This special issue of the *International Journal of Information Communication Technologies and Human Development* (IJICTHD) provides a brief insight into an area that has received infrequent attention in the world of information and technology – human rights. Beyond the issues of privacy, information security, freedom of speech and digital exclusion, the area has not been well covered in academic journals. Nonetheless the description of the IJICTHD includes an important statement about humanity and technology which provides us with a good point of departure for this special issue on human rights and information communication technologies (ICTs):

"... It is so important to design human development policies, in the context of the information and knowledge society, which promote the use of new technologies in the widening of the basic structure of rights which allow individuals to exercise freedom to develop capacities and fulfill achievements that give sense to their lives."

The history of adoption and application of ICTs in the world of human rights advocacy and activism is as long as the history of ICTs themselves. Human rights is a fast moving world, where action is often required rapidly in order to respond to abuses of human rights and in some cases direct threats to life or liberty. Early evidence of the use of the fax machine and later bulletin boards to undertake urgent “action appeals” for human rights is evidenced by Patti Whalley, former Deputy General Secretary of Amnesty International, and Debra Guzman in a 2000 book entitled *Human Rights and the Internet* (Hick, Halpin, & Hoskins, 2000). At the time these placed international human rights non-governmental organisations (NGOs) at the cutting edge in terms of technology. The development of the use and application of ICTs since these early days can be traced through an important, although limited, series of articles and book contributions including Metzl (1996), Ball, Girouard, and Chapman (1997), Brophy and Halpin (1999), Hick and Halpin (2001), and Lannon and Halpin (2008). These bring us up to the present day, and into an era of ever expanding connectivity and information flow.

This special issue provides a range of insights into the world of technological and political change that we live in today. It covers the Arab Spring (Wilson & Dunn), repressi-
ian governments (Bowe et al.), ICTs and human rights in Brazil (Rodrigues Filho), ICTs and gender rights (Ionescu) and health information technology and human rights (O’Hanlon). The articles form part of a longer consideration of ICTs and human rights which can be found in a forthcoming book titled Human Rights and Information Technologies: Trends and Consequences of Use. The book will contain either broadly similar or slightly edited versions of the articles in this IJICTHD special issue, as well as additional chapters from across the world of human rights.

The human rights context is one we all know, yet when asked to define human rights many people struggle. The concept of human rights is a tradition in almost all cultures, over many centuries, going back well beyond the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which the United Nations General Assembly adopted in 1948. There are academic and legal definitions, but when reduced to more human terms, human rights are in essence about human dignity. Today, the concepts of equity, fairness, protection of human dignity and life are codified in United Nations declarations, regional instruments, and in national law. Yet there is still repression, inequality, false arrest, detention, beatings, and extra-judicial killing to mention a few acts of inhumanity, in the world. However in the period since 1948 large numbers of organisations and institutions have come into existence, and the number of NGOs working for human rights has grown exponentially. These NGOs are at the heart of the struggle to address human rights, and it is largely (though not exclusively) their adoption and application of ICTs that this Special Issue addresses.

We are now part of a global networked society. In theory, anyone, anywhere that has access to the Internet can broadcast to an ever-increasing audience. In practice, only 30% of people in the world have access to the Internet (Internet World Stats, 2011). Of those, even fewer can create their own content. This could be because of unreliable connectivity, inadequate fulfillment of the right to education, social stratifications and inequalities, language, or other barriers to Internet adoption and appropriation. For human rights activists who draw unwanted attention to the illicit actions of a state there are additional difficulties. Political censorship and surveillance are commonplace across the world, as can be seen from the reports of international non-governmental organisations like Reporters without Borders and Human Rights Watch. As a result, anyone who draws unwanted attention to the actions of an authoritarian state can put themselves or others at risk by posting information online. Human rights defenders generally take precautions, like choosing the least risky communications channels, using encryption to prevent surveillance and censorship of their web usage, being careful of what and where they publish, and using tools that allow anonymous web surfing. Nonetheless governmental efforts to control the Internet are becoming more subtle, flexible, and offensive in character (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010). Legal takedown notices, restrictive terms-of-usage policies and national information-shaping strategies are all used to restrict the type of information that can be posted, hosted, accessed, or communicated. A wide range of covert practices are also being used, some of which may be outsourced to third parties. These include the infiltration and exploitation of computer systems by targeted viruses and the employment of distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks. As Deibert and Rohozinski observe (2010), these practices emerge from a desire to shape and influence as much as to tightly control national and global populations that are increasingly reliant on cyberspace as their main source of information.

Despite the many constraints that impede human rights activists’ effective use of ICTs, mobile phones, hand-held cameras and the Internet have all provided new opportunities for the human rights movement. They have made instantaneous reporting of human rights violations possible and have transformed the potential of transnational networks. Thanks to social networking sites, blogs, wikis, video sharing sites, mash-ups and other web
2.0 applications and tools, there is now more potential for collaboration, and action can be organised in a decentralised way, even across borders. The Internet allows NGOs to pool their information, thus greatly increasing its value to the human rights movement. News of crises can be spread quickly, and speedy support can be arranged for organisations on the ground in times of crisis. This can create opportunities for spontaneous collective action on a global level.

Inequalities exist throughout society on both global and local levels, and as Agre (2002) wrote, technologies like the Internet can amplify these inequalities rather than eliminate them. Nonetheless O’Hanlon explains in this special issue that ICTs can help to eradicate many of the inequities seen in the area of healthcare today. However they also present significant risks. Data can still be lost, stolen or viewed by unauthorised persons, and now misuse of health information technology can result in violation of the right to privacy.

Ionescu notes that the inequalities that exist between men and women in many societies are also accentuated by the difficulties that women encounter in continuing their education. She says that for women to be able to attain true equality of opportunities with men in respect of knowledge, it is essential for them to have access not only to general education but also to an education tailored to the new technologies.

Privacy is also at risk as a result of the widespread dissemination of information. While online media outlets like the video sharing site YouTube provide human rights advocates with instant access to an audience in a way that press releases never can (this is described with reference to the Arab world by Aziz Douai in Human Rights and Information Technologies: Trends and Consequences of Use, the privacy and security of those filmed and of the reporter need to be borne in mind). The key challenge according to Sam Gregory, director of WITNESS (an organisation that trains and supports people to use video in human rights advocacy), is how to establish online and participatory cultures that “create and share social justice and human rights material in a manner that balances the right to privacy (and the integrity of the person) with the right to freedom of expression” (Gregory, 2010, p. 204). The importance of exposing human rights violations must be balanced with consideration for the dangers that human rights defenders and victims are exposed to. This involves human rights, technology, privacy law, media literacy communities, and online communities like YouTube where the video content is being shared.

One of the most interesting aspects of the debate around human rights and ICTs is the ongoing friction between online freedom of expression and government repression. As Bowe et al. point out; many technology companies find themselves in a position of either facilitating government repression or finding themselves unable to compete in particular markets. The international human rights NGO Amnesty International stated unequivocally in a 2011 blog that technology companies must challenge laws that suppress free expression, censor information and invade users’ privacy (Amnesty International, 2011). “They should do it because it is the right thing to do” said Amnesty.

Things do not always work out like that however. During the 2011 Arab Spring protests in Egypt, the Mubarak government attempted to completely block online activities, and in what has been described as “an action unprecedented in Internet history” (Cowie, 2011), they ordered service providers to shut down all international connections to the Internet. Human Rights Watch described this as an extreme step designed to disrupt planned marches, to block images of police brutality, and to silence dissent once and for all (Human Rights Watch, 2011). In a mini-keynote address to a Silicon Valley Human Rights Conference in October 2011, Egyptian activist Alaa Abd El-Fattah explained that mobile phone and Internet service providers, including large Western based corporations, knew that the government had enacted a law that gave it the power to demand these providers shut down
communications but they did not fight against it (Abd El-Fattah, 2011).

Alaa Abd El Fattah was at the forefront of anti-regime struggles in Egypt for most of a decade, and was a political prisoner during the Mubarak era. Ironically he was again imprisoned by the military ruling council seven months after the overthrow of Mubarak, on charges of inciting violence against the military. Abd El Fattah had, like many others, turned his attention to the ruling council as their early promises to defend Egypt’s revolution and help move the country towards democratic civilian rule had been slow to materialise.

Governments have a responsibility to respect, protect and fulfill human rights. But as Bowe et al explain, they impose severe restrictions on free expression, not only in Egypt but in other places like Iran, China, and Singapore. Even in countries that are recognized as democratic, with civil society groups and networks, the impact of ICTs on the enjoyment of human rights is not always entirely positive. A case in point is Brazil. Rodrigues Filho writes that there is a high level of investment in information technology in the public sector (e-government) in the country, but despite this there are also clear signs of the violation of human rights in the area of privacy.

With the advent of the digital age, the landscape has changed in terms of human rights advocacy. The political landscape is changing too. A global financial crisis grips the world. The war on terror has seen the slipping of human rights standards that the international community worked hard to establish. The Arab Spring has seen revolutionary waves of demonstrations and protests leading to regime changes in several Arab countries. And the West’s strategic interests, coupled with the embracing of a new discourse of responsibility to protect (Cooper & Kohler, 2008), are redefining intervention policy. Wilson and Dunn explore how activists can strategically combine digital and grounded communications to respond to some of these complex and changing environments. For their analysis they take us back to Egypt and to the Front to Defend Egyptian Protesters (FDEP), a Cairo-based initiative utilizing multiple digital media to mobilize support teams for arrested protesters and work towards their release. They note that the increased communicative reach enabled by digital media engenders anonymity for individuals, but that it also provides a broadly transparent public profile that is capable of motivating engagement and impacting official decision-making processes.

Bowe et al. and the other articles in this Special Issue demonstrate how ICTs can shape flows of information that impact on the enjoyment of human rights. The politics of inequality and injustice, and the determination to expose, change or replace authoritarian regimes and corrupt leaders are both powerful forces. Information – or lack of information – is key to the success of either. And those that appropriate and control today’s technologies determine the flows of information, just as they did in the days of the printing press. ICTs therefore have an impact on the enjoyment of human rights but they do not make their enjoyment a reality or their denial an inevitability. That is ultimately determined by governments’ willingness to respect, protect and fulfill the rights that all people are entitled to by virtue of their birth.

The challenge for the human rights movement is to use ICTs effectively to bring that about.

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REFERENCES


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