Documenting Human Rights Abuse and Crowdsourcing the Problem

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Abstract

This paper compares ICT-based tools developed to help human rights organisations record usable and actionable information with technology that enable anyone to collect and visualise crisis information. It looks at an initiative that actively involved citizens in the reporting of xenophobic attacks in South Africa, and contrasts it with a number of data collection systems including one based on standard formats and micro-thesauri. The former provided information on where incidents were happening, which was useful to organisations providing assistance on the ground. It also provided a central point of reference for the mainstream media. The latter's strength, on the other hand, is its ability to produce analysis and statistics based on type of violation, perpetrator, victim characteristics, geographic area and so on. The analysis shows that the rigorous standards-based tools used to monitor human rights violations are essential to the effective implementation of human rights standards. It also shows that crowdsourcing techniques, enabled by new technologies, can empower ordinary citizens to become directly involved in awareness building and debate about human rights abuse. The difference needs to be understood however, and one should not be confused with the other.

Introduction

Human rights standards are set primarily by the United Nations (UN), its sub-bodies and other inter-governmental organisations. They are also set by specialised agencies such as the International Labour Organisation that are linked to the UN, and by regional bodies such as the Council of Europe and the African Union. Human rights monitoring, undertaken to see if these standards are being met in domestic settings, involves the repeated collection and recording of information for later use (Guzman and Verstappen, 2003). It is done by the human rights treaty-based committees of the UN, charter-based bodies (including the Human Rights Council) and other specialist agencies. It is also undertaken by government bodies, including human rights commissions, and by NGOs.

Human rights treaty bodies like the UN Human Rights Committee consider periodic reports submitted by UN member states on their compliance with human rights

treaties. International NGOs play an important role in this process by providing reliable and independent information to the treaty and charter-based bodies through reports that shadow the entire state report or provide commentary on specific articles of a convention. These shadow reports, which are an opportunity for NGOs to voice their human rights concerns and criticisms at an international level, rely on unhindered grassroots NGO activity in a country and the flow of information from them. In the absence of these information flows, the attention of the international community will not be drawn to the situation in a country, even if the level of human rights violations there merits attention.

In writing about how to document and respond to allegations of torture within the international system for the protection of human rights, (Giffard, 2000) said that some NGOs have adopted excellent methods of reporting, but many less experienced NGOs are either unaware of the importance of the information they provide, or have never had the opportunity to learn how best to present it. A significant proportion of the information received from such NGOs is wasted, she said, not because the allegations are unfounded, but because important facts are omitted, the allegation is worded in excessively political speech, or it is presented in a language that the recipient does not understand or does not have the resources to have translated. In other cases a lack of familiarity with the functions of the various international bodies and mechanisms means that information is incorrectly sent to an authority that is not empowered or mandated to use it effectively.

Human rights NGOs monitor ongoing violations of human rights as well as the compliance of governments with treaty obligations. They collect data relating to violations from various sources including newspaper articles, official reports and documents, medical records, and testimonies from witnesses and people directly involved. Policy-makers, prosecutors, truth commissions, academics and other actors use the information collected, as do the international NGOs that submit shadow reports to the treaty monitoring bodies.

Human rights protection depends on information that is reliable, trustworthy and relevant. If it is not objective and truthful, it will be ignored (Metzl, 1996; Weyker, 2002), and if it is not presented in a way that is usable by its recipients it has little value. NGOs generally work with others to gather details of situation or individual cases; to investigate events linked to suspected human rights violations; to produce records and analysis of investigations carried out; and to report to an international body. ICTs simplify all of these steps in the human rights information chain, but without the application of appropriate norms and standards the mistakes highlighted by Giffard are likely to be repeated.

Monitoring and Documenting Human Rights Events

In 1985 a Geneva-based NGO called HURIDOCS (Human Rights Information and Documentation Services, International) developed a bibliographic standard format for the recording and exchange of information on human rights (Stormorken, 1985). These were updated in 1993 (Noval, 1993), and in the same year the organisation responded to requests from human rights organisations in developing countries by producing the first version of its Events Standard Formats. These formats, which were updated in 2001 (Dueck et al., 2001a), were based on the requirements of international organisations such as the UN Human Rights Committee and Amnesty International to whom human rights cases were reported by NGOs.

The Events Standard Formats were first developed for use in documenting violations of civil and political rights. The revised 2001 edition attempted to be useful to NGOs that focus on other rights, including economic, social and cultural rights, although as (Guzman, 2001) points out, an indicators-based methodology that is related to human rights norms and standards may be more suited to monitoring things like the enjoyment of the right to education than the events approach.

HURIDOCS also developed micro-thesauri (Dueck et al., 2001b) – which are controlled vocabularies - to enhance the effectiveness of ICT-based applications that use the event standard formats. These help with data classification, and give users coherence and consistency in their data entry. They contain lists of all the terms commonly used in human rights work as well as coded typologies for types of acts (deliberate killing, harassment, violation of the right to privacy, etc), the rights that apply to an event, the physical identification markings on the victim or perpetrator, and the source providing the information.

The basis for HURIDOC's work is that accurate and systematic reporting along with improved human rights monitoring are essential in the process of providing security, peace, justice and equality for all (HURIDOCS, 2007). Their goal is to ensure that human rights organisations have the tools, knowledge, skills and supporting services to effectively utilise their information resources. Towards this end they developed a computer-based version of the events standard formats called WinEvSys. This system, which is based on Microsoft Access, evolved from an earlier DOS-based system for the documentation of human rights violations called EvSys.

The WinEvSys database system is used by human rights organisations in Bangladesh, Mexico, the Philippines, Zimbabwe and other parts of the world to record data on human rights violations. It enables them to collect data in a systematic way, to analyze patterns of abuse, and to generate statistics by perpetrator, time period, type of violation, victim characteristics and so on. It also allows organisations working together to pool data for better overall analysis of the human rights situation. In many cases WinEvSys is customised to meet the specific needs of the organisation recording the data.

A number of organisations and networks around the world have built their own database systems using the event standard formats. One example is Red Nacional de Organismos Civiles de Derechos Humanos in Mexico, which is a network of over 60 NGOs. These document a wide range of human rights violations using different methods to collect valuable data. Starting in 2007, the network developed their own monitoring system called Sistema de Monitoreo de Derechos Humanos over a two year period. It was based on the HURIDOCS model, and the goal, according to Agnieszka Raczynska of La Red was "to have a system that any organization could use, big or small, and those they would not need Internet to access it" (New Tactics in Human Rights, 2010).

In 2009 HURIDOCS themselves developed a new web-based version of the events methodology called OpenEvSys. This allows organisations to record, browse and retrieve information on events violations, victims, and perpetrators and to store related documents such as testimonies, affidavits, and audiovisual files. As the database is fully relational, violations can be linked to victims, perpetrators, and sources that are already entered in the system without having to enter them again. It can also be used to analyze the data, produce reports and detect trends and patterns of abuse, as well as to manage and track interventions, such as medical and legal aid provided.

HURIDOCS' focus has always been on providing human rights information that is accessible - so that the right information reaches the right people when and where they need it - and usable - meaning it should be presented in such as way as to facilitate analysis and decision-making. They also strive for compatibility in order to increase levels of sharing and to improve communication and collaboration between NGOs (HURIDOCS, 2007). All these contribute to making human rights data actionable, which is ultimately the most important characteristic of any information collected by human rights organisations.

Benetech, a Californian non-profit company that develops technology-based tools to assist human rights organisations, has also developed a tool to collect, organise and securely store human rights violations information. The tool, which is called Martus, enables grassroots NGOs to create a searchable and encrypted database on an off-site server and to store their records on this. Like WinEvSys and OpenEvSys it is built on the "who did what to whom" data model. The software addresses what Benetech see as the four critical requirements for software used to protect the records of grassroots human rights groups. These are that it be usable - Martus is as easy to use as email, can run on an inexpensive computer and does not require a constant connection to the Internet; secure - records are encrypted, stored securely at a remote site, backed up to multiple locations and protected by a unique password; searchable - specific violations and identifying details can be searched by groups or outside researchers granted access to the records; and transparent - the software is open source so any group can examine the code and make an informed decision about using it (Benetech, 2008). The main focus is on security however, as it enables organisations to upload their data, encrypted, to a server in a different part of the world.

Martus was designed to be an easy-to-use tool for gathering and securely storing information about human rights abuses, but it was not designed to do in-depth analysis of the data gathered. Its free-form text entry fields make it ideal for qualitative data collection, as users can quickly enter bulletins that can be sorted and searched. It is complemented by another Benetech product called Analyzer, which is a software programme developed by the Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG) to structure and quantify human rights data. Analyzer can combine input from multiple data collection projects and in so doing it can provide the sort of large-scale statistical analysis required by truth commissions and tribunals. The HRDAG has assisted the truth and reconciliation commissions in South Africa, Sierra Leone and East Timor and in all of these its work proved to be instrumental in helping the commissions to make powerful and credible findings.

The WinEvSys database system uses built-in vocabularies to describe all types of violations and all aspects of a human rights case, thus giving a human rights organisation flexibility in its data recording. Indeed the data richness supported by WinEvSys can leads to successful and reliable routine monitoring instead of waiting until a situation has exploded. This means however that its use requires more training than Martus. HURIDOCS believe that this training is necessary to ensure that NGOs don't over simplify human rights monitoring and reporting.

The use of standards and codes - as in the HURIDOCS tools - make it easier to record and retrieve information relating to human rights events, especially in cases where computer-based systems are used to store the information. It is also easier to exchange or communicate information to other organisations if they use the same standards and codes. So while it is commonplace for recordings made by witnesses and others in the

field to use free form descriptions of an event, the information becomes more valuable if it is encoded using standard formats.

Citizens Reporting Online – a Case Study from South Africa

In 2009 Molly Land analysed how peer-based production – where large groups of volunteers contribute to production of information in a decentralised and open format such as a wiki - can be applied to advance human rights. She claimed that its underlying characteristic of amateurism can increase capacity and participation. She recognised however, that the involvement of ordinary individuals in the production of human rights reporting is also its greatest disadvantage, since human rights reports generated by citizen activists are less likely to be perceived as accurate, thereby detracting from the effectiveness of those reports (Land, 2009).

Land goes on to examine methods by which these disadvantages might be overcome and concludes by advocating for a collaborative approach in which peer-based production is augmented by training and certification by local professionals. She also mentions the possibility of using a website that would allow witnesses to report human rights abuses that they saw or experienced. She argues that this first-hand information on human rights violations could be particularly useful for human rights organizations that seek to augment their capacity to collect primary information.

A system like this has other advantages too. In situations where there is a need for rapidly generated information – such as a humanitarian disaster or an outbreak of widespread violence – having reports come directly from those involved can be helpful in getting assistance to where its needed quickly or in averting an even greater crisis. Ushahidi, which is an online platform that allows anyone to gather distributed data via SMS, email or web and visualise it on a map or timeline, makes this possible. It started as a simple website mashup[1] using user-generated reports and Google Maps, and was first used to gather citizen generated crisis information after the post-election violence in Kenya. The goal - to create the simplest way of aggregating information from the public for use in crisis response – shows how the techniques known as crowdsourcing can be used to good effect in situations where human rights abuses are taking place. Crowdsourcing - defined as the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call - is a distributed problem-solving model. Problems are broadcast to an unknown group of solvers in the form of an open call for solutions. Users (the crowd) typically form into online communities and submit solutions, or in this case incident reports.

One example of how crowdsourcing and the Ushahidi engine have been used to record human rights violations is the *UnitedForAfrica.co.za* portal. This is an interactive online facility set up in May 2008 within days of an outbreak of xenophobic attacks on foreigners in South Africa. Its objective was to enable ordinary people who witnessed or had information about violent incidents to anonymously submit reports.

Incident reporting on *UnitedForAfrica.co.za* was done using a web-based form. The web reporting provided incident description, location, date and time, incident category (selected from a predefined list) and the names of people involved. It even provided

[1] A mashup is the compounding or "mashing" of two or more pieces of web functionality to create powerful applications.

the option of adding links to uploaded video - for example on Youtube. There was also an SMS facility which people can use to text in reports to an advertised number. Leaflets with the number prominently displayed were produced and distributed around potential trouble hotspots. These leaflets highlighted the objectives of the project which were to have stories told; to mobilise members of the public to assist; to mobilise government to react; to raise money and to inform people how they can assist; and to share opinions on the causes and solutions through ongoing dialogue and debate.

None of the reports received by UnitedForAfrica.co.za were published without first verifying the content. A system of checks was implemented which included conducting online searches to see if other commentary existed on the incident, as well as checking if more than one person reported the incident. The portal managers were also anxious to ensure they were not seen to be sensationalising what was happening; the potential repercussions of publishing for individuals, vulnerable groups and society in general were always taken into consideration.

The type of information being reported and published by UnitedForAfrica.co.za is typified by the following incident which occurred at the Atteridgeville township on Saturday June 14th 2008:

> *A Mozambican man has been burned alive by a mob during disturbances near the South African capital Pretoria.*
>
> *The 30-year-old was stoned then set alight in Atteridgeville township after being accused of an arson attack on a shack the day before, said police.*
>
> *Three suspects were held for murder and robbery as 2,000 rand ($246 £126) were stolen from the man, police said.*
>
> *Atteridgeville was the scene of a spate of recent attacks on foreigners, in which 62 people died.*

A report on this incident was subsequently published by the BBC News in its entirety, with additional background information.

When the issue of xenophopic attacks against foreigners flared up initially, the mainstream media used *UnitedForAfrica.co.za* to get first hand reports. The portal manager regularly got approached by a news site and would find himself mediating between them and someone who was closer to what was happening on the ground. It was helpful for the media in South Africa at the time to get information on attacks very quckly without having to run around from location to location. As a result, the issue was being reported more often and to a wider audience than would otherwise receive it.

Once published on *UnitedForAfrica.co.za* reports appear on a map-based view for others to see. The map, which was a mashup of the xenophobia incident reports and Google Maps, allows users to click on a location or incident to get more information. Mashups are just one example of how Web 2.0 technologies were used in response to the xenophobia crisis. Another was the Afrigator xenophobia page[2] which aggregated blog posts and news articles of the crisis.

In the first day after it went live there were 357 site visits to *UnitedForAfrica.co.za*; on the second there were 932. The portal was used to provide information on where

[2] See http://afrigator.com/

the incidents were happening. This information proved to be quite valuable; site managers were even linking with NGOs on the ground that were providing assistance, and were using the portal as a central point to bring all the data together and to help the NGOs to prioritise their response.

UnitedForAfrica.co.za was designed by a South African web marketing agency called Quirk who also manage and maintain it. It used an early version of the Ushahidi engine which is built on the premise that gathering crisis information from the general public provides new insights into events happening in near real-time. It uses direct citizen reporting rather than depending on experts in the field, and has been tested with people working on issues linked to the environment, health, political crises and human rights. The focus is on crisis situation reporting, not just human rights, but while standard event formats and coding are not used, human rights organisations with the expertise to do so could filter and verify the reports to build a picture of the human rights situation in a crisis.

This early rudimentary deployment of Ushahidi made the development team realise the need to rebuild the framework from the ground up. The latest version has now been tested and deployed with 11 different organizations directly, including the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), the Kenyan National Commission on Human Rights, Al Jazeera (during the war on Gaza), Vote Report India (to monitor the recent local elections) and Pax Voices (to map incidents of violence in Pakistan).

Discussion

Nathan Frietas of the Guardian Project[3] summarised the application of crisis mapping tools for human rights quite well in an online discussion about documenting human rights violations:

> *"With the increased implementations of crisis mapping tools, we are seeing the emergency of a "Realtime" acquisition and analysis of data about human rights violations. Rather than focus on detective research after the fact, those interested in protecting populations at risk must now move into more of a operational center model of tracking, vetting, organizing and disseminating data as it is happening, with the dual goal of getting to the truth of what is happening at that moment, while also doing what you can to stop a tragedy before it can escalate." (New Tactics in Human Rights, 2010)*

The main concern about crowdsourced human rights data is seen as accuracy since "inaccurate reporting risks injury not only to the organization's credibility and influence but also to those whose behalf the organization advocates." (Land, 2009). Others like Patrick Meier see the main problem as being one of volume (Meier, 2009a). More crowdsourced information can provide an ideal basis for triangulation and validation of peer produced human rights reporting, particularly if multimedia reports are available in addition to text. It can also permit the use of probability analysis to determine the reliability of incoming reports but the success of this is

[3] The Guardian Project aims to create ready-to-roll applications, firmware MODs, and customised, commercial mobile phones that can be used and deployed around the world, by single activists looking to protect themselves, to large humanitarian organizations needing a more effective way to safeguard their communications. See http://guardianproject.info/.

dependent on volume. Meier argues that this will become increasingly tenable since we are only going to see more user-generated content, not less.

Land is also concerned that a website allowing peer-production based on primary information may become nothing more than an opinion site. However, a crowdsourcing platform like Ushahidi is not an efficient platform for interactive opinion sharing. Meier explains: "Witnesses simply report on events, when they took place and where. Unlike blogs, the platform does not provide a way for users to comment on individual reports." (Meier, 2009a)

Crowdsourcing, citizen journalism and other forms of direct, immediate reporting provide vital real-time (or almost real-time) information in times of crisis. Proponents argue that the transmission or dissemination of timely information is crucial for crisis-affected communities, and they make it clear that crowdsourced information is not automatically validated (although in the case of *UnitedForAfrica.co.za* it was done by manually reviewing the reports). "Beneficiaries are not dumb" according to (Meier, 2009b); "they can perfectly well understand that SMS alerts are simply alerts and not confirmed reports". Nonetheless the damage that a false alert – or worse, an organised sequence of multiple bogus alerts - could do to a community must be borne in mind.

There are also risks inherent in the labeling of incidents as human rights violations by untrained reporters. Tom Longley, a former consultant with HURIDOCS explains:

> *"Making information about violence public has strong social and political mobilisation opportunities, which can have political consequences, but when people pin human rights labels to this information, though, they're stepping into a very legalistic area with its own rules and strategies." (Longley, 2009)*

Longley explains that to call something a human rights violation is to make a legal judgement about the nature of the source material. This judgement leads to consequences, such as an investigation of an allegation of abuse, and for this reason it can act as a deterrent. If process of making the judgement – which is something that human rights NGOs around the world do every day – is not rigorous and well informed it waters down the legal deterrent and increases the chances of impunity.

Crowdsourced information coming through tools like Ushahidi, Twitter and YouTube may also undermine a victim's privacy. If a report of an incident of domestic violence or rape results in an incident report on a Google Map for example, or a victim is identified in an uploaded video clip, it could become embarrassing for a victim or their family, or even put them at risk. Human rights NGOs who systematically record such incidents for later use are sometimes accused of lack of transparency but there are often good reasons that go well beyond any proprietorial claims to the data gathered. Privacy – as well as the personal security of victims, witnesses and reporters – can never be ignored when reporting human rights events.

Notwithstanding the increase in user-generated content, it is worth remembering that there are about 10,000 human rights NGOs throughout the world that systematically collect information in the field (Benetech, 2008). However much of the violation and abuse information gathered is lost due to confiscation, destruction or neglect, and as a result the effectiveness of many of these NGOs is reduced. It is therefore difficult – sometimes even impossible - for prosecutors, truth commissions and international human rights groups to find sufficient evidence to hold the perpetrators of human rights abuses accountable. And it is as yet unclear, for the reasons outlined above, if crowdsourced information can solve this lack of evidence at international level.

Taking a long term view is also important when monitoring and documenting human rights. For human rights organisations it is therefore better, even in times of crisis, to record events in a way that makes it possible to look at patterns over time. But now that technology is at a point where it is possible for any ordinary person to openly share valuable evidence of suspected human rights abuse, the question may be one of how to separate the good data from the bad. We can already see different approaches emerging. HURIDOCS emphasise the importance of training in the practical use of tools for classification, documentation and monitoring (such as the Event Format Standards). This is to ensure that violations are recorded in precise terms in order to establish involvement, relationships and roles, and to assign responsibility for potential rights violations. In other words what gets collected is good data. Benetech's approach on the other hand is to use advanced statistical analysis to build evidence-based arguments. Their Human Rights Data Analysis Group offers training in data collection, management and processing phases in areas such as statement taking and data entry but their key to helping organizations identify and answer pivotal human rights questions is through statistical analysis of the data they have collected.

Ushahidi have also started to think about what needs to be done when massive amounts of information is being gathered from a range of sources that might include Twitter, Ushahidi, Flickr, YouTube, local mobile and web social networks. Their Swift River software platform seeks to do two things which they see as crucial for many emergency response activities in the future. First, it gathers as many possible streams of data about a particular crisis event as possible. Second it uses both machine based algorithms and humans to filter and to better understand the veracity and level of importance of any piece of information. It takes a lot of people to do it, but as Erik Hersman, one of the co-founders of Ushahidi explains,

> *"This is classic "crowdsourcing", where the more people you have weighing in on any specific data point raises the probability of the finding the right answer. The information with greater veracity is highlighted and bubbles to the top, weighted also by proximity, severity and category of the incident."(Hersman, 2009)*

Whether or not solutions like *Swift River* have a long term role to play in human rights protection is something that it is still too early to judge.

Conclusion

Information on a developing crisis can be captured quickly from several text sources such as SMS messages, emails and tweets. Video footage, pictures and satellite imagery also offer new possibilities for human rights advocacy that engage communities directly. On the other hand, human rights organisations put a lot of time and resources into the rigorous collection, storage, analysis and presentation of human rights events. By controlling the data entry process they ensure that the information is actionable in a wide range of human rights contexts, and can ultimately lead, for example to submissions to the Universal Periodic Review process of the UN's Human Rights Council.

In addition to the value of early reporting (particularly for the humanitarian community) crowdsourcing can certainly assist awareness building and debate about human rights abuse. But there are trade-offs that must be borne in mind by any human rights organisation wishing to avail of its people power. Timely and widespread reporting of incidents may be offset by concerns over the accuracy and veracity of the

data. Opportunities for mobilisation and changes in public opinion in the short term may come at the expense of effective long term advocacy for accountability and social justice. And going public immediately with details of a reported incident may not always be in the best interests of a victim, their family or others who are involved.

On the other hand, the full cost of implementing a human rights monitoring system designed to meet the particular needs of a human rights organisation or network can be prohibitive compared to the deployment of a crowdsourcing platform. But the cost to a human right organisation's reputation must also be borne in mind. There are a wide range of ICT-based tools and approaches to make human rights data collection and information management more efficient, but their appropriateness and effectiveness can only be properly understood by considering the purpose of the information produced and the impact of outputs and outcomes on every stakeholder along the information chain.

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