Read The Feminist Manual

is a re-appropriation of RTFM (Read the Fucking Manual) and addresses gender discrimination in tech documentation of FOSS.

it consists of a firefox addon that replaces she and he pronouns with the neutral counterpart they.

this zine gathers info about the inspiration of the project, feminist servers, and images from online view of tech manuals using the addon.

Introduction

The project Read the Feminist Manual is a re-appropriation of RTFM (Read the Fucking Manual)and addresses gender discrimination in the Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) communities and the lack of support in accommodating marginalized voices. It started in the context of Excavations, a online governance research organized by the Media Enterprise Design Lab of Boulder University of Colorado. The output of the research is an experimental addon which replaces gendered pronouns he and she to the neutral pronoun they. In this zine here, you will find information about the idea behind the project, information about feminist servers, information about the addon and browser screenshots of the research.

Enjoy the feminist reading!

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Context and inspiration

Free and Open Source Software (aka FOSS) development happens with code contributions within communities. This code is most often technical, but sometimes is about code of conduct, meaning how members shall engage with the community, and code documentation, meaning how other developers and users can interact with the code. The writing of these manuals often assume the programmer/engineer is a he.

The idea for a feminist tech manual as a re-appropriation to RTFM (Read the Fucking Manual) [note 1] came up when I was looking online the documentation of a free software I was installing. I read this from gettext docs:

> In this manual, we use he when speaking of the programmer or maintainer, she when speaking of the translator, and they when speaking of the installers or end users of the translated program.
> [note 2]

When I posted about this gender stereotype re-enforcement on mastodon, someone pointed me to a patch that was submitted last September by a contributor in the GNU community, who wished to correct this issue by substituting he, she, his, her with they/their. Incredibly but true, this patch was not accepted by the community. Here are some excerpts of the responses to the patch contributor on GNU mailing list (public and accessible) about the gender usage:

> The GNU Kind Communication Guidelines don't mandate gender-neutral speak in documentation. [they] are about communication between people, not about documentation. Therefore there is no need for gender-neutral speak in the GNU gettext documentation.

> [...] The patch you suggested requires reader to accept "singular they" which is not commonly used anywhere and is considered an error by many, especially in formal writing.

1) In a specific document or documentation, do we want gender-neutral speak?
2) If we want gender-neutral speak, what is the English grammar element that works best?
Here, it's futile to discuss the second question, since the answer to the first question is already "no".

This last quote was the end of the debate. So the question about introducing gender-neutral speak was finally raised by one of the main contributors, only to reject it with the above reasoning.
Just for the records here, one response in favor of the change pointed out:

It (they) is very much on the uprise. So much that it's been chosen as the 'Word of The Year' in 2019 by Merriam Webster, And 'Word of the Decade' by The American Dialect Society.

[see the email thread on the GNU lists note 3]

If we dig further, Richard Stallman, one of the founders of the Free

Software movement, refuses to use people's preferred pronouns, to the point of dismissing the pronoun they as grammatically wrong and coming up with his own random rules for new pronouns [note 4].
When we cannot have a say in the decision-making of these communities with regards to language etiquette, gender inclusivity and other forms of discrimination, we can at least circumvent them on another level. A browser addon can do that for the readers without waiting for the gender emancipation of the GNU project and the FOSS in general. But more about this later.
How this gender bias was backed with arguments of language correctness is similar to another incident that happened in a Greek hackerspace mailing list around 2019. What happened in a nutshell; me and a peer organized a presentation about our autonomous feminist servers, and in the event's promotion we wrote a blurb, where we referred to the server with a female pronoun, while in Greek it is called with a male pronoun. The warriors of the Greek language got furious (la rage!) and a long trolling unfolded. In both incidents, it is clear that the language correctness is a pretext for refusing to waiver the privilege of the male programmer/hacker. The result though has further implications; these communities tend to be biased and changes of social inclusion are (mostly) not happening.

Feminist Servers

What is a feminist server?

All servers are ruled by different terms of service, governance models and national legislation [...] This somewhat technical definition can obscure the possibilities for understanding the political aspect behind the setting up and management of a server. [Sophie Toupin, Alexandra Hache note 5]

From the experience of women and queer identified peers running autonomous tech infrastructures, the following junctures are part of a feminist pedagogy: extensive documentation, be able to ask any question without being judged by competitive colleages, and work without having to deal with a sexist discourse. These attitudes inspire solidarity and participation from diversed identities, and challenges the dominant FOSS monoculture.

A list of feminist servers

[see more info about each server in cheat-sheet note 7]

Support/Resources

Although cyberfeminists have done a lot to put forward their priorities as a movement to funders, it can be argued that internet freedom funders remain unconvinced of the centrality of gender issues and only see it as an add-on or a subset of the sector. [Ledys Sanjuan Mejia note 8]

There is an urgency for feminist internet infrastructures to provide for activists, creatives and marginalized communities. And to do so they need more resources to grow their networks of solidarity. Support that comes with strings attached, such as adjusting feminist tech projects into Big Tech aesthetics, or obssesing over technical rather than social innovation, pressure on serving funders' agenda and so on, is often not a viable option for tech and cyber feminists who mostly care about the access to and agency of technology, and not about purely technocratic emancipation.

RTFM add-on

A Firefox addon that replaces she and he pronouns with the neutral counterpart they, by filtering webpage content, is under development and released as an experimental extension. It can be installed from the Mozilla addons gallery:

https://addons.mozilla.org/addon/read-the-feminist-manual/

Read the Feminist Manual version 1.0 of the addon provides the following features:

+ A user input to enter one or more URL for filtering. Click the addon's icon to add hosts.

+ Replacement of he/she with they in bold.

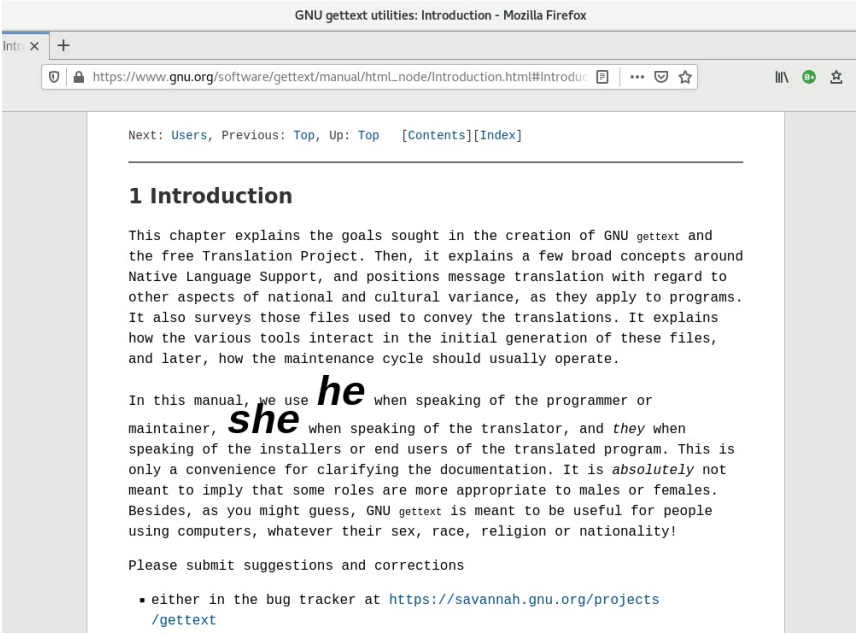
+ A counting of all he/she occurrences found in the HTML text is added at the top of the page.

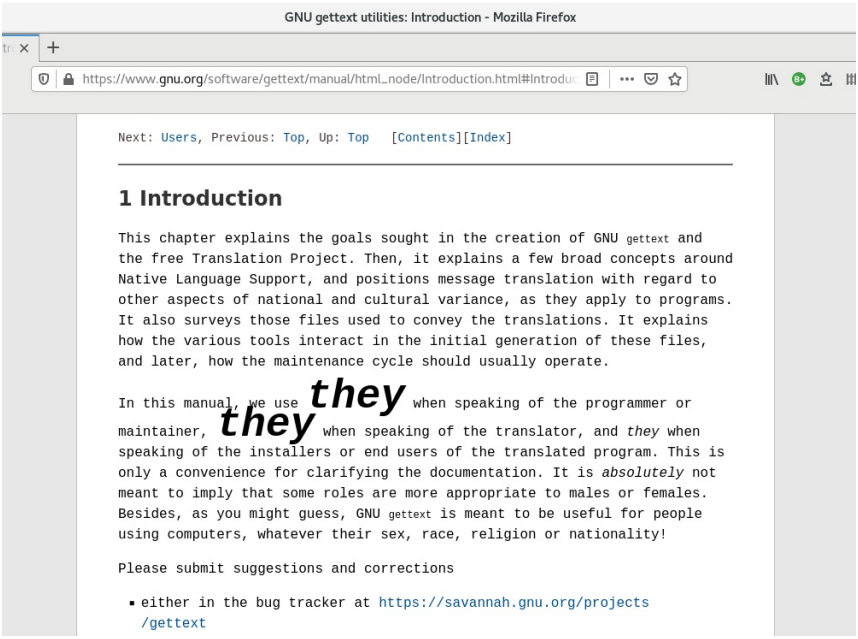
So far, the addon has been tested with the following GNU manuals:

gnutils mailutils gettext tar emacs wget

Future versions will include the option to print the filtered content into a PDF.

Screenshots





he: 1 time(s)

3.7.2 Upward negotiation

Other application protocols[7] use a different approach to enable the secure layer. They use something often called as the "TLS upgrade" method. This method is quite tricky but it is more flexible. The idea is to extend the application protocol to have a "STARTTLS" request, whose purpose it to start the TLS protocols just after the client requests it. This approach does not require any extra port to be reserved. There is even an extension to HTTP protocol to support this method [RFC2817].

The tricky part, in this method, is that the "STARTTLS" request is sent in the clear, thus is vulnerable to modifications. A typical attack is to modify the messages in a way that the client is fooled and thinks that the server does not have the "STARTTLS" capability. See a typical conversation of a hypothetical protocol:

(client connects to the server)

CLIENT: HELLO I'M MR. XXX

SERVER: NICE TO MEET YOU XXX

CLIENT: PLEASE START TLS

SERVER: OK

*** TLS STARTS

CLIENT: HERE ARE SOME CONFIDENTIAL DATA

And an example of a conversation where someone is acting in between:

(client connects to the server)

CLIENT: HELLO I'M MR. XXX

SERVER: NICE TO MEET YOU XXX

CLIENT: PLEASE START TLS

(here someone inserts this message)

SERVER: SORRY I DON'T HAVE THIS CAPABILITY

CLIENT: HERE ARE SOME CONFIDENTIAL DATA

As you can see above the client was fooled, and was naïve enough to send the confidential data in the clear, despite the server telling the client that it does not support "STARTTLS".

How do we avoid the above attack? As you may have already noticed this situation is easy to avoid. The client has to ask the user before it connects whether the user requests TLS or not. If the user answered that **he** certainly wants the secure layer the last conversation should be:

(client connects to the server)

CLIENT: HELLO I'M MR. XXX

SERVER: NICE TO MEET YOU XXX

CLIENT: PLEASE START TLS

(here someone inserts this message)

SERVER: SORRY I DON'T HAVE THIS CAPABILITY

CLIENT: BYE

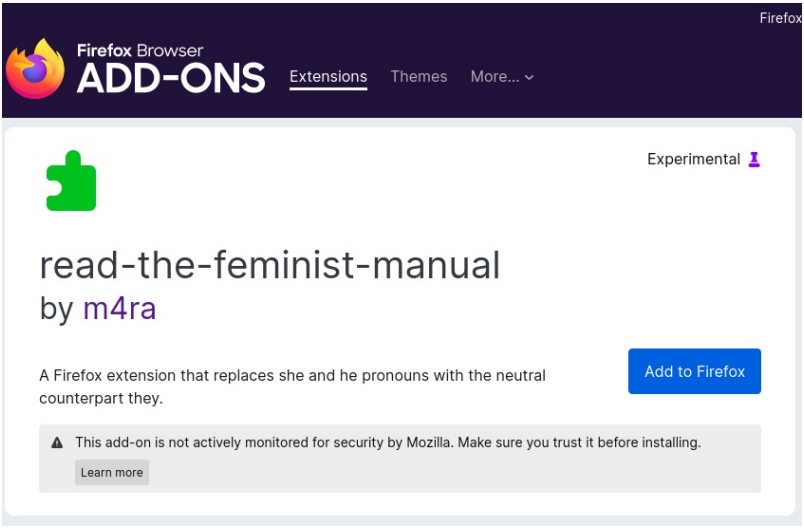
(the client notifies the user that the secure connection was not possible)

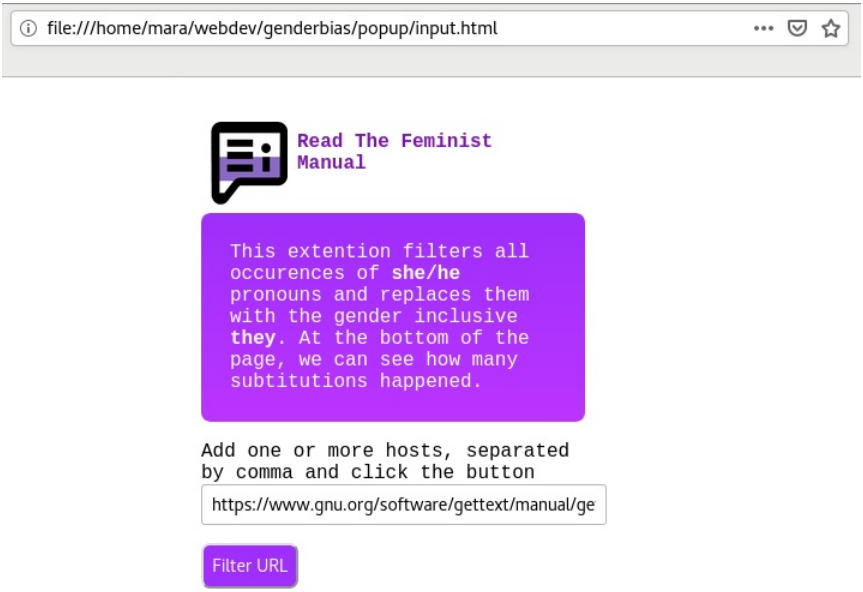
This method, if implemented properly, is far better than the traditional method, and the security properties remain the same, since only denial of service is possible. The benefit is that the server may request additional data before the TLS Handshake protocol starts, in order to send the correct certificate, use the correct password file, or anything else!

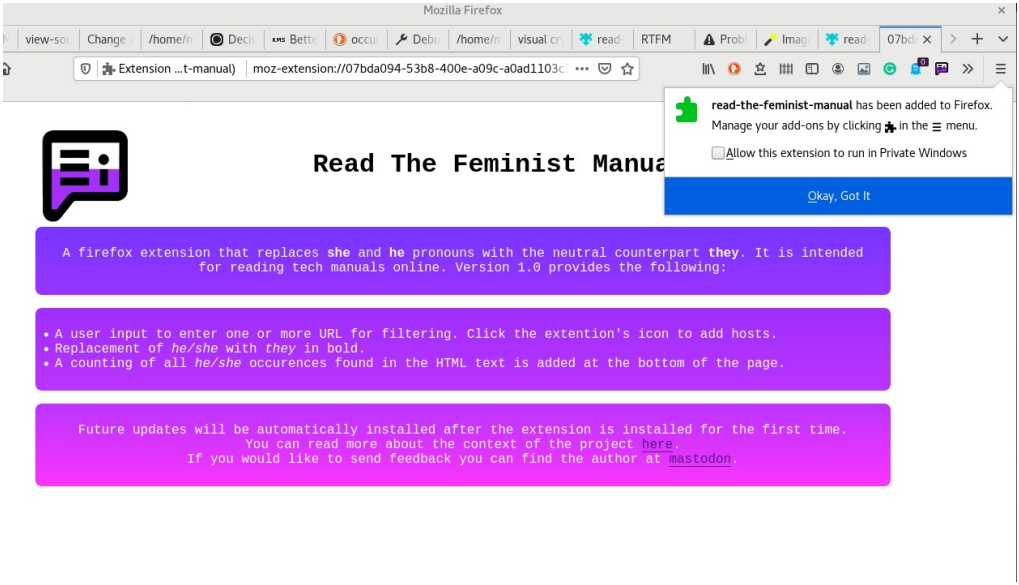
Footnotes

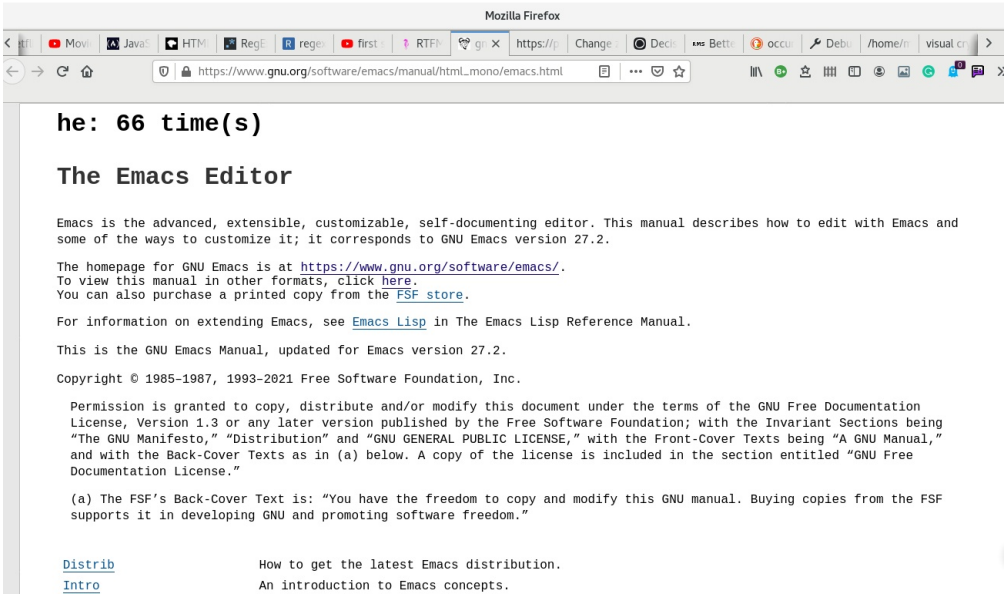
(7)

See LDAP, IMAP etc.


Firefox
Firefox Browser
ADD-ONS
Extensions
Themes
More...
Experimental
read-the-feminist-manual
by m4ra
A Firefox extension that replaces she and he pronouns with the neutral counterpart they.
Add to Firefox
This add-on is not actively monitored for security by Mozilla. Make sure you trust it before installing.
Learn more


file:///home/mara/webdev/genderbias/popup/input.html
Read The Feminist Manual
This extention filters all occurences of she/he pronouns and replaces them with the gender inclusive they. At the bottom of the page, we can see how many subtitutions happened.
Add one or more hosts, separated by comma and click the button
https://www.gnu.org/software/gettext/manual/ge
Filter URL


Mozilla Firefox
Extension ...t-manual)
moz-extension://07bda094-53b8-400e-a09c-a0ad1103c
read-the-feminist-manual has been added to Firefox.
Manage your add-ons by clicking in the menu.
Allow this extension to run in Private Windows
Okay, Got It
Read The Feminist Manua
A firefox extension that replaces she and he pronouns with the neutral counterpart they. It is intended for reading tech manuals online. Version 1.0 provides the following:
• A user input to enter one or more URL for filtering. Click the extention's icon to add hosts.
• Replacement of he/she with they in bold.
• A counting of all he/she occurences found in the HTML text is added at the bottom of the page.
Future updates will be automatically installed after the extension is installed for the first time.
You can read more about the context of the project here.
If you would like to send feedback you can find the author at mastodon.


Mozilla Firefox
https://www.gnu.org/software/emacs/manual/html_mono/emacs.html
he: 66 time(s)
The Emacs Editor
Emacs is the advanced, extensible, customizable, self-documenting editor. This manual describes how to edit with Emacs and some of the ways to customize it; it corresponds to GNU Emacs version 27.2.
The homepage for GNU Emacs is at https://www.gnu.org/software/emacs/.
To view this manual in other formats, click here.
You can also purchase a printed copy from the FSF store.
For information on extending Emacs, see Emacs Lisp in The Emacs Lisp Reference Manual.
This is the GNU Emacs Manual, updated for Emacs version 27.2.
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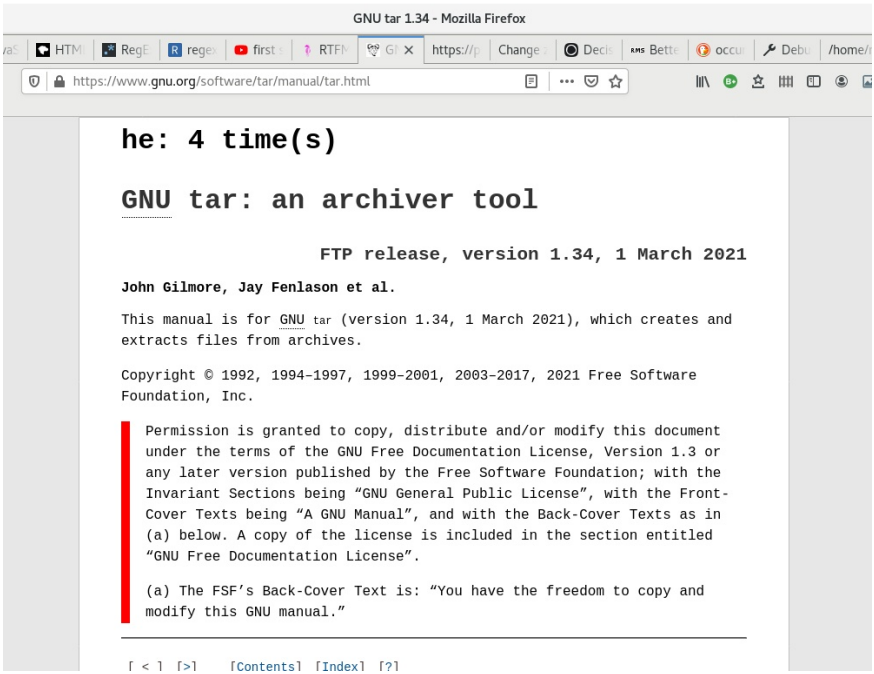
(a) The FSF’s Back-Cover Text is: “You have the freedom to copy and modify this GNU manual. Buying copies from the FSF supports it in developing GNU and promoting software freedom.”
Distrib How to get the latest Emacs distribution.
Intro An introduction to Emacs concepts.


GNU tar 1.34 - Mozilla Firefox
https://www.gnu.org/software/tar/manual/tar.html
he: 4 time(s)
GNU tar: an archiver tool
FTP release, version 1.34, 1 March 2021
John Gilmore, Jay Fenlason et al.
This manual is for GNU tar (version 1.34, 1 March 2021), which creates and extracts files from archives.
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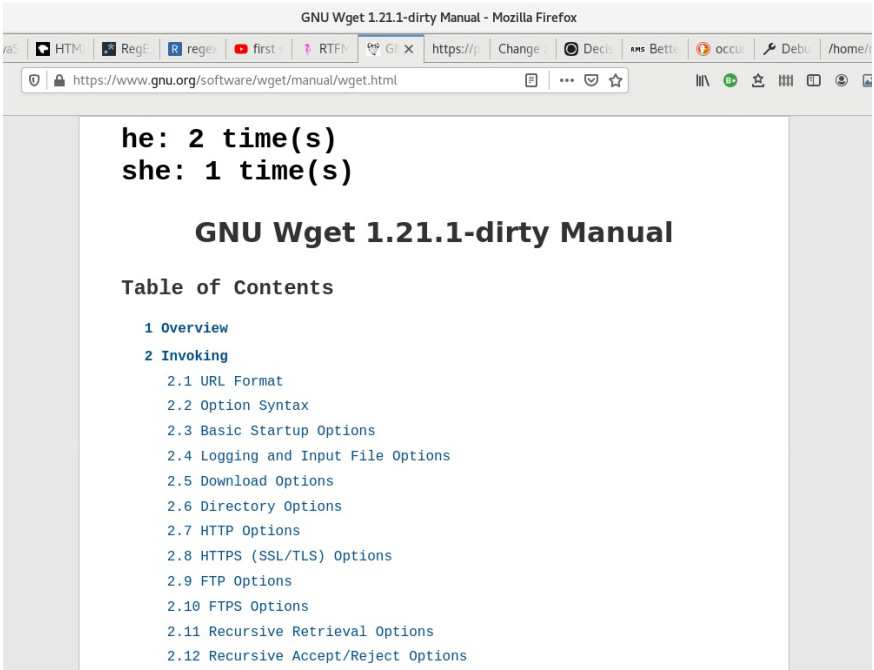
[<] [>] [Contents] [Index] [?]


GNU Wget 1.21.1-dirty Manual - Mozilla Firefox
https://www.gnu.org/software/wget/manual/wget.html
he: 2 time(s)
she: 1 time(s)
GNU Wget 1.21.1-dirty Manual
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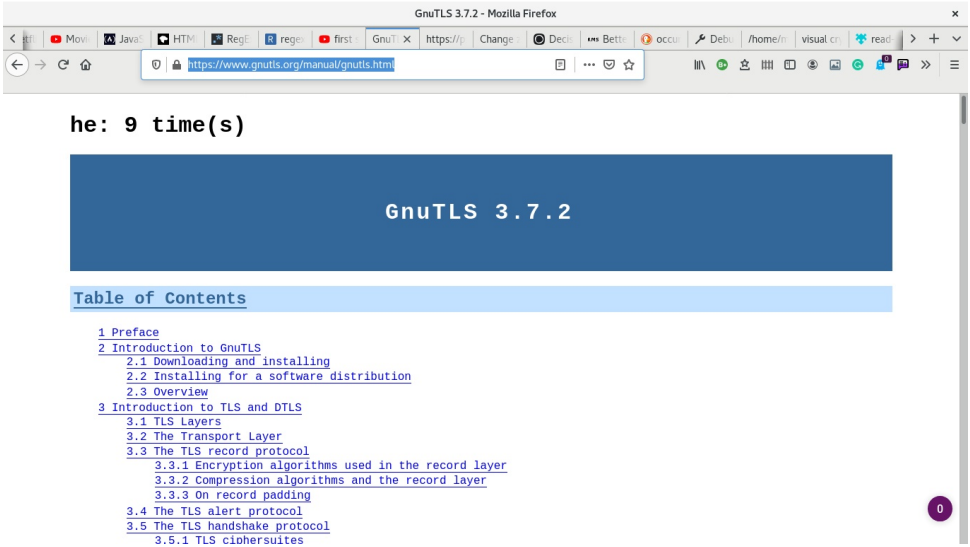
2.6 Directory Options
2.7 HTTP Options
2.8 HTTPS (SSL/TLS) Options
2.9 FTP Options
2.10 FTPS Options
2.11 Recursive Retrieval Options
2.12 Recursive Accept/Reject Options


GnuTLS 3.7.2 - Mozilla Firefox
https://www.gnutls.org/manual/gnutls.html
he: 9 time(s)
GnuTLS 3.7.2
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3.5 The TLS handshake protocol
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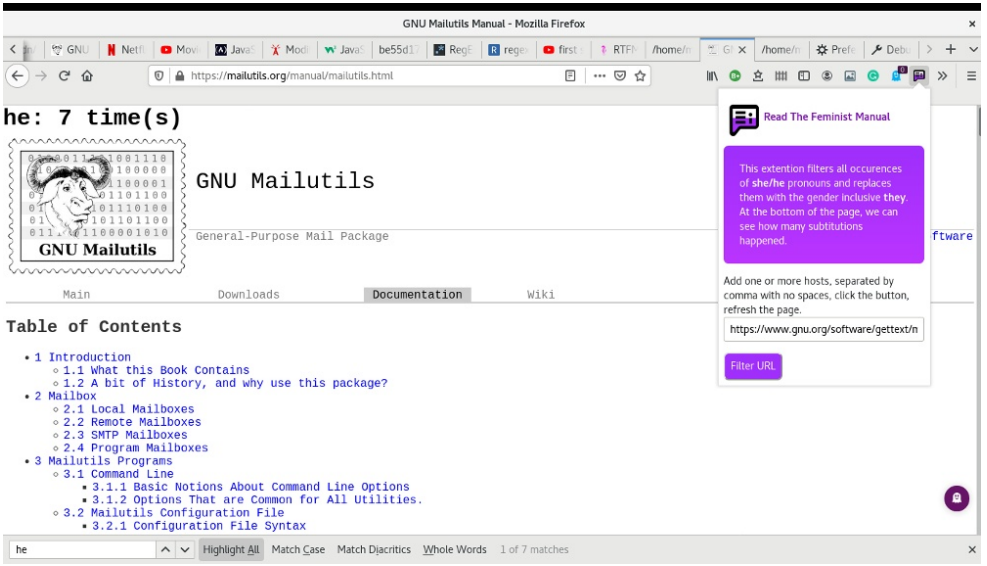
GNU Mailutils Manual - Mozilla Firefox
https://mailutils.org/manual/mailutils.html
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3.1.1 Basic Notions About Command Line Options
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Read The Feminist Manual
This extention filters all occurences of she/he pronouns and replaces them with the gender inclusive they. At the bottom of the page, we can see how many subtitutions happened.
Add one or more hosts, separated by comma with no spaces, click the button, refresh the page.
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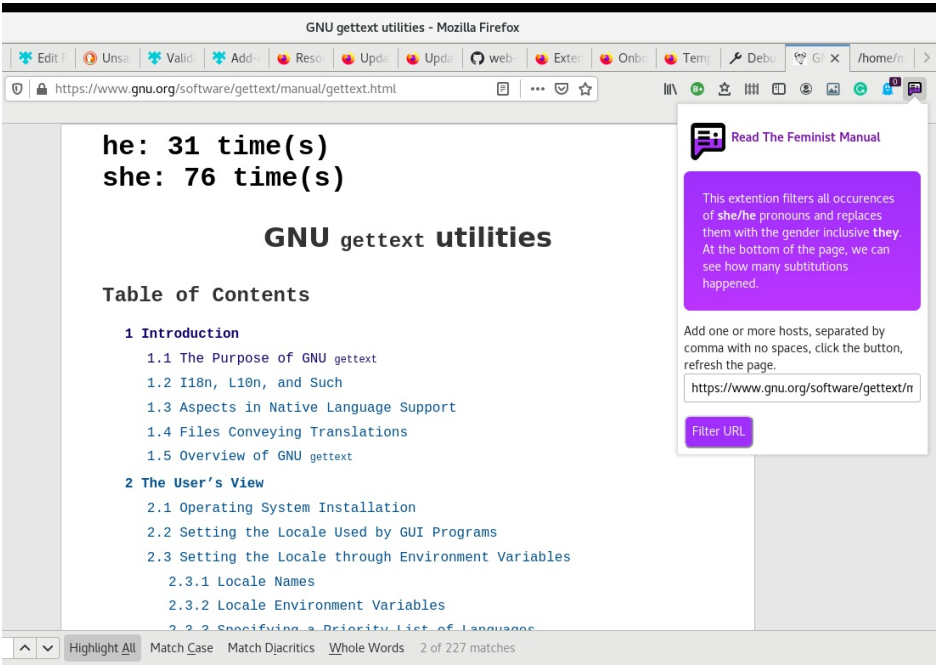
he
Highlight All
Match Case
Match Diacritics
Whole Words
1 of 7 matches


GNU gettext utilities - Mozilla Firefox
https://www.gnu.org/software/gettext/manual/gettext.html
he: 31 time(s)
she: 76 time(s)
GNU gettext utilities
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2.3 Setting the Locale through Environment Variables
2.3.1 Locale Names
2.3.2 Locale Environment Variables
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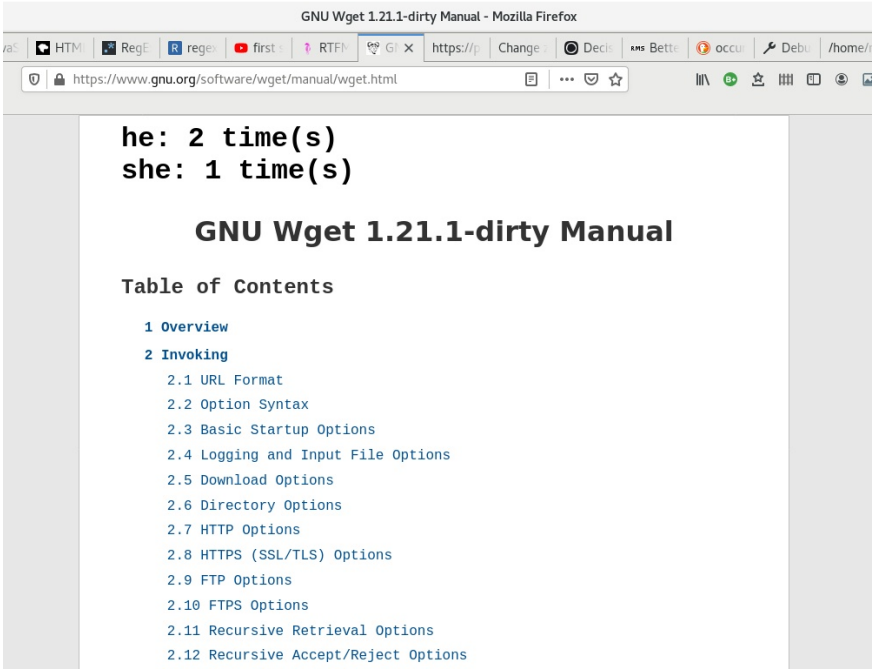
Add one or more hosts, separated by comma with no spaces, click the button, refresh the page.
https://www.gnu.org/software/gettext/m
Filter URL
Highlight All
Match Case
Match Diacritics
Whole Words
2 of 227 matches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2.8 HTTPS (SSL/TLS) Options
2.9 FTP Options
2.10 FTPS Options
2.11 Recursive Retrieval Options
2.12 Recursive Accept/Reject Options

CHEAT-SHEET

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RTFM
2. https://www.gnu.org/software/gettext/
3. https://lists.gnu.org/archive/html/bug-gettext/2020-09/msg00012.html
4. https://stallman.org/articles/genderless-pronouns.html
5. https://giswatch.org/en/internet-rights/feminist-autonomous-infrastructures
6. https://systerserver.net, https://anarchaserver.org
7. https://alexandria.anarchaserver.org/index.php/You_can_check_some_of_their_services_in_this_section
8. https://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/feminists-are-building-their-own-technology-organise-where-are-funders-0

this zine is created by Mara Karayanni and is part of the psaroskalazines.gr

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Content font: Helvetica