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ABSTRACT

This article offers two arguments about the opportunities that technology presents for the human rights agenda. The first refutes one of the main criticisms of promoting the Internet as a tool for human rights work: large sections of the population do not have access. The second discusses the role of processed information in the context of social behavior. The article discusses the diverse ways in which technology can be used to increase the effectiveness of human rights organizations, in terms of communication. To show its potential, the author describes communication alternatives in terms of new formats for dissemination and using alternative information sources.

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HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM IN TIMES OF COGNITIVE SATURATION: TALKING ABOUT TOOLS

Miguel Pulido Jiménez

1 Introduction

The centrality of technology in human interactions is a distinguishing feature of our time. Political agendas, legal relationships, knowledge, struggles for social transformation, and, as a result, one of the fields resulting from the intersection of these spheres: human rights, are no exception to this phenomenon, nor should they be. I refer not only to the emergence of a range of rights associated with the ability to communicate freely without state intervention (ORGANIZACIÓN DE LOS ESTADOS AMÉRICANOS, 2011) when the use of the Internet or cell phone is at stake, the redefining of ideas (i.e. privacy, intimacy, and confidentiality) (STOP..., 2012), or to the conceptualization of new positive obligations on states to assure universal access to information technologies (UNITED NATIONS, 2011), but also to the opportunities that technology presents for human rights activism.

This article seeks to develop two central arguments related to the new opportunities that technology (and Internet use in particular) presents for the human rights agenda. The first argument is based on a supposition. One of the main criticisms of the promotion of the Internet as a tool for human rights work is that large swaths of the population do not have access. In other words, it is argued that while the Internet may offer a lot of possibilities, the so-called digital divide (VOLKOW, 2003) works against it and makes the strategies that use it either elitist or exclusive. In this article, without questioning the factual existence of that divide, I aim to refute the validity of the argument that says that because many people have limited or no access to the Internet, under the most radical interpretations, its use should be set aside.

The second argument discusses the role of processed information in the context of social behavior. The way our societies produce information has

transformed how we relate to one another (CASTELLS, 2000). That is, it is not longer only the way we connect; it is the intensity of that exchange. Today we are able to exchange information more quickly and reach new stakeholders (SOTO, 2014), but we are saturated with data every day, causing cognitive overload. The foundation of the second argument, therefore, is the need/opportunity for human rights organizations to participate in this phenomenon by taking on the task of selecting and processing information (WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM, 2013) in order to effectively keep their audience's attention. To this end, I will focus on the diverse ways in which technology can be used to increase the effectiveness of human rights organizations' communication efforts. By themselves, information (or computer science) technologies do not have any impact. It is often said, but sometimes forgotten, that they are just tools. Just like a hammer, technology will make the work easier – but if used without skill, we will puncture the wrong parts of the board faster. It depends on us. In order to demonstrate its potential, I will describe communication alternatives related not only to new formats for dissemination, but also those using alternative sources of information.

2 What can we do about the digital divide?

Statistics on Internet access¹ have changed over the last 12 years. For example, data from Internet World Stats shows that the percentage of the population in Latin America that has Internet access went up by 10% between 2000 and 2012.² True, that increase could be considered moderate. Nevertheless, its use and its influence on the political agenda, and its emergence as an instrument of change, continues to grow. That is also attributable to the fact that users' habits have changed,³ so it is not just about greater access, but also the fact that it is more central to human activities. The Internet has become a key way to disseminate information, and more groups and sectors are incorporating its tactics or using it as a tool for their work.⁴ The same is happening with other technologies and telecommunications tools. Today we have new categories, like citizenship and digital activism, but also solutions like Mobile Health (M-Health) or crowd sourcing (BRADLEY, 2013), to name just two of hundreds or thousands of examples. To what can this be attributed?

One reasonable answer to this question is that, despite its limits in terms of accessibility, the use of technology and the leading role of the Internet, is truly one of the most powerful ways to reverse social asymmetries (LEADBEATER, 2013). For example, mobile health solutions (where people receive relevant information on their telephones)⁵ democratize access to medical knowledge.⁶ If the argument is that few people have access to digital cell phone technology, let's remember how limited access is to hospital infrastructure and to personalized attention from a doctor or nurse. In the field of knowledge,⁷ if we think that only "x" percent of the population has access to the Internet, we forget that even fewer people have access to libraries or technical literature (MARGOLIN, 2014). Compared to what have traditionally been niche markets, even though those may use means that are more popular by definition (such as direct consultations with medical staff, or reading a printout of an academic treatise), the Internet is a more practical form of communication

that can transmit essential information for the exercise or promotion of rights.

The digital divide is only an expression of other gaps that exist within our societies. Human rights organizations traditionally work on behalf of disadvantaged populations, who experience firsthand the consequences of marginalization or restricted or differentiated access to goods and services (with no legal duty to put up with it). Unequal access to rights is an expression of structural asymmetries in the distribution of symbolic and material goods. A person in the countryside is effectively isolated from government offices. But, in many instances, the Internet is more accessible than paying to travel from one city to another, such as when processing paperwork for a government support program. The Internet has a greater penetration capacity than any printed publication, and disseminating and accessing a video that denounces human rights violations is much easier over the Internet than through traditional media.⁸ A few spectators is always better than none.

As we have said: the digital divide is an expression of other structural gaps. Therefore, a question continues floating in the air: How can organizations that deal with scarcity and work with limited resources take advantage of this technology? The good news is that in this context, many organizations have started to generate technology,⁹ resources, and solutions¹⁰ that can be shared (sometimes at no charge)¹¹ with other organizations, thereby mitigating some disadvantageous conditions and reaching broader audiences. The DNA of the technological solutions of our time is free, community-based, and participatory.¹² Due to their genetics, many projects tend towards cost reduction, exchange, peer-to-peer learning, complementarities, and a lack of owner control. In this vein, the use of the Internet is one of the most consistent ways to include traditionally excluded groups in efforts to disseminate information or knowledge. Of course human rights organizations are among those who can benefit from this trend.

Now, it is appropriate to make use of usual caveats like “however” or “nevertheless”, because civil society organizations confront different challenges. First, for this to work, we have to identify the digital, strategic, and tactical tools that are most useful for taking advantage of the technological moment. Solutions emerge very quickly, and there is a huge supply of alternatives, not all of them equally useful or relevant for specific cases. The risk is that the “what” may be confused with the “how”, or that the solutions that are chosen may be impractical, unnecessary, or cosmetic.

Furthermore, we have to change the way in which we use resources and prioritize the use of tools. It is not about simple willingness or a decision to add technologies to our area of work, but rather about filling an equipment and resource gap (both human resources and technical capital) within many of our organizations. Sometimes the problem is very concrete: there is no correlation between the decision to innovate (partly a result of a realization by some activists of the potential use of these tools) and the set of actions that would be required. Deciding to use technology and the Internet requires having the resources to do so, and that in itself is a challenge.

In summary, we are clear that using technology presents challenges, such as the need for a cultural change within institutions, and the absence of technical

know-how among activists and civil society organizations' staff. Still, the alternative is a reality.

3 How to participate in cognitive saturation

Currently, data and information flow at dizzying speeds. The availability of sources has undergone radical transformations, both with regard to overcoming distance barriers, as well as in the capacity for storage, processing, and dissemination. Eric Schmidt (creator of Google) suggests that every two days we create the same quantity of information that was generated from the beginning of human history until 2003 (SIEGLER, 2010). In an equation that practically comes from the market, the communication challenge of our time is to capture the attention of audiences that are more and more saturated with an incommensurable supply of messages.

In other words, a large part of the challenge for sending (assertive) and receiving (effective) information is in the ways in which data is presented and visualized.¹³ Thus, the application of technology, fed with processed information and applied to specific contexts, improves the interaction between information providers and the general public. If human rights activists want to communicate in this context (to inform, to advocate, to mobilize, to generate solidarity, etc.), technology is an ally with great potential. To use it, it must be understood that the phenomenon implies changes not only in the start of the communication (how we send messages) but also in the way we construct it.

I will first give an example of how the current context has radically changed the availability of information sources, adding new ones. Given the way in which data and information are processed, the idea of freedom and the relationships between citizens and their governments also underwent changes. One example is the reinterpretation of historical concepts like open government (HOFMANN; RAMÍREZ-ALUJAS; BOJÓRQUEZ, 2013). Described as an analytical category (not as a result or factual description), an *open government* is generally one that embraces and promotes transparency, stimulating accountability and citizen participation using innovation and new technologies to establish a dialogue between citizens and the government.¹⁴ Now, one final characteristic of an open government is that it connects citizens and rulers through open data, open innovation, and open dialogue. Here the important element is how the term "open" is characterized (POLÍTICA DIGITAL, 2012), and it must be noted that available information is not the same as accessible information, which can be handled and manipulated.

The key point that I want to develop is that regardless of whether it is out of conviction or government inattention, today we have much greater access to the information that is in the hands of public institutions. In many instances, these sources are made public using standard formats¹⁵ that allow any individual to use the information for any purpose. These formats can be freely copied, shared, combined with other material, or re-issued, allowing new users to explore, analyze, or transform them again into new products. The evidence shows that there has been a clear increase in access to statistical government databases,¹⁶ budget information,¹⁷ parliamentary newsletters¹⁸ and the geographic locations of public services like

schools, hospitals,¹⁹ etc. It is an expansion of the information inventory that can be transformed into many uses for human rights agendas, again, from the complaint through to the proposal, and including the mobilization of public opinion and fundraising (CROWDFUNDING..., 2014).

I will focus on a particular item: drafting reports on a human rights situation using new evidence (ARTICLE 19, 2014) (budget information,²⁰ indicators, audit reports,²¹ synthesized citizen reports,²² etc.). In these cases, the value added from the work of these organizations is in using the data with a methodology that leaves aside long systematized content and abstract narratives. The data is sorted, double-checked, and compared, and as a result, not only does the analysis grow, but it is also presented in more accessible ways. It's not about substituting form for substance, but achieving a comprehensive understanding of the context of information overload in which we live, and proactively engaging in it.

This is the second relevant aspect: dissemination. The criterion that governs the development of a new range of materials (which does not replace the drafting of papers and other articles, but rather complements it) is the practical application of the knowledge. It's about more people hearing the message, which arrives more quickly and mobilizes people or serves as a foundation for advocacy activities regarding public policy. The impact can be much deeper if activists also use information technologies in their research and analyses. The key factor is that the data is used and then presented through web sites, creative visualizations, info graphics, pivot tables, interactive maps,²³ reports that are developed collaboratively, platforms that link users facing similar problems, etc. Human rights organizations have messages that are politically timely, socially relevant, and with a legal basis, and these new dissemination formats help ensure that the data backs up the complaints²⁴ or the proposals, and that it is presented in a dynamic way.

Finally, it is worth briefly including another argument in favor of the use of technological tools, with a philosophy grounded in better exploitation of data and capturing audiences: the positive effects of Internet communication are not only valuable for their vertical reach (the audience that is reached through direct use of this medium) but also for their horizontal impact (the influence on traditional media and thus a literal multiplier effect). The latter is extremely important because even conventional radio stations, television programs, and magazines or other printed media can take up discussions that happen in social networks, or increasingly use new materials developed by organizations as information sources.

That said, I think the original claim is valid; we live in times when the emergence of new tools and technologies, particularly those associated with multimedia and the Internet, are transforming citizen participation, organizational structures, and the spheres of action of civil society organizations, and ways of engaging in politics in general. Their understanding and reach necessitates much more analysis and study, but denying it is an anachronism, while thinking it is the be-all and end-all is excessive, something like digital populism.

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NOTES

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