Chapter 74
Human Rights and Technology:
Lessons from Alice in Wonderland

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines eleven technology issues faced by human rights organizations. These issues are critical if they are to use technology effectively. Although solutions are not proposed, the chapter highlights topics that increasingly require research and concrete solutions in order for human rights organizations to integrate technology tools into their work. The key issues addressed are: rapid technology changes; national security, personal information, and human rights; web security; data relationships; controlled vocabulary (a common language); Semantic Web and human interactivity; search - finding the information; assumptions and ease of use; trust; open source; and social media. These issues, chosen from the human rights and technology backgrounds of the authors, provide a frontier to human rights work that may seem daunting to the newly initiated. Human interaction must remain the key element. Technology must be a servant to the human rights needs and demands.

INTRODUCTION

The wonderland of information communication technologies is upon the human rights community. The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable (Knowles, 2006) defines wonderland as:

A land or place full of wonderful things, a fairy-land; the term is recorded from the late 18th century, but is most frequently used with refer-ence to the country which Alice found down a rabbit-hole in Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. (Knowles, 2006)

One could suggest with little levity that perhaps Alice's wonderland is similar to the technology wonderland today – a wonderland with promises, delights and dangers. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, a classic fantasy novel written in 1865 under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll, is about a girl

who falls down a rabbit hole into a fantasy world (Wonderland). The quotations used in this chapter are from this book, as well as *Through the Looking Glass* which was a sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.* Alice's wonderland in some ways parallels the "wonderland" of technology with its complexities, mystery and unknown future.

The following quote sets the stage:

Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it, and burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and fortunately was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.

In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.

The rabbit-hole went straight on like a tunnel for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down a very deep well.

Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her and to wonder what was going to happen next (Carroll, 1865, Chapter 1).

On contemplating the curious world of technology that everyone seems to have fallen into, one must admit that many once impossible processes are now not only possible but have been implemented. This advancement in technology has many advantages but also some inherent dangers - dangers that may be critical in a field as sensitive as human rights. Alice rushes down the rabbit hole without consideration of any repercussions. Organizations, on the other hand, must ensure a holistic approach considering the technical, organizational, ethical, communication, human rights and other implications before they jump into the alluring rabbit hole of technology.

BACKGROUND

Looking back one can see many trendsetters – those who led the way into wonderland. For example, in the mid-80s only a few human rights organizations used email. Examples include Al Haq, the West Bank branch of the International Commission of Jurists and Amnesty International. They had the foresight to see the potential of the new communications technology.

Trendsetters in human rights documentation in the 1980s included non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Centre for Legal and Social Studies (CELS) in Argentina. In 1986 the Argentinian government passed the "Ley Punto Final," a law that created a 60 day time limit for prosecution of crimes committed during the military dictatorship (Jelin, 1994). Human rights NGOs such as CELS turned to manual documentation systems in order to proceed with prosecutions as quickly as possible. In 2005 the "Ley Punto Final" was overturned and once again the documentation systems of human rights NGOs were invaluable. These documentation systems identified perpetrators, times of events, reported incidents, places, roles of persons involved, and other details. The CELS system was one of several which were examined carefully as useful examples in the development of electronic human rights documentation systems. Organizations began to create methods of documenting violations using discrete pieces of information and relational databases. Some of the discussions around these processes can be found in Guinchat & Minou (1983), Chaves (1989), Ball et al (1994), Ball (1996), Metzl (1996, 1997), Ball et al (1997), Guzman & Verstappen (1998), Frontalini (1990), Ball et al (2000), and Cross & Jarvis (2000).

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