



Chapter VIII

Human Rights Movements and the Internet: From Local Contexts to Global Engagement

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Abstract

This chapter looks at the impact of the Internet on the worldwide human rights movement, and examines the opportunities and pitfalls of the technology and its applications for human rights organisations. It argues that the technology is a useful tool in nongovernmental efforts toward worldwide compliance with human rights norms despite the new challenges it presents for human rights defenders and activists, particularly in the South. Conceptualising the movement as a collection of issue-based social submovements, it draws on social movement literature and examples from Africa to describe how the technology and its applications benefit the movement in six key areas of activity. The promises, pitfalls, and difficulties of Internet usage are discussed, with particular emphasis on censorship, surveillance and privacy, and the challenges they pose for human rights activists operating in a digital environment.

Introduction

The worldwide human rights regime has been growing in legal, political, and moral strength ever since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. But it was only after the end of the Cold War that human rights law and discourse became prominent in local, national, and international agendas, and a growing array of professionalised, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) began to appear (Rosenblum, 2000). Human rights defenders and local activist groups can now look to these for moral and material support, and they in turn can mobilise advocates around the world to act on behalf of victims of abuse and oppression. Through the collective efforts of these individuals and organisations, states and other actors have been forced toward greater accountability, institutional structures have been set up, and a vocabulary of liberation has been provided for people all over the globe.

Human rights activists everywhere share a commitment to compliance with human rights norms that transcend nationality and particular cultural values (Shelton, 2002). Granted, the origins of human rights discourse in a Western, liberal tradition is often seen as either undermining its universal value (Kennedy, 2002) or contributing to its ongoing manipulation (Abdul-Raheem, 2005). But antiuniversalism is refuted by arguments against genocide, slavery, racial discrimination, and other grave forms of abuse (Li, 1996), and by the widespread support that the major international human rights documents enjoy among the states of the world today (Perry, 1997). Certainly, particularities of context are important, and it is only when asserted within each country's tradition and history that human rights can become a reality (Tharoor, 1999). Thus, instead of allowing Western actors to set the agenda, local human rights movements in Africa and elsewhere need to "build sustainable legitimacy through local presence and work" (Abdul-Raheem, 2005).

Today, the international human rights regime encompasses institutional actors such as the United Nations (UN); national legal systems and human rights bodies; national and international criminal tribunals; quasi-governmental truth commissions; international, regional, national, and local (grassroots) NGOs; and academics, lawyers, educators, and activists all over the world (Ball, Girouard, & Chapman, 1997). It is becoming increasingly diverse not only because of the worldwide heterogeneity of cultures, subcultures, and contexts in which it operates, but also because the initial preference given to civil and political rights in the "western doctrine of human rights" (Cassese, 1986, p. 297) has waned. Equal attention is now given to economic, social, and cultural rights, and efforts are being made to place these on national and international agendas. There are also new global challenges to contend with: the integration of markets, the shrinking of states, increased transnational flows of information and people, the spread of cultures of intolerance, the decision-making processes of global institutions like the World Bank and multinational corporations (Brysk, 2002), and international terrorism. In response to these, the human rights movement—the worldwide community of advocates and activists working for the promotion and protection of human rights—has extended, evolved, and diversified. The lines between it and other civil society movements have become blurred, and human rights discourse now permeates, and often underpins, peace, conflict resolution, development, environmental protection, gender, health, and many other areas of civic concern.

The human rights movement has been described as "one of the most potent of contemporary social movements" (Cohen & Rai, 2000, p. 7) based on its implied universal logic. As with other international movements to which similar logic can be applied (such as the

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