Chapter 24
Crowdsourcing for Human Rights Monitoring:
Challenges and Opportunities for Information Collection and Verification

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ABSTRACT

Accurate information is a foundational element of human rights work. Collecting and presenting factual evidence of violations is critical to the success of advocacy activities and the reputation of organizations reporting on abuses. To ensure credibility, human rights monitoring has historically been conducted through highly controlled organizational structures that face mounting challenges in terms of capacity, cost, and access. The proliferation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) provide new opportunities to overcome some of these challenges through crowdsourcing. At the same time, however, crowdsourcing raises new challenges of verification and information overload that have made human rights professionals skeptical of their utility. This chapter explores whether the efficiencies gained through an open call for monitoring and reporting abuses provides a net gain for human rights monitoring and analyzes the opportunities and challenges that new and traditional methods pose for verifying crowd-sourced human rights reporting.

INTRODUCTION

Accurate information is a foundational element of human rights work. Collecting and presenting factual evidence of violations is critical to the success of advocacy activities and the reputation of organizations reporting on abuses. To ensure credibility, human rights monitoring has historically been conducted through highly controlled organizational structures that face mounting challenges in terms of capacity, cost and access.

The proliferation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) may provide new opportunities to overcome some of these

challenges. For example, ICTs make it easier to engage large networks of unofficial volunteer monitors to crowdsource the monitoring of human rights abuses. Jeff Howe coined the term "crowdsourcing" in 2006, defining it as "the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call" (Howe, 2009). Applying this concept to human rights monitoring, Molly Land (2009) asserts that, "given the limited resources available to fund human rights advocacy...amateur involvement in human rights activities has the potential to have a significant impact on the field" (p. 2). That said, she warns that professionalization in human rights monitoring "has arisen not because of an inherent desire to control the process, but rather as a practical response to the demands of reporting - namely, the need to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in the report" (Land, 2009, p. 3).

Because "accuracy is the human rights monitor's ultimate weapon" and the advocate's "ability to influence governments and public opinion is based on the accuracy of their information," the risk of inaccurate information may trump any advantages gained through crowdsourcing (Codesria & Amnesty International, 2000, p. 32). To this end, the question facing human rights organizations that wish to leverage the power of the crowd is "whether [crowdsourced reports] can accomplish the same [accurate] result without a centralized hierarchy" (Land, 2009). The answer to this question depends on whether reliable verification techniques exist so organizations can use crowdsourced information in a way that does not jeopardize their credibility or compromise established standards. While many human rights practitioners (and indeed humanitarians) still seem to be allergic to the term crowdsourcing, further investigation reveals that established human rights organizations already use crowdsourcing *and* verification techniques to validate crowdsourced information and that there is great potential in the field for new methods of information collection and verification.

This chapter analyzes the opportunities and challenges that new and traditional methods pose for verifying crowdsourced human rights reporting. The first section reviews current methods for verification in human rights monitoring. The second section outlines existing methods used to collect and validate crowdsourced human rights information. Section three explores the practical opportunities that crowdsourcing offers relative to traditional methods. The fourth section outlines critiques and solutions for crowdsourcing reliable information. The final section proposes areas for future research.

TRADITIONAL METHODS OF HUMAN RIGHTS MONITORING

Human rights organizations traditionally operate through highly trained groups of professionals who gather and verify information under a demanding burden of proof. Researchers visit sites where human rights abuses are suspected to be taking place and conduct detailed interviews with witnesses, look for environmental clues and seek to gain a greater understanding of the dynamics at play. The role of the professional researcher becomes to collect, verify and pull information into a cohesive story that is based in fact.

The follow-up conducted by human rights researchers is extensive and significantly more involved than what is realistic to expect from untrained amateurs. Professionals are taught to systematically assess the usefulness and accuracy of information they collect before incorporating applicable and accurate information into official reports. The veracity of each individual report is extensively evaluated before it can be used. Researchers investigate sources in order to discern the previous record of an individual or organization and identify any biases or agendas that might shape the way in which information was framed.

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