

Book Review

Human Rights and Information Communication Technologies: Trends and Consequences of Use, by John Lannon and Edward Halpin (Eds). Hershey, Pennsylvania: IGI-Global, 2012, ISBN: 9781466619180, 468 pp. \$146.12, hardcover.

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Issues regarding human rights and information communications technologies (ICTs) are no longer the stuff of esoteric academic conversations or science-fiction writers' imaginations; they are front-page news. For example, tracking Google's experience in China in the pages of the *New York Times* (2013) tells a story of a losing struggle between an Internet search service that had attempted to be unaffected by political interests or state censorship and a regime hostile to human rights. It is obvious who won that tug of war. But what came next was the revelation that Google wasn't simply the conduit of information in its quest to democratize information—it was to become a compliant, albeit reluctant, tool of government surveillance agencies (Miller, 2013).

What was once thought of as an unfortunate occurrence in less free countries to block people from expressing their human rights became, in free countries, unfettered backdoor access to personal information via the Internet by government agencies that proclaimed the Internet free but collected data on what people did during their visits. It seems that governments everywhere just couldn't resist the temptations to know more than they should about their citizens.

While an Internet search itself seems straightforward and safe, we have since learned that even when it operates in an open society such as the United States, government interests have been quietly gathering and archiving virtually the entire history of the billions of individual searches and, with other data, have been creating the capacity for user profiles ostensibly needed for the war on terror, but involving innocent and suspect alike. Further, these great repositories of information include telephone records of calls made and received, credit card and banking records, and all activity on social networking and other websites.

Today, in light of a year of WikiLeaks (WikiLeaks.org), the Manning (PrivateManning.org) and Assange affairs (in addition to WikiLeaks, see Crowley, 2012), Facebook's manipulation of privacy settings and terms of use (Burnham, 2013), and most recently, the continuing revelations of widespread spying on people by corporations, and governments, the Edward Snowden revelations (Greenwald, 2013) have raised the public's consciousness of just how extensive the loss of privacy has been and the real threat to other human rights in the Internet era (e.g., freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of belief, and due process).

Thus, the publication of *Human Rights and Information Communication Technologies: Trends and Consequences of Use* (Lannon & Halpin, 2012) is both timely and significant. Addressing the particular environment of grassroots human rights organizations, Dueck and Rempel (2012, pp. 3–14) have identified 11 technology-related issues facing these organizations that need to use ICT while existing in a surveillance-oriented world that also threatens their success. The issues range from the increasing costs of a continuously changing technology necessitating ongoing servicing and upgrades to the fundamental questions of whom one trusts and to what extent information itself can

be gathered, verified, and safeguarded. In essence, one important message is to maintain eyes on the ground and strong interpersonal relationships for purposes of authenticating, sharing, and protecting information in any human rights campaign. Looked at another way, this is a cautionary tale that one needs to develop sophisticated ICT skills to assure one's system's integrity and the ability to protect one's data.

The book is divided into four sections: setting the stage, case studies from around the world, practitioner perspectives, and economic and social rights. Together, they cover the broad spectrum of ICT challenges, particularly noting that what can be an asset to human rights organizations can also be a detriment due to the vulnerability of data on the very networks so advantageous to communicating and alliance building. The case studies demonstrate both aspects of the ICT-enriched world of the human rights organization. On the one hand, as we have seen, the so-called Arab Spring—regardless of how it is finally judged—did get its impetus and spread like fire because of the initially unfettered access to new ICT and the power of social networking tools. On the other hand, what was initially a resource quickly became a tool for further repression by enabling the government to identify the dissenters and, when that wasn't sufficient, to scare off the insurgents by simply disrupting access. That won't change anytime soon, however, even with the recent U.N. resolution sponsored by Brazil and Germany to protect the privacy of Internet users (BBC, 2013).

Right to privacy, access to ICT, protections against disclosure of personal information gathering (e.g., healthcare recording systems, credit card numbers, membership rosters, and email lists of human rights organizations), and sharing user data are double-edged swords. For every advantage, there is a countervailing threat, yet there is no alternative other than to understand its usefulness, master the technology, and install the most powerful security features.

The weak link in Lannon and Halpin's (2012) survey—and, in fairness, perhaps it requires a separate treatment—is how ICT has transformed the employer–employee relationship and the nature of work itself, including its societal importance to the rise and fall of economic well-being as globalization continues apace. Given the establishment of routine global sourcing resulting in the “hollowing out” (A., 2012) of the U.S. domestic workforce, one increasingly substantial impact of ICT has been the replacement of highly paid professionals in the United States with lower paid professionals in China and India, in particular. The differential in pay scales alone can mean average personnel savings of about 40% (Skolnick, 2013). Further, monitoring work and the speed with which it is accomplished (anytime/anywhere) makes it possible to remove layers of middle managers as those functions become automated with the assistance of increasingly sophisticated ICT capabilities. While these forces are contributing to the stagnation in employment in the private sector, for human rights organizations, it may (ironically) actually mean increasing the capacity of perpetually under-resourced efforts.

Lannon and Halpin's (2012) contribution to the human rights community is to provide an overview of the potential as well as the manifest power of ICT as part of the toolbox for organizing, data gathering and dissemination, and networking among like-minded organizations. That alone is immensely useful—especially to activists in the field and students preparing to join them. It is also a good resource for understanding the technical challenges ahead. In one sense, however, the ICT advocacy component of their overall message is really unnecessary and too late, but the questions Lannon and Halpin (and their many contributors) raise and the challenges the book presents are critical for the sensible application of ICT in the service of human rights.

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