Human Rights and the Internet

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8

Information Overload: How Increased Information Flows Affect the Work of the Human Rights Movement

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This chapter examines how the challenges brought about by increasing information supply has been addressed by the human rights movement, and in particular by the World Organisation Against Torture, more widely known by its French acronym OMCT. From the standpoint of OMCT, an international human rights organization, this chapter attempts to examine the implications of technology for human rights as a movement. It aims to examine the radical impacts of technology on the supply and costs of information. The chapter will then describe how we, in OMCT, have tried to implement new technology, the effect on working practices and strategy in fighting torture and other grave violations, finally examining what this may imply for human rights as a movement.

OMCT, formally known as SOS–Torture, is a clearing house organization on information relating to torture and other grave violations for a network of over 200 national human rights organizations, mostly based in the developing world. As an organization that works very closely with both international human rights mechanisms and the communication needs of national human rights organizations, we are perhaps in an interesting position to comment on the implications of communication technology for human rights as a movement. Indeed, our approach has gained considerable recognition, going some way to influence the conclusions of the European Union's approach to the Internet and human rights, amongst others.[1] It should be stressed from the outset that our observations and experience are based on largely informal evidence, but, importantly, draw on many informal discussions on these issues with other non-governmental organizations, UN agencies and, equally, on our own internal evaluation.

A major lesson learned by OMCT is the need to control the dissemination of information. OMCT believes that the more you respond to the

needs of the people to whom you send information the greater the impact. Part of the solution to information overload is for human rights organizations to be more selective in deciding where their information is distributed. This, in turn, required a database approach to information distribution rather than mailing lists that merely send the same information to everyone regardless of their needs or concerns.

The Internet and human rights: a brief history

Our informal observations on the growth and usage of new technology in human rights seem to be consistent with the evidence presented elsewhere in this book. Until recently, any informal straw poll conducted at a human rights meeting on the numbers of human rights groups who had email, might be greeted with looks of incomprehension. Now the majority will have some form of connection, or will be planning to do so in the near future. Communicating with our members and indeed other partners is now rarely paper based.

When talking about these technologies, essentially the argument, for our members, seems to boil down to one critical issue. For them, the biggest impact is straightforward: user friendly, affordable, mass communication. Up to the present, this has chiefly been expressed through the use of the email; the use of web technology remains to be wholly integrated.

Many in the human rights movement believe that the near future looks rather rosy. If market analysts are to be believed, the near future will see an increase from anything between 300 to 800 million computers globally. The vast majority will have communications capacity; clearly there will be a marginal effect on the human rights community. All these machines will have the capacity to multiply information by a factor of millions. Cheap and readily available software mixed with a little common sense means that mass communication is within easy reach of even the smallest human rights organization and the individual activist.

This line of thinking is, on the surface, very persuasive and to some extent explains the evangelizing optimism of Negroponte,[3] amongst others. Arguments like these have pushed many in the human rights movement toward this increasingly dominant view which regards new communications technologies in a range stretching from the broadly positive to producing a panacea for all the world's ills.

The invisible hand of the market

We would err, however, toward caution: the consequences do not appear to us to be quite that straightforward. The most significant issue for us, and the *leitmotif* of this chapter, are what appears to be the dramatic and long-term change in the dynamics of information supply. As Shenk, in his analysis of the impact of increased information flows states, 'in a very short time we have vaulted from an age of information scarcity to one of information surplus'.[4]

For a very long time it has been taken as a given that computers dramatically improve the productivity of their users. Thus these increases in the supply of information that we have talked about will be neatly handled by increases in human productivity, which, interestingly, implies further investment in technology.

However, over the last decade a stream of new research has found no evidence of such vaunted productivity improvements. Indeed, in some cases, productivity has dropped. As Stephen Roach, chief economist at Morgan Stanley, Dean Witter, has bluntly put it, 'the productivity gains of the Information Age are just a myth'.[5]

> Knowledge-intensive and increasingly complex white-collar work cannot be easily automated, and technology designed to save time and increase productivity actually consumes more and more of our lives. Unlike the Industrial Revolution, the heavy lifting of the information age cannot be performed by forklift trucks, it occurs between the ears.[6]

The fundamental issue is that while computers have unlimited capacity to accelerate and multiply information, human capacity to process that information, to give it any meaning and utility, is sadly limited. So as information moves from scarcity to excess *with no commensurate change in demand*, the net effect is not difficult to predict: as supply costs of information plummet, simple economics dictate that the supply of information on human rights is set to become a tidal wave.

Another equally fundamental economic lesson will also tell you that in conditions approaching unlimited supply, with no change in demand, the value of a good, be it tangible or intangible, will go into free fall. Seen in this light we would argue that rather than pushing us towards solutions, technology may simply be generating a whole new set of questions, to the extent that we believe that a substantial rethink of strategies for human rights may be in order.

Daily challenges of information overload

Having identified what we feel to be the central issue of concern it would seem appropriate to demonstrate how these increasing information flows are influencing the daily work of human rights organizations. The examples provided arise from the work of OMCT, but are by no means either unique to the organization or exhaustive. Each of the challenges discussed below has had tremendous affects on the work of all human rights organizations and activists. As groups are flooded with information it becomes increasingly necessary to be able to weed out or edit lower quality documents, ensure that action is coordinated, that the source is accurate, that follow-up is completed, and that processing is done effectively.

Quantity over quality

One issue that Internet evangelists seem to miss is that increasing speed of transmission and quantity is in no sense synonymous with pertinence. Indeed the increase in usage of the Internet can paradoxically constitute an obstacle to communication in the larger sense of the word. When there were more difficulties in communicating, in the days of the telex and the telegram, organizations were forced to stick to essentials, complete and to the point, repetition was avoided and additional information weeded out.

OMCT daily receives texts of 30 to 60 pages, of which only a few paragraphs concern our mandate. Moreover, this information is not only buried deep inside the text, but is often written and conceived without any specific purpose and lacks any critical factors that would make it useful. Key events and information in cases of serious violations are often missing (for example, the legal situation of victims is vital in determining which mechanism can be called on to act; has the victim exhausted all national remedies); documents often contain volumes of political and verbose language. Every day numerous activists and organizations discover the Internet and use it to distribute information with little consideration for the recipient; thus OMCT gets reams of information sent that has absolutely no relation to the mission of the organization.

The ability to distribute information to many thousands of recipients takes over from sound documentation. Technology can never be a substitute for professionalism.

Weaknesses in the chain

Information and the way it is communicated is a chain in a process of action; this too can be threatened by the Internet. Problems arise where

one of the partners in a communication chain decides to act unilaterally, taking action other than proposed in the communication received. Formally addressing the United Nations Committee Against Torture (CAT), for example, is an option not to be taken lightly. The CAT is competent to examine individual cases under very specific criteria; the case, for example, will be rejected if not submitted by an authorized representative of the victim. The authorities of the state concerned would not be slow to exploit such an event.

The source of information

One of the delights of the Internet is the ease with which information is forwarded to third parties. One of the less innocent practices is the removal of the original owner's signature, replacing it with that of the 'new' owner.[7] The new owner then transfers the information to an 'international complaints procedure'. Subsequently the mechanism requests additional information, the new owner is unable to furnish the required elements and the case is dropped. The credibility of the system is damaged; the state makes political capital and the victim's opportunity for any kind of justice is lost.

The follow-up

When an urgent message is dispatched by a source, it sets off a wave, which as it rolls is amplified as it is forwarded, published on web sites, news servers, and so on. Many organizations in different milieux will intervene on different levels. When the situation of the victim changes, whether for good or ill, news of, say, his or her release may be communicated only to a source that contributed directly, who while overjoyed, will already be working on the next case and may not distribute the information. Thus an uncontrolled campaign continues to secure the release of a victim who is already at liberty, wasting precious resources, exposing organizations to attack and damaging credibility.

Processing the information

The issues that we have outlined here suggest that for the human rights sector the communications revolution does not augur particularly well: organizations are increasingly facing an ever-mounting deluge of information, most of it poor, irrelevant and often unreliable.

Anybody, well intentioned or otherwise, can now arm himself or herself with the equivalent of a nuclear bomb in terms of information distribution. With limited human resources to respond, decision makers

will increasingly have to make ever-harder choices, while organizational behavioural studies on the impact of increasing information flows show us they are likely to respond as follows:

> as people were given more information confidence in their judgement increased, but their accuracy did not....
>
> a person's benevolence to someone needing assistance decreases in likelihood as his environment increases in input bombardment....[8]

This view is not just held by psychologists; informal evidence appears to support this view. International human rights organizations, and international bodies like the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, those who process information on human rights, are already finding it increasingly difficult to cope with the sheer scale of information they are being called on to process.[9] The real danger is that, increasingly, it seems that good information will be driven out by bad.

OMCT's approach to the Internet

Each of these challenges will alter how organizations accomplish their work. In the following section we would like to briefly examine our own experience at OMCT. We examine our own attempts to develop as an organization and to integrate new technology in response to the changes that we have observed. We would not like to suggest for a moment that our experience has been one of boundless progress; change is difficult, time consuming and increasingly, a constant in an organization; however, we feel the results, direction and perhaps our methodology are worth consideration at least.

To aid understanding we will briefly lay out what it is the organization seeks to do and, using two examples, try to demonstrate how we are developing an iterative response to the changes that integration of technology, both internally and externally, implies.

OMCT was founded in 1986 to respond to the needs of human rights defenders in the field, mainly, at that time, southern organizations, in fighting torture. One of the main conclusions of the meetings that led to our foundation was the need to reduce the time lag between the violation or threats of violation, and the communication of that violation to bodies capable of intervention. It appeared at the time that technology could play a facilitating role in this and, then as now, technology has always been a central plank of strategy.

Taking the urgent appeals programme as an example of how we implement technology, we start with the goals. The challenge of the programme is to respond to the threat of torture. If torture is to be prevented two criteria are fundamental: speed of reaction and the ability to reach bodies capable of taking action.[10]

The structure of operations is designed to meet those challenges: OMCT operates as a network. Faster and better decisions can only be taken by the experts with all the facts available to them: initiation, verification, indeed all the fundamental decisions, are thus taken where the events are taking place – in the field.

The responsibility of the OMCT international secretariat is to target the most appropriate international procedures for action, to decide on the most effective international action and to reach out to particular communities who can bring their influence to bear, and to distribute and translate the information at speed. National information is handled by national experts, with international value added by international expertise. The concept is simple and the structure extremely flat.

The aim is to maintian a fluid, flexible structure that puts decision-making capacity with the information source and provides national human rights NGOs with an empowering distribution service. A single line of communication concerning an urgent case can be distributed at great speed to many thousands of potential sources of influence.

If the OMCT network has had some measure of success it is because the international secretariat provides an environment where groups can interact effectively and partners draw value – the technology that we use is simply a means to facilitate this. Clearly, the faster the information can be transferred the better and email has facilitated this process dramatically. As more members of the network have gone online we have been able to dramatically cut lead times.

The database approach to information distribution

Working within a network makes it difficult to miss changes in the industry and growing awareness and concern at international secretariat level led to a very conscious attempt to develop a meaningful response; in turn, this has led to a radical change in our approach. The traditional human rights approach to a problem is very straightforward: get the information to enough people and someone, somewhere, will do something. The tools of the Internet make this easier.

The problem is that this broadcast approach is just that: *broadly cast*. Reacting to the changes brought about by technology, OMCT is deliberately trying to break from this traditional mindset towards a more client-centred approach. What we mean by this is that rather than push *our* information at people and bodies of influence we must first look at what *their* needs are. Rather than using a list or a series of lists, this means developing a database approach. A database approach implies much more than a list or lists, rather it is a bank of knowledge of recipients' needs. It should allow us to manage recipients, increasingly, as strategic campaigning assets.

The logic is very appealing, the more you respond to the needs of the people to whom you send information, the greater the impact. Children's rights groups, for example, do not have, and will have ever less, time to work on abuses of the rights of trade unionists. If an organization produces 2000 pieces of information a year, and only one is relevant to an individual client, then deluging them with the other 1999 is not only a waste of effort, but also can severely damage the impact of that all-important piece of information.

The results of this increasingly targeted approach, measured in terms of the reaction from those we work with, have been overwhelmingly positive. The crucial point is that, faced by an ever-increasing workload, and limited human capacity to process information, decision makers will be forced to make hard decisions; human logic will choose those that provide them with the right information at the right time.

It is a straightforward and workable approach; it doesn't have many flashing lights or multimedia features, but it has speeded up the process; it delivers increasingly precisely targeted information in a usable and convenient form for action, and it has significantly cut costs. In short, we believe it works.

The same philosophy can be seen in action in our training project.[11] The project seeks to provide development opportunities for human rights defenders to acquire a range of practical skills to improve the effectiveness of their documentation and denunciation skills. Part of the training involves work on new technology. The crucial issue is that OMCT's training programme places a heavy emphasis on the use of Internet only as part of a global strategy. The strong conclusions of such training are that substantives and technology should not be separate. An emphasis on the means, no matter how exciting or technologically advanced, *without substance*, can be counterproductive and, at worst, positively dangerous.

Lessons learned

Technology can help an organization, and, equally, to ignore it would be total folly. But technology is not *the strategy*. While OMCT supports communication investment from funders, we are nonetheless concerned that such funds as there are, are spent wisely. Delivery of new technology is treated by too many as an end in itself; simply sending a computer to Africa and praying for a consequent rise in respect for human rights seems a little misguided. Computers and other communications tools are complex beasts; they go wrong. Moreover, and most fundamentally, they will never be answers in themselves. Thus, communications technologies alone will not improve human rights and should under no circumstances be used to substitute substantive human rights training.

And it is this that we now consider. In such uncertain times, where technology is constantly changing, it is simply naïve to invest too much faith in any 'technology equals good' mantra. What is also fundamental is that there is no such thing as neutral technology: technology is proactive: it appears to imply changes *within* organizations. Our own experience wholly supports this view; to reap its benefits, substantial rethinking in practices is a constant – and an imperative. What is also clear is that not only do we need to look deep into ourselves but also industry wide; technology is dramatically altering relationships *between* human rights organizations. It is to these that we turn next.

Time for a new vision

The argument of this chapter is that while there may be cause for some guarded optimism, the enthusiasm and hype over technology is dangerous. We are not arguing for any modern day luddism – human rights cannot ignore technology – but at the same time we must be aware that it raises fundamental questions about the way we organize ourselves as a movement.

The root idea is straightforward: human rights as a movement has organized itself, and has assumed the form it has, for good reasons. Its current structure is held in a complex dynamic equilibrium. One of the factors that hold the structure in its current form is a complex notional idea of the costs of information, in which we can include, for example, the very real physical risks of using the information. As we have seen earlier, technology has made the cost of collection and dissemination of information vastly cheaper. What this implies is dramatic: if cost

structures change dramatically then industry structures should change as well.

However, the relationships within human rights – without the immediate and harsh glare of the free market – means that these relationships are perhaps more embedded, deeply political, and will consequently be harder to shift. While on the face of things human rights may seem to be structurally healthy, and indeed may not look that different in ten years, under the surface significant change is taking place. Whether our current structures are the most effective at defending and promoting human rights is also another question altogether. Elsewhere in this volume others have posed questions about the changing relationships between grassroots activism and national human rights organizations brought on by technology. OMCT would go further; technology in other sectors is destroying the traditional role played by intermediaries; international human rights organizations and international mechanisms must face up these very real challenges if they are to remain relevant to the goals they serve.

Equally, we would argue that it would be a common mistake to conclude that the communication revolution relates only to the external relations of human rights. The lessons of commercial organizations are once again hard to ignore: fundamental change is needed in the way that human rights organizations organize themselves internally – particularly how they handle the information that they hold. We would argue that this would apply particularly to the organs of the UN and other international and regional bodies.

We are not the only ones facing these challenges: in order to stay afloat, successful commercial companies are responding by totally rethinking their traditional structures both internally and externally; it would be foolish to suggest that human rights can simply duck the issues.

We have no need to reinvent the wheel; many large corporations and those leading the commercialization of the Internet have been successfully integrating technology for many years. They have used it to completely revolutionize and democratize their internal structures. They use an often unfamiliar vocabulary of 'empowerment', 'the learning organization', 'pushing power to those on the front line', 'strategic cooperation'; words that the human rights community pay a great deal of lip service to, but which all too rarely applies to its own internal structures.

If dynamic enterprises are using new technologies as tools of progress and to move towards their goals in innovative and empowering ways, the human rights community should be interested in *the means* by

which they have achieved results, not the *end result* in itself. If the *means* to produce more profits prove effective in defending human rights, it would be unwise to ignore this.

OMCT's strategy to respond to these challenges has been somewhat more pedestrian than the literature of business: we aim for clarity; we try to be clear about our goals, to be clear about where we are going and to measure, evaluate, as far as possible, everything against those established goals. Organizing ourselves as a network has not only been empowering for national human organizations but the flattened structure also appears to be working. In addition, drawing from mutual strengths at national and international levels seems to make good management sense.

It is critical that human rights re-orient itself for this brave new world. Out there is a world whose principal characteristic is instability, where uncertainty is increasingly the rule, where innovation and change are the norm, and in such an environment it would seem, then, that we must change simply to stand still. To rise to this challenge the human rights movement desperately needs vision. Without vision the mentality of 'this is the way we do things round here' will provide an extraordinary block to the very deep changes that technology implies for the struggle for human rights.

Globalization is driven by technology. Globalization, as it advances, is not producing glowing human rights records. It is producing unfettered, uncontrolled free anarcho-markets; and like any other market it will produce winners and losers. Markets make no moral judgements. Human rights will not win simply because *we care*; however, we *must* be on the winning side.

The challenge for human rights is to learn from others, to establish a clear and elevating vision of human rights for a world of uncertainty and systemic crisis. We are clearly witnessing the emergence of something; what that something is, is less clear. The time, however, is now.

Notes

1 A Human Rights Agenda for the Year 2000 – European University Institute, Florence 1998.
2 Published by NetAction Issue No. 32, 12 January 1998 (www.netaction.org).
3 Nicholas Negroponte is co-founder and director of the MIT Media Laboratory and has been a regular contributor to 'Wired', presenting many positive views on the digital age. Author of *Digital Age*, he has been described as the 'Net Prophet'.

4 Shenk, D., *Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut*, London: Abacus, 1997, p. 28.
5 Steven Roach, quoted in *Wired* (http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/6.07/neweconomy.html)?pg=5.
6 Steven Roach, quoted In Wired (http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/6.07/neweconomy.html?)pg=5.
7 An event of depressing regularity witnessed at the International Secretariat.
8 Korte, *et al.*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1975, quoted in *Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut*, London: Abacus, 1997, p. 38.
9 Conversations with the various Urgent Procedures of the OHCHR and members of a variety of International Human Rights Organizations have regularly underlined that this is already a serious problem particularly in terms of the quality of the information; an issue dealt with later in the chapter.
10 The criteria are extremely wide: numerous institutions – as much regional and national as well as international – depend on fast and accurate information.
11 OMCT runs a modest training programme which aims to build the capacity of human rights defenders and their organizations and is financially supported by the EU.