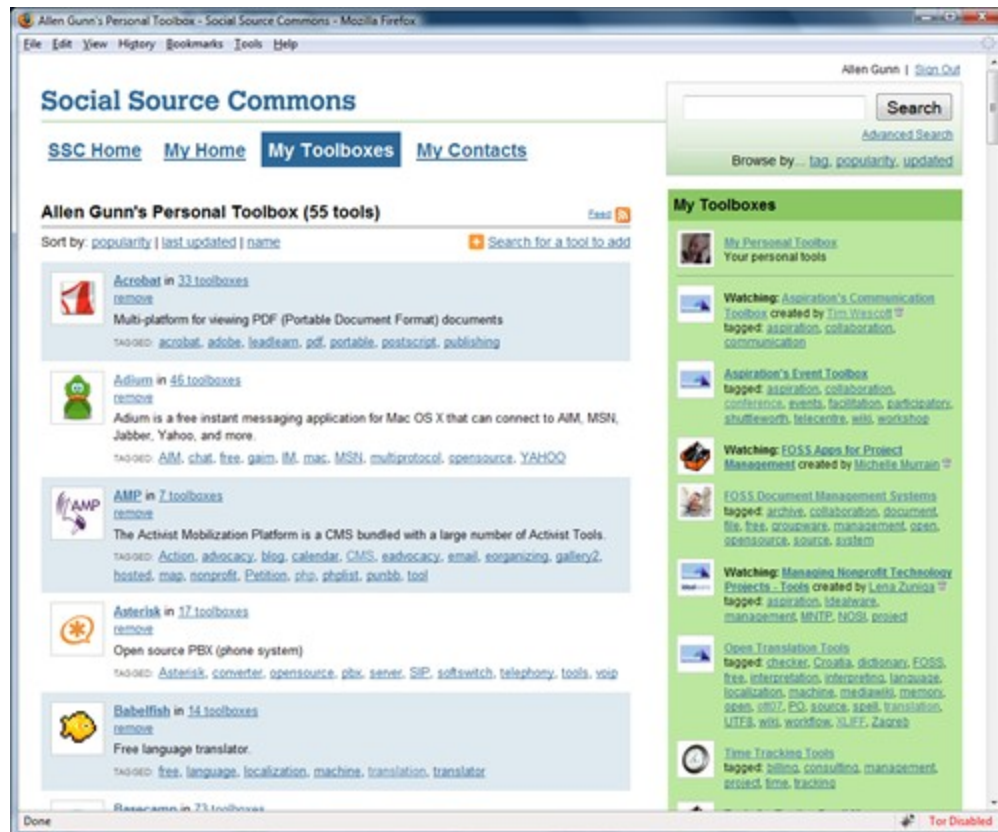
First-time visitors to the site see listings of the latest tools and newest users added to the system, as well as “heat maps” indicating most active tools (in terms of edits), most active users, and which users are most often tracked by other community members.



In parallel with the platform, Aspiration publishes the SSC blog⁷, which offers roundups of new tools, assessments of trends in NGO software, and interviews with community members.

The following features are available to users who create an SSC account.

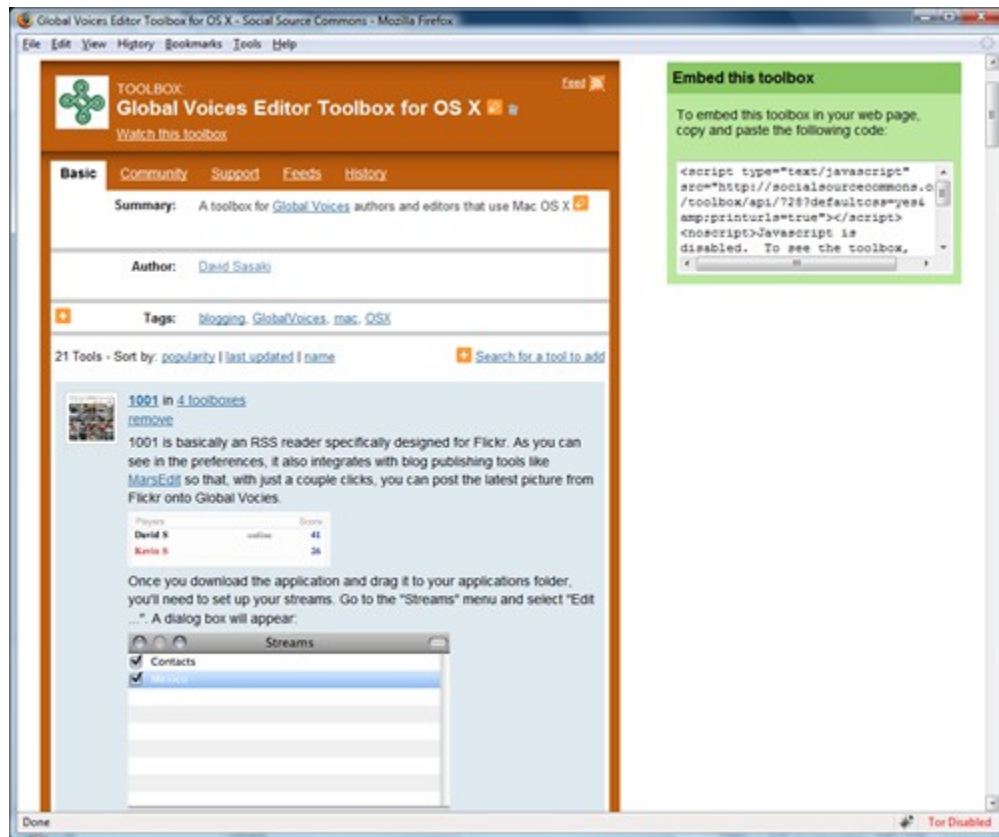
Personal Toolbox: SSC allows each registered user to build a list of the software tools they use or track, and store them in their “Personal toolbox”. This toolbox then generates a custom RSS feed that allows each user to track updates and new information about the tools they use.



Community Toolboxes: SSC also allows each user to create additional lists of tools, known as “Community Toolboxes”, which can be used to build collections of related tools. These may be the set of tools required to support a specific process, tools used by a particular community of practice, or tools with a thematic or functional relationship. One example of this usage is the “Global Voices Editor Toolbox”⁸ maintained by David Sasaki of Rising Voices; whenever a new editor joins the team, David is able to point them to this list of tools, which includes customized documentation on how to install and configure each tool for use in the Global Voices program:

7 <http://blog.socialsourcecommons.org/>

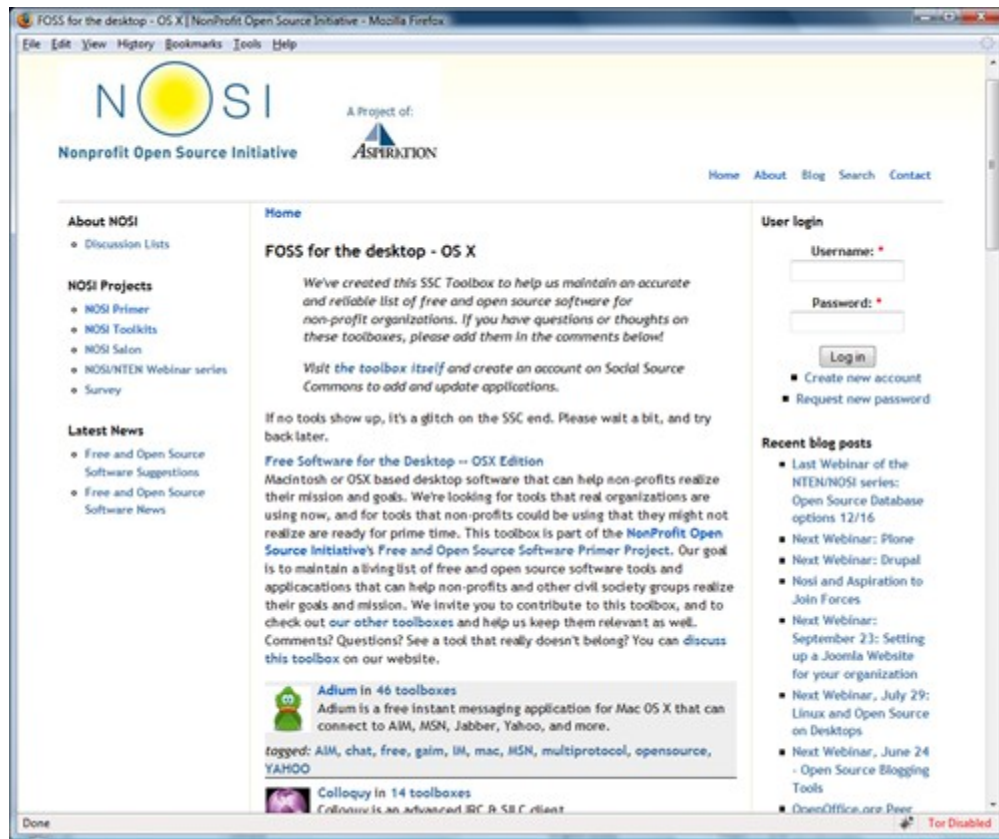
8 <http://socialsourcecommons.org/toolkit/show/728>



Rich, customizable RSS feeds: In addition to the RSS feed associated with their personal toolbox, users can subscribe to feeds for each Community Toolbox they create, as well as each tool, each tag, each user, and the overall site activity.

“Embed” APIs for toolbox re-publishing: SSC exposes a simple “embed” API which allows other web sites to embed SSC data on their pages. At present, the API is limited to embedding toolboxes which have been previously created on SSC. While uptake has not been dramatic, there have been notable success stories, including inventories of free and open source software for NGOs maintained by NOSI (the Nonprofit Open Source Initiative)⁹

⁹ <http://nosi.net/projects/primer/toolkits>



Current platform issues and challenges

Performance: The greatest limiting factor to growth in platform usage is application performance. Initial page load times have taken 15 seconds or more, and many users report frustration in trying to use the system. Recent migration to new hosting infrastructure has mitigated this to some degree, but speed is an ongoing concern, especially as site traffic grows.

Repeat user visits: A fundamental unsolved problem of the platform is the establishment of a value proposition which will motivate users to visit the site on a regular basis. While many users report using the site “whenever they need to find a tool”, at present the site does not generate a sufficient volume of new and compelling content to drive regular return traffic.

Personal toolbox maintenance: A direct corollary of missing incentives for repeat visits is that users do not tend to keep their personal toolboxes up-to-date. What is potentially the most compelling values of the platform—users browsing what tools others are using—is an unrealized potential at this point.

The Strategy Points section at the end of this paper enumerates specific steps which will be taken to mitigate these limiting factors.

The following sections detail how SSC has been used to inventory tool categories in a live event setting, and subsequently provides analysis on how to replicate and improve the process.

Live Tool Mapping with SSC – Event Background

The 2007 Open Translation Tools Convergence (OTT07) took place in Zagreb, Croatia in late November and early December 2007. The event brought together two passionate communities: those creating open source software tools to support translating open content, and those with a need for better tools to support translation of the open content they create. “Open content” was interpreted to encompass a range of resource types available under open licenses such as Creative Commons (CC) and Free Document License (FDL), ranging from books to manuals to documents to blog posts to multimedia. “Open translation tool” was interpreted to encompass any piece of software which supports or performs language translation, and which is distributed under a free or open source software (FOSS) license.

Open Translation Tools was co-organized by Aspiration and Multimedia Institute (MI2), and was supported by the generosity of the Open Society Institute, with additional support for participant travel provided by TechSoup. The OTT07 agenda was collaboratively developed by participants and event organizers in the time leading up to and during the gathering, and the proceedings were directed using Aspiration's collaborative approach to event facilitation.

The event focused on a relatively specific category of translation tools: those which support or enable the human translation of text content. Participants engaged in two parallel paths of learning and mapping: one team documented available open translation tools and technologies, categorizing and differentiating the available offerings, while another team oversaw the enumeration of a set of “use cases” which describe how publishers of open content want to be able to translate and manage that content.

The event was convened to:

- Document the open source translation tool landscape – What tools are out there? And what should we create to fill the gaps?
- Inventory “open content translation use cases” - What translation support is needed?
- Strengthen the community of practice around open source translation tools.

All event proceedings were captured on an event wiki¹⁰, and ongoing discussions continue to take place on the event mailing list¹¹. A short video was created to capture voices and perspectives of the event participants¹².

Outcomes from the actual mapping and overall event are described in the paper “Open Translation Tools: Disruptive Potential to Broaden Access to Knowledge”¹³, and the list of Open Translation Tools is maintained on the Social Source Commons web site¹⁴.

10 <http://opentranslation.aspirationtech.org>

11 <http://lists.aspirationtech.org/lists/info/opentranslation>

12 <http://aspirationtech.org/papers/ott07/video>

13 <http://aspirationtech.org/paper/opentranslationtools>

14 <http://socialsourcecommons.org/toolkit/show/1107/>

Overall Event Process

The process of mapping out the universe of open translation tools was embedded in a larger agenda focused on a broad range of open translation topics. The arc of the agenda was constructed to yield the most fruitful, interactive environment in which to perform the mapping tasks at hand, with the ultimate goal of refining outputs from knowledge capture processes into a coherent and well-documented tool set.

The general event process was architected to establish a collaborative ethos, and convey non-competitive dynamics as the preferred mode of interaction. Explicit mention was made of the fact that the event was not a contest to establish who was the smartest or most knowledgeable. In addition, it was communicated that excessive advocacy for one's own tools and or favorite projects was not in the best form.

Pre-event engagement: In order to make optimal use of the time in Zagreb, discussions were started on the event mailing list before the gathering. Several specific threads were initiated, inviting participants to:

- Introduce themselves in a paragraph or two, and share what they were hoping to get out of OTT07;
- Initiate the tool-mapping process, by listing any open source translation tool they were working on or aware of;
- Start describing translation needs, by enumerating functionality required for specific projects and contexts;
- Propose session topics, both to identify issues most important to participants, and to set a participant-driven tone for the event.

Large group ice-breaking: On the first morning of the event, participants spent the initial two hours getting to know one another as a large group and sharing perspectives on a range of issues relevant to open source tools for open content translation. This was done using “spectrograms”¹⁵ with such statements as “anyone can be a translator” and “The open content community needs one unified platform that meets all needs”. By touching on quasi-controversial topics and areas of passion, this initial exercise let participants open up immediately and allowed their perspectives and passions be known.

Participatory agenda design: The first morning concluded with agenda brainstorming. Participants broke into small groups of 5-6 people and used “post-it” notes to write down topics and questions that they wanted to see addressed in the agenda. Each participant could create as many sticky notes as they wanted, but each note could only contain one sentence, either a statement or a question. The second phase of this brainstorming involved posting the notes on large rolling boards, and inviting participants to “cluster” the notes into related topic

¹⁵ <http://facilitation.aspirationtech.org/index.php/Facilitation:Spectrogram>

areas, which were then morphed into sessions on the agenda. The overall process was lively with a sense of fun and play, and the net result of the process was a shared sense of ownership over the ensuing proceedings.

Additional interactive sessions: The agenda also made use of two "SpeedGeeking"¹⁶ sessions in order to allow participants to showcase their tools and projects. In this fast-paced format, 10 participants presented their work in parallel at tables arranged around the perimeter of the main meeting room, while the remainder of the attendees broke into groups of 4 or 5 and rotated from station to station every 5 minutes.

SpeedGeeking also relieved pressure on participants to see that their tools were featured in the tool mapping part of the agenda.

The net result of all the agenda components described above was to create an ethos of collaboration, sharing, and mutual respect in which to best foster the tool and use case mapping processes. In addition to establishing an interactive tone, these session also stimulated fresh thinking and ideas about solutions to translation needs.

All agenda proceedings were captured on the event "wiki"¹⁷, where outcomes from the brainstorming as well as notes from all sessions and mapping efforts were posted for shared viewing and collaborative editing.

¹⁶ <http://facilitation.aspirationtech.org/index.php/Facilitation:SpeedGeeking>

¹⁷ http://opentranslation.aspirationtech.org/index.php/Event_notes

The Tool Mapping Process

The original vision for the event was to simply map out software tools within the domain of open translation. But in the course of planning OTT07, it became clear that such a mapping would not be particularly valuable if it was not coupled with an inventory of “use cases”, which described how publishers of open content would want to be able to translate and manage language versions of that content. Thus the tool mapping process at OTT07 became two parallel processes, one mapping the tools, and a second enumerating associated use cases for open translation.

For the purposes of OTT07, participants defined a use case to be an example of an interaction between a user and a software system which generates some form of value to the user. Such use cases help to capture and scope out what a particular system needs to be able to do in order to support its target users.

The goal of the software tool mapping was to assess the range of currently available open source software tools and services, and identify pressing needs. Primary focus was placed on tools and technologies which support and enable distributed human translation of content, but the role of machine translation was also considered at many points.

While it did not always work out in practice, a general guideline to all participants was to focus on end-user vocabulary when describing both tools and use cases.

The initial session for each mapping project focused on what information, or metadata, to collect for each identified item.

Use Case Mapping

The use case group had the more challenging initial task, as they had to reach agreement on what was meant by “use case”.

At OTT07, use cases were defined as having four primary attributes:

- A title
- A short background description for context
- The description of the use case
- The desired outcome for the user

The following is an example use case from the OTT07 set to illustrate the format:

Title: Translate blog post

Background: A web site has bloggers from around the world posting content which needs to be viewed in more than one language.

Use Case: A translator is assigned to translate a specific entry, logs into the website

to find that entry, and enters into a translation interface, allowing them to translate the blog entry. The translator submits the entry is placed in the queue for approval.

Outcome: Blog entry is translated, and ready for approval.

While “real world” use cases tend to include specific details (e.g. specific languages, situations, technologies), the use cases mapped out at OTT07 have been authored to be more generic and thus hopefully relevant to a broader range of audiences.

After defining the use case format as a full team, the use case mapping group broke into smaller teams of two to four people to generate the actual use cases. Iterating through several phases, the small teams of participants focused on mapping open translation use cases in a range of categories. Some use cases stemmed from the specific needs of individual participants, while others were amalgams of collective participant needs, and still others represented general and well-known functionality requirements.

Even with agreed-upon metadata, a particular challenge in defining the use cases lay in maintaining consistent scope and granularity. Some use cases were very specific and well-defined, while others were vague and expansive. Some simply stated the functionality and outcome, while others enumerated detailed steps to achieve the outcome.

After iteration and refinement, the use cases were grouped into seven categories:

- **Content translation:** Translation of text content in various forms.
- **Multimedia translation:** Translation of audio and text content in videos, audio streams, and graphics.
- **Translation workflow:** Management capabilities needed for oversight and realization of translation processes.
- **Machine and computer-aided translation:** Translation done by software programs instead of humans.
- **Interpreting:** Simultaneous translation of spoken words.
- **Content rendering and presentation:** Use cases for tools that render and display translated content.
- **Localization:** The process of converting a piece of technology, such as a software program, to be available in new language or locale.

The complete set of open translation use cases can be found in the paper “Open Translation Tools: Disruptive Potential to Broaden Access to Knowledge”¹⁸.

¹⁸ <http://aspirationtech.org/paper/opentranslationtools>

Tool Mapping

The tool mapping group decided on a simple set of metadata to collect for each tool: name, URL, and tags. The idea was that all additional information, such as license, publisher, version number, etc., could be gleaned from the URL. A general “breadth over depth” ethic was adopted in order to maximize the number of tools identified rather than focusing too deeply on the best known.

Each tool was identified on a large post-it note by name and URL. Smaller post-it notes were arranged next to the primary note for each tool, in order to associate categorization tags with that tool. This process spanned two sessions, and all OTT07 participants were invited multiple times to review the map and contribute their own knowledge on tools and tool details.

Subsequent discussion in the tool mapping team focused on grouping the identified tools. This was a challenging process, in large part because of the diversity of tools and translation functionality supported. In addition, there was not full agreement on the nature of the categorizing; some participants wanted to use strict exclusive grouping for each tool, such as “Dictionaries” and “Process Management”, while others were more comfortable with a tagging approach that attributed multiple categories to any given tool. Given the overlapping functionality and wide variance in the size of each tool, it was the opinion of the organizers that a tag-oriented approach was the more sustainable and intuitive path to a maintainable mapping.

Tools were then transcribed from the notes onto the event wiki, with all relevant metadata. The wiki was then “gardened”—edited and reorganized to arrive at a refined enumeration and grouping of tools and additional resources.

After the event, research was performed on each of the tools to obtain the additional metadata (license, publisher, etc). In addition, each tool was assessed for which additional tags should be associated, both in order to richly characterize the tools and to enhance the mapping. Several additional tools were also shared on the event mailing list.

Once the wiki had been organized into a suitable state, and secondary metadata such as URLs and tool publishers tracked down, the information was entered into Social Source Commons. A “Community Toolbox” titled “Open Translation Tools”¹⁹ was created. Relevant tools which were already in the SSC database were then associated with the toolbox. Next, tools not already in SSC were entered into the database, and then added to the open translation toolbox. A description, secondary links, and tags were then associated with the toolbox itself, and the link was published to the OTT07 mailing list to invite participants to review the list, identify any omissions, and add additional information about specific tools.

¹⁹ <http://socialsourcecommons.org/toolkit/show/1107/>

Gap Analysis Technique: Positing a “Dream Tool”

One of the goals in doing the tool mapping was to identify functionality gaps in the open translation tools space. Because no formal process exists in the live event context for generating such a gap analysis, the OTT07 group took a creative approach to the problem.

Participants were asked to envision what their “dream translation tool” might look like. The idea was to specify a feature set for a tool which does not yet exist, but which would meet the broadest range of translation needs in terms of features, supported workflows, and business models.

It is important to note that this was a purely theoretical exercise; participants generally agreed that large monolithic tools were not the right course for the future, and that a small, distributed set of tools that work well together was the recommended path for better supporting open translation efforts.

The generated feature set was both expansive and impressive in its ambition to meet a wealth of translation needs. While most of these capabilities are available in various proprietary and open source tools, there is not currently a FOSS tool or tool set that comes close to offering the features enumerated below.

Unfortunately, time and resources did not allow a detailed cross-indexing between the “dream tool” and the inventoried translation tools. An area for improvement in future tool mapping projects would be to further formalize the process of identifying gaps, and in turn inviting participants to prioritize those gaps.

Complete details on outcomes from the “Dream Tool” brainstorm can be found in the paper “Open Translation Tools: Disruptive Potential to Broaden Access to Knowledge”²⁰

²⁰ <http://aspirationtech.org/paper/opentranslationtools>

Issues uncovered in the tool mapping

While a very coherent and rich set of tools was enumerated and documented by the mapping process, the effort also uncovered several issues related to scope and definition of the mapping. These included:

What is a actually a “tool”? The object of the open translation tool mapping was to identify software that could be utilized by publishers of open content to support translation of their content. But many of the items mapped out by the team were developer-facing code libraries and API's used to build and support translation applications. These included the ubiquitous 'gettext' library, and well as the Translate Toolkit. This information was captured on the event wiki, but there was no final repository in which to store and maintain this list of additional resources. To the extent that developers were not the primary audience of the tool mapping, this was acceptable, but to the extent that similar dynamics will likely emerge in other tool mappings, it is worth considering how best to capture and make available this “back end” and “internals” knowledge.

Tools not included in the mapping: There was discussion of several categories of tools which are not strictly speaking “translation” tools, but have as part of their feature sets some support for translation tasks. Two primary types of tools were explicitly left out of the Open Translation Tools inventory:

- **Content Management Systems (CMS):** A number of FOSS CMS, including Drupal, Joomla! and Plone, can be used to create multi-lingual web sites. The conventions and methodologies vary widely from platform to platform, and very little actual translation work is supported by the core distributions of any of these systems. While CMS are an essential component of the open content and open translation fields, they were not included in this tool mapping because of the secondary nature of their translation features.
- **Wikis:** Wiki platforms such as MediaWiki and TikiWiki have been used to manage knowledge in parallel languages in a number of instances, Wikipedia being the best known. But wiki support for translation is done more by editorial convention than by technology-backed processes, and so wikis were not included in the tool mapping. However, the Cross-Language Wiki Engine, which is a project run by members of the TikiWiki community, was included in the mapping, as it is a dedicated component for translation support.

Issues uncovered in use case mapping

As alluded to elsewhere in this paper, there were three primary issues that surfaced during the use case mapping process:

- **Definitions:** Participants spent a good amount of time reaching agreement on just a “use case” actually is from a formal metadata standpoint.

- **Granularity of use cases:** The scope of functionality implied varied widely from use case to use case, and required substantial editing and refinement after the event
- **Level of detail per use case:** In parallel with the granularity issue, the amount of detail provided per use case ranged from minimal to excessive.

It is presumed that future tool mapping events will pre-negotiate these issues, in the hope of generating a more homogeneous and coherent initial data set.

Reflections and Lessons Learned

Overall, the mapping of the Open Translation Tools domain can be considered a success; a richly documented toolbox containing almost 50 tools is live and maintained on the SSC site, and a steady set of updates have been applied since the event. As new tools are added, and when information about tools in the toolbox is updated, those subscribed to the RSS feed for the toolbox are notified.

That said, there is room for improvement in the model, and learnings from this project will greatly inform any future tool-mapping undertakings. The following reflections address success factors in the tool mapping process, as well as considerations on replicability.

Tool domain selection: The fact that OTT07 was a first-of-its-kind event actually worked against the goal of creating a tool-mapping process. The identified tool domain was nascent at best, with few event participants identifying as part of an “Open Translation Tools” community until after the convening. In addition, the field of translation technology is broad, fragmented, and nuanced, which is a daunting triple of factors in any such endeavor. And as described in the corresponding event paper, the fact the the internet is driving rapid evolution of the field only heightened the complexity of the mapping, and assured any desired outcomes were “moving targets”.

Participant Makeup: Owing to the emergent nature of the Open Translation field, a disproportionate number of the event attendees identified as software developers, as opposed to translators or content creators. As a result, it was often a challenge to keep the dialog and language focused on “end user” topics. While participants felt generally comfortable asking for definitions and explanations, various translation disciplines, such as machine translation and translation memory, were terminology and concept domains unto themselves. Future tool mapping projects will likely benefit from a higher percentage of users and intermediaries, with a smaller but facilitative set of developers present to elucidate technical concepts and back-fill more esoteric and arcane essential details.

Use case and tool team makeup: When participants self-selected into groups mapping out use cases and tools, the latter was predominantly made up of developers, while the former was primarily made up of content creators. While this made intuitive sense in the moment, in hindsight, forcing a more heterogeneous mix on both teams would have likely have yielded a better-distilled set of outcomes from each mapping.

Tagging process: An additional implication of the participant makeup was the disjoint nature of domain vocabularies spoken by attendees. Developers tagged tools in technical terms, such as supported standards, underlying technologies and programming languages. Content producers tagged in terms of content types, translation tasks, and more general process concepts. In addition, there was, surprisingly to the organizers, a generally conservative approach to tagging of tools; once a tool had been associated with 1 or 2 tag categorizations, others generally refrained from adding additional tags. An explicit process component of future tool mappings will be to encourage verbose tool tagging.

Offline and online tool set to support mapping process: The tools utilized in the mapping process were simple and worked quite well. Initial brainstorming and enumeration was done using post-it notes on large rolling boards. Digital cameras were used to capture the contents of the boards both for posterity and for backup. And the wiki served as a good preliminary repository for the captured knowledge.

Replicability of the tool mapping process: It seems very likely that applying the process in other tool domains would yield useful mappings. Factors to consider in future tool-mapping convenings:

- **Rightsizing the event goals and agenda:** A pure tool mapping is unlikely to draw in a rich and diverse participant group. The tool mapping tasks need to be balanced with complementary and relevant session topics, as well as rich opportunities for knowledge sharing and capture. Two discussions that can enhance any mapping, and which can translate into multiple sessions each, are a) what are the biggest challenges and opportunities in this tool domain, and b) what are the biggest gaps and missing features in the domain? In addition, focus on emerging trends and technologies will never fail to be a primary draw, and making sure the agenda focuses on the work and passions of the participants is a simple way to maximize engagement.
- **Appropriate targeting of tool domain:** The tool domain to be mapped needs to strike a balance between breadth, so as to draw in a diverse and compelling set of participants, and focus, so as to yield a useful and coherent set of outputs.
- **Makeup of participants:** While it is critical to have developers present for any discussion of the state of software tools in a given category, it is substantially more important to make sure the diversity of target users is represented and made central in the process and discussions. Developer-centric dialogs tend to be self-referential and closed in scope, while users can drive outside-the-box discussions of what's needed while questioning priorities and technical focus of developers on the “cool, geeky stuff”.

In addition, it is likely that better results will be achieved by sequencing the enumeration of the use cases and the tools for a given domain, rather than running them in parallel. By having a stable and fairly complete set of usage scenarios, tools could be linked immediately to the uses cases they support, and the tagging and categorization of the tools could be better informed by the knowledge captured in the use cases.

Other suggested improvements to the process, based on learnings from Zagreb:

- **Formalized methodology for identifying “what's missing”:** While the “Dream Translation Tool” exercise at OTT07 yielded an excellent enumeration of features and functionality desired by open translation practitioners to support their work, there was no follow-on process to formally identify and prioritize specific gaps and missing functionality.

- **Rating on support for specific use cases:** It was an achievement to generate the use case inventory in the 3 days of OTT07, but a useful addition in future mappings would be to rate the use cases on a range from “Essential” to “Important” to “Desired”. Such a ranking would further clarify the priorities and most pressing gaps of the participating communities.
- **Enhanced post-mapping collaboration:** Post-event collaboration is an unsolved problem in virtually all live convenings. Rare is the mailing list or event wiki that remains active and vibrant more than 30 days after the actual gathering. However anything that could be done to sustain dialog and collaboration about tool sets after a mapping exercise will build richness into the effort and retain focus on gaps and pressing needs.

Suitability of SSC to Support Tool Mapping Processes

Overall, SSC proved a very valuable component in a larger mapping toolset at OTT07.

In particular, benefits of using the platform in the process included:

- SSC provided an excellent final repository for the mapping, storing rich metadata and offering flexible and collaborative editing capabilities of both the tools and the toolbox;
- Highly configurable RSS feeds for those wanting to track updates and additions to the toolbox;
- Tools were easy to enter and edit, both initially and later in the process;
- Searching for tools, once they were entered, worked quite well, based on a combination of keywords and tags.

Several limitations of the platform also became apparent during the OTT07 project:

- SSC is not well suited for tracking developer-level resources relevant to NGO software; the end-user focused nature of the editorial focus means that libraries and APIs are not suitable entities for entry to SSC.
- A related issue involves the “perpetual alpha” nature of many FOSS tools; a number of software projects at OTT07 were in the concept, pre-launch or alpha stage of their development, with unclear time tables for achieving formal “release” status. Editorial policy for SSC is to focus on ready-to-use tools for NGOs, and as a result, the platform doesn't readily offer a home for works-in-progress in the same way that platforms like SourceForge.net do.
- Because SSC has live feeds for all new data entering the system, and because those feeds are of a high quality, with “low noise”, SSC is not as effective as a “scratchpad” for tool mapping. The wiki served as an excellent “staging ground” for the SSC data generated at OTT07, but this is still an limitation to be considered.

In addition, SSC has several features that make it well-suited to serve as central component in a collaborative hub focused on a specific category of software:

- **The “Feeds” tab** associated with each toolbox (and tool) is a great way to aggregate blog postings and other syndicated material from participants in mapping and other community members publishing relevant material.
- **Per-tool feeds** enable very focused tracking of new developments for a specific tool.
- **The Community tab** provides a single point for finding online collaboration venues.

Strategy Points for the Growth of Social Source Commons

SSC is at this point a relatively mature platform, with a stable feature set and a well-defined community process. Updates and contributions are steady, and new users register every day. But the impact of the platform is still limited, as not enough people know about SSC or understand how it might help to support their NGO software needs and use.

The following section lays out strategy points for growth and success of the platform, grouped into three categories: Enhanced Marketing and Communications, Extended Platform Reach, and Platform Improvements.

Enhanced Marketing and Communications

SSC marketing to date has been inconsistent at best. Much of it has been viral and word-of-mouth. The following are intentional marketing steps needed to bring the platform to a larger audience.

Increased visibility in NGO/nonprofit online venues: Work must be done to have SSC become more visible on nonprofit technology mailing lists and blogs. Some research and work has been done on the efficacy of summarizing mailing list threads about specific tool categories (e.g., “what are people using for project management software”), but this work needs to be increased, in order to encourage people to “check SSC before asking”.

Increased traffic via Google Adwords: Aspiration has received a Google AdWords grant, which allows the organization to place “sponsored” links on Google search results pages. While the learning curve on the AdWords system is nontrivial, we are slowly ramping up our AdWords usage. At present, we are averaging over 50,000 “impressions” (a sponsored SSC link displayed on a Google results page) and several hundred “conversions” (a user clicking on the SSC link) per month. Our goal is to increase these by an order of magnitude over the next year, so as to be getting 500,000 impressions and thousands of conversions per month.

Featuring SSC in more events, and seeking out tool mapping projects: As documented in this paper, SSC can play a useful and strategic role in document software ecosystems and inventorying available tools. While this paper is a step in the right direction, more work must be done to feature SSC in live event contexts and generate more valuable tool inventories on the site.

Establishing new strategic partnerships: Aspiration has strong relationships with organizations like TechSoup, and will strive to strike agreements with these high-profile organizations to get SSC content and services features on those sites. In addition, we'll ask allied organizations to maintain tool lists on their site whenever relevant/useful.

Enhancements to the SSC blog: The SSC blog²¹ has become substantially more relevant over the past 6 months. Community Manager Matthew Garcia, working with Aspiration as part

21 <http://blog.socialsourcecommons.org>

of the CTC VISTA program, has generated a steady stream of interesting and engaging posts, and blog traffic and commenting are slowly increasing. Three strategies to further increase the reach and relevance of the blog:

- Guest blogging, where NGO technology thought leaders are invited to post on a specific subject
- Better blog marketing, both through Technorati as well as Google AdWords.
- Cross-blog participation, commenting on relevant posts on other blogs and sites. This is a challenging objective because of the time-intensive nature of the process.

Extended Platform Reach

As SSC is an inventory, a large part of its potential value proposition lies in utilization by other sites needing to publish and maintain lists of software for specific purposes or themes. The following are ways in which the reach of SSC will be increased over the next year.

Integration with ANSWR project: The SSC platform has always been envisioned within a “stack” strategy, designed to serve as a database of NGO software and related resources that can sit beneath other “editorial” web applications and provide relevant background information on referenced tools and tool categories. Surdna Foundation has funded Aspiration to create the ANSWR platform as a place to aggregate knowledge about specific nonprofit software disciplines, such as email, web publishing, and constituent relationship management.

Organized as discipline-specific “channels”, ANSWR will aggregate 3 types of knowledge about NGO software:

- A comprehensive database of “frequently asked questions” for each discipline, with a community-driven model for generating, maintaining and enhancing each answer.
- An inventory of “best-of” links, providing context on valuable existing content from other sites.
- Aggregation of relevant blogs and other feeds, to reflect the latest thinking within each discipline.

SSC will serve as the back end of this application, aggregating per-tool and per-category information, and providing lists of relevant tools on a per-page basis.

Enhanced APIs for interoperation with other platforms: SSC exposes a simple “embed” API which allows other web sites to embed SSC data on their pages. At present, the API is limited to embedding toolboxes which have been previously created on SSC. While uptake has not been dramatic, there have been notable success stories, including inventories of free and open source software for NGOs maintained by NOSI (the Nonprofit Open Source

Initiative)²². We are currently enhancing the API to provide more generalized, search-oriented access to the tools. This generalization will support the ANSWR project described above, and allow SSC data to be displayed on remote sites in a much more dynamic and contextual fashion than is currently possible.

Platform Improvements

While the platform is stable and useful, there is plenty of room for improvement in order to drive better user engagement. The following are high-priority improvements to be added in the coming 12 months.

Addition of missing collaborative functionality: While SSC is the de facto reference on what software is available for NGO needs (at least in English-language contexts), there is a fundamental functionality gap in terms of collaborative features. Users can see who else is using specific software tools, but they can not pose questions or otherwise engage that target subset of users, apart from a very basic commenting feature. New platform features will allow users to pose questions to one or more users of specific tools, track which users provide the most useful answers and feedback, and allow users to establish themselves as experts in specific tools or tool categories.

Integration with service offerings: As part of the ANSWR project, data will be collected about consulting and service offerings available per tool and per tool category. The goal is to make this information contextual, so that as users are looking at a tool or category of tools, they will be able to see related service offerings. While initially this listing feature will be free, it has the potential to become a source of revenue once critical mass is established and service providers are realizing revenue from SSC/ANSWR referrals.

Improved hosting: One of the most consistent complaints about SSC from users has been with regard to sluggish load times for pages. A recent migration to a new hosting and runtime environment has yielded multifold performance gains; whereas loading of the SSC home page previously took 15-30 seconds, load times now are between 4 and 10 seconds, with the slower load times in that range only experienced when new cached data sets are being generated. While this is an excellent improvement, we are continuing to optimize caching and database operations in order to guarantee that API-based access of the the platform is never perceived as a liability with page loads on other sites.

Increased usability: Usability has always been a guiding value in the development of SSC. The platform has been developed with a user-focused methodology, and SSC has been a featured project at two of Aspiration's FLOSS Usability Sprints²³. But there are still usability factors that constrain uptake and usage of the platform; the basic task of building the personal toolbox of software that one uses still requires too many clicks. The platform team is working with a volunteer usability expert to assess how to simplify and streamline the process of building toolboxes and finding tools, and this is considered to be a fundamental success factor in the ongoing growth of the platform.

22 <http://nosi.net/projects/primer/toolkits>

23 <http://www.flossusability.org>

Strategy points summary

Overall, the strategic focus of SSC needs to target increasing the value proposition for registered users of the platform. While anonymous use of the platform is substantial, and numerous ad-hoc testimonials speak to the utility of such a comprehensive searchable database of NGO software, there is still not sufficient motivation for users to maintain their personal list of software tools they use. Until this value deficit is mitigated, SSC's primary high-value proposition--"see who is using what NGO software"--remains unrealized.

SSC is a qualified success; use of the platform has grown steadily, the database is the largest of its kind, and pending integrations and partnerships indicate these trends will continue. The strategy points above are critical to move SSC into a more mission-critical context in the NGO software ecology, and evolve its role from a player in an uneven field of resources to a leading, must-use service.

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