Working with CHRS: Core Values & Operating Principles

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Introduction

The use of technology in human rights practice has dramatically increased over the past few years, and this trend shows no signs of abating. From advocacy and fact-finding to litigation and education, human rights practitioners and organizations routinely explore, use, and adapt technologies offered by the market. There are a growing number of specialized companies and nonprofits that create technology specifically for the human rights and humanitarian sectors.

Human rights practitioners almost always work in under-resourced, high-pressure environments. With a few exceptions, they tend to use opportunistic and adaptive approaches when adopting technology. Practitioners and organizations are often in disadvantageous positions to discover, evaluate, and decide whether it makes sense to adopt these new technologies. Yet like in many other aspects of our social and economic lives, there can be great pressure to adopt technology simply because it is equated with an abstract notion of progress.

This situation often leads to negative outcomes including: the commitment to tools that decrease efficiency and excessively affect budget; the use of technologies at an immature stage; lack of awareness about trends that could be transformative for specific areas of human rights practice; and even skepticism about the value of technology writ large, among others.

The Center for Human Rights Science at Carnegie Mellon University (CHRS) was founded in 2011 to address this challenge. As part of its multidisciplinary, problem-solving oriented approach, the Center brings together natural and social scientists, technologists, and human rights practitioners committed to developing, applying, and evaluating scientific methods for collecting, analyzing, and communicating human rights information. CHRS operates at the intersection of academia and practice and is comprised of two main components: the Statistics Program and the Technology Program.

For historical reasons having to do with the rise of criminal tribunals and truth commissions as core components of the transitional justice movement, the formal use of statistics in human rights work is more established, both in terms of methods and mechanisms for formal collaborations between statisticians and practitioners. However, there are still many opportunities to develop or improve quantitative analyses in human rights investigations. To the extent that

technology impacted human rights work historically, it was primarily in the forensic and genetic domains.

The human rights community is just beginning to adapt and adopt technologies for data analysis like machine learning, computer vision, and natural language processing. Corporate, military and intelligence actors, on the other hand, have been pouring billions of dollars into figuring out how to exploit these technologies for profit, military advantage, and situational awareness. Through sustained engagement with the human rights community, we realized both that human rights practitioners were not always aware of the latest developments in computer science, and even if they were familiar, they lacked an effective bridge to help them gain access in an effective and affordable manner.

Core Values

The primary goal of CHRS is to be a *bridge* between scientists & technologists and the human rights community (or to use a different metaphor, a *trading zone* where individuals from differing backgrounds and disciplines come together to engage in mutually beneficial interactions and exchange). Through this role, we seek to level the scientific and technical playing field between the human rights community and the governmental and corporate entities they seek to monitor and hold accountable. At the same time, we seek to educate researchers and students about the computational and analytical needs of the human rights community, in order to inject human rights concerns into public and private discussions about the development and use of technology and scientific knowledge in society.

All of CHRS's activities are rooted in core human rights norms and frameworks, beginning with a commitment to *accountability, transparency, and justice*. We are motivated by the belief that all individuals and communities, especially the most vulnerable and disenfranchised members of society, should be protected from the harms and risks associated with the deployment of technology, and should directly benefit from advances in science and technology. In order to ensure both protection from harms and direct benefits, representatives of all strata of society ought to have a role in decisions about the deployment and regulation of technologies and bodies of knowledge that affect them.

CHRS is further guided by the principle of *solidarity* in our work. We are here to help human rights groups achieve their normative goals more efficiently and effectively through discrete technology transfer and longer-term planning for the ways that emergent technologies will impact them in the future. We do not advise them on what issues are important to address, engage directly in advocacy work, or offer advice on matters of law. There are many strong academic human rights centers around the world that already do this work, and we seek to complement their efforts.

We are committed to avoiding two major shortcomings of previous interactions between academic institutions and human rights practitioners: first, the extractive mode of operation in which academics take the life stories, histories, and data from vulnerable populations and use them to produce products that are rewarded in professional settings (journal articles, book chapters, conference presentations, etc.) but do not offer knowledge and other forms of utility back to the communities from which data were taken. Second, academics have long partnered with human rights groups, but have not focused directly on working to help them improve their efficiency and effectiveness in terms of the collection, retention, and analysis of data. They have used data and

problems from human rights practice to fuel research and innovation, but have not made sure that their human rights groups have been left empowered with new tools, methods, and bodies of knowledge.

Finally, we approach our work with humility, recognizing that we don't have all the answers and that it is absolutely crucial to value the experience and perspective of human rights practitioners who are at the frontlines of the documentation of violations and data analysis. We see our role as service providers as having equal or greater value to our role as academic researchers.

Our Theory of Change

Our theory of change is that human rights organizations can achieve significant and rapid payback in efficiency and effectiveness of existing human rights work by thoughtful and careful implementation of existing and emerging technologies. Practitioners can also benefit by understanding what technologies will also be available to them over the next 5-10 years so they can proactively plan for their eventual arrival rather than being forced to adapt to them in a reactive way.

We operate in two complementary modes. The first is more immediate. It focuses on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of existing practices and workflows through technology and better analytical tools. The other takes place in parallel to the more short-term approach and focuses on raising awareness about emerging technological developments so that human rights practitioners are prepared to integrate emerging technology into their practice and not caught off guard when they arrive on the scene. We introduce and explain new technologies with as little hype as possible. We seek to demystify technology, peeling back the veil of magic to show practitioners how technologies work and what they can and cannot do. Our goal is for human rights practitioners to integrate technology where sensible with minimal negative impact to their overall missions. It is very important to us that technology not be a distraction, in terms of mission or resources, and that their human rights agenda remains front and center both during and after our collaboration.

How We Operate

Our first and most important job is to get to know potential partners and determine: a) if we can offer them discrete, short- and mid-term benefits by making tools, methods, and approaches available that are just being developed or are not widely accessible in the commercial market or open source communities; and b) if they provide a sufficiently novel technical challenge to be meaningful to researchers and students at Carnegie Mellon. Put another way, we only engage in mutually beneficial partnerships.

Potential partners generally come to us through word-of-mouth referrals from other partners in the human rights community, advice from donors who either fund us or know our work, or because they have heard about our work in media reports or our publications.

We are often contacted by potential partners and decline to engage because: the requestor does not have clear rights-promoting intentions; we do not possess the requisite technical capacity; we do not believe it is technically possible to do the work requested; or the service or product is available commercially or through open source in a more easily accessible format. Our goal is to advance the state of human rights science and technology, not do consulting work or maintain services for long periods of time. When we turn down a prospective partner with a legitimate

human rights goal, we always explain why and do our best to connect them to organizations or individuals who we feel can better help them achieve their goal.

From the moment we determine that a partnership has potential, we practice and promote inclusive collaboration. Both academic colleagues and human rights partners need to: be directly involved in shaping the research agenda; understand how data will be shared, stored, and used; and most importantly negotiate outcomes such as publications, tools, and technical assistance in advance. We also make it clear that the transfer of technology is about more than just making tools and techniques accessible to partners. New methods need to be compatible with existing workflows and analytic outputs need to be easily integrated into existing data systems. We seek to create as little disruption in everyday practice as possible unless all parties agree that doing so is absolutely necessary and desirable.

Although we often engage in a proof of concept stage using publicly available data, before any real work takes place, we engage in extensive conversations to ensure that all parties are on the same page with respect to the above. We then work together to draft a memorandum of understanding, contract, or letter of cooperation that formalizes the agreements we made in the negotiating phase. This document is then passed back and forth until all collaborators are comfortable with it, and then it is sent to senior management at the respective institutions and Carnegie Mellon's Office for Sponsored Research for review. Revisions are often requested at this stage and once these changes have been made, the document is signed and becomes the basis for the partnership moving forward. While such formal agreements sometimes seem unnecessary, particularly with long-standing partners, they are vital for ensuring that all parties receive expected benefits.

Because this is research, we cannot always accomplish what we are trying to do. This reality is written into the agreement so that human rights partners understand that positive outcomes are not a guarantee. We do promise, however, to always share what we have learned with the research and human rights communities. Being open and honest in our capacities and limitations is a core principle of the center. In this vein, we currently respond to the needs of our partners with respect to sustainability on a case-by-case basis. As a research-oriented center, we make it clear that we cannot provide long-term support to our partners, nor can we maintain the technologies we develop and/or deploy in perpetuity. We hope that the development of new approaches to human rights documentation and data analysis will spur more permanent solutions from organizations and providers that are more capable of stable product development than we are currently, or will encourage the organizations we work with to ensure sustainability through internal mechanisms. While this has not caused problems thus far, we regularly and reflexively reevaluate this aspect of our work.

Dissemination of Knowledge and Results

In addition to engaging in partnerships and collaborations with human rights practitioners, we also seek to produce and disseminate knowledge about the use of technologies in human rights practice to the broader community. We do this through a wide range of formats from books and peer-reviewed journal articles to blog posts and white papers. We also regularly participate in public meetings, workshops, and conferences; organize and attend private consultations; and provide both formal and informal advising to a growing number of key individuals, projects and

organizations. Sometimes these endeavors focus specifically on the tools and methods being developed at CHRS and sometimes they focus more generally on the use of diverse technologies in human rights work. Our goal is to reach diverse audiences with different needs and cultural understandings of technology and human rights practice in the ways that are most useful to them.

Final thoughts

We do not wish to claim that our method of technology transfer or our philosophy of engagement with the human rights community is the single *right* way of operating in this space. Science and technology are vast domains, and the human rights community is anything but monolithic. That said, our model works well for us and our partners and we hope that laying out our approach and philosophy can be useful to others. We are always open to questions, feedback, and requests for consultations and would welcome the opportunity to discuss our processes further.