New Technologies and Human Rights Monitoring
August 6-7, 2012

Workshop Summary

Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law together with the Foreign Policy Studies Program at the Brookings Institution and Google.org, convened a two-day workshop to advance strategic thinking on how to leverage new technologies to strengthen U.N. human rights monitoring around the world. Bringing together a small group of United Nations Human Rights Council mandate-holders, leading civil society activists, government representatives, and technologists working at the intersection of technology and human rights, the workshop developed concrete proposals for how technology platforms can be used to amplify the voices of mandate-holders, broaden their engagement with activists and citizens globally, and increase the awareness and impact of U.N. human rights monitoring mechanisms.

On the first day of the workshop, participants identified the needs of special rapporteurs, learned how technology is currently being used to promote human rights, and discussed the possibilities presented by new technologies for strengthening U.N. human rights mechanisms. The second day was conducted in the form of a design workshop. Hosted at Stanford's Design School ("d.school"), participants engaged in a day-long exploration of the needs of particular constituencies of the U.N. Special Rapporteurs, and designed and prototyped potential solutions to meet those needs.

Background on UN Human Rights Monitoring

A key element of international efforts to protect and promote human rights is the use of United Nations-mandated independent experts who investigate human rights conditions on the ground and report back to the Human Rights Council in Geneva (UNHRC). More than forty of these independent experts are now deployed internationally, working on issues including torture, violence against women, and freedom of expression among others. An additional 12 mandates examine violations in specific countries including North Korea, Sudan, Burma, and Cambodia.

These individuals receive a formal mandate from the Human Rights Council, but are unpaid volunteers who fulfill this role on top of their professional responsibilities, with some modest support from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). A recent study by Ted Piccone at the Brookings Institution entitled, *Catalysts for Change: How the UN's Independent Experts Promote Human Rights*, documents the prolific work of these mandate-holders. Between 2004 and 2008, special rapporteurs recorded over 9,000 formal communications to governments regarding alleged human rights abuses. In 2009 alone, they conducted 73 visits to 51 countries and prepared more than 150 reports. As the Arab Spring unfolded, U.N. human rights mechanisms were key instruments for protecting the rights of citizens to protest peacefully and documenting abuses throughout the region, including in Iran, Libya, and Syria. These experts are central to the effectiveness and impact of the UNHRC—they are the front-line of UN efforts to document human rights policies and abuses and seek cooperation from governments.

Special Rapporteurs: Current Approaches, Aspirations, and Needs

Four special rapporteurs in attendance at the workshop represented diverse mandates and shared their perspectives on how they approach their work and the challenges they confront. Each focused on the strengths and weaknesses of the three main methodologies they employ to document abuses and promote human rights: urgent appeals, country visits, and thematic reports.

Urgent Appeals. Mandate holders receive individual complaints and letters of allegation from victims, relatives, or others on behalf of victims. With credible and reliable information, U.N. special rapporteurs engage governments on behalf of the complainant. A number of challenges were raised regarding urgent appeals:

- While some mandate holders receive dozens and even hundreds of allegations of abuse, others do not receive sufficient information to effectively serve victims. Moreover, complaints are often filed by international human rights organizations that are well informed about the role of U.N. special rapporteurs while other smaller organizations lack the knowledge to take advantage of this resource. There is a need to facilitate engagement with the special rapporteurs by local and national human rights defenders, particularly in countries with less developed media and civil society networks, taking into account the importance of ensuring security in these communications.
- Some special rapporteurs struggle to keep track of a large number of complaints, a challenge exacerbated by insufficient resources such as funding and professional staff. There is a need for a systematic way of managing the complaints that have been submitted, tracking progress as SRs engage with governments, and communicating receipt and results to the individual complainants.

Country Visits. Mandate holders also carry out fact-finding missions through country visits to document the situation of human rights at the national level. Mandate holders conduct country visits at the invitation of the host country and under negotiated terms. After the country visits, independent experts generally issue reports offering their findings and recommendations. Challenges include:

- Country visits are only possible with the permission of the host government on a timely basis. There is a need for mechanisms that pressure governments to respond favorably to mandate holders' requests to visit, and for a transparent structure that allows civil society to track when invitations are sent, accepted, or denied.
- Countries are often non-responsive to the recommendations of special rapporteurs following country visits. Mechanisms are needed to increase visibility of SR's recommendations and track how governments respond to them, as well as to help draw media attention to these final reports.
- A large amount of material generated by country visits is not included in the final report. A database of materials gathered during visits would facilitate broader access to the source material that underlies SR's recommendations.

Thematic Reports. Mandate holders also produce cross-cutting thematic reports depending on the individual mandate. These reports are sometimes generated in consultation with regional and

international experts on the topic and often include rigorous research and valuable bibliographic information. Challenges include:

- Mandate holders are often limited in their capacity to engage regional and international experts in producing these reports. Special Rapporteurs lack mechanisms to crowd-source and verify information from a broader range of sources.
- The reports are often neither broadly available nor widely read. There is a need for an ability to broadcast the findings of the report, and to disseminate them in local languages.

New Technologies and Human Rights Monitoring: Innovations at Work

As a means of prompting innovative thinking in the group, a number of leading technologists profiled innovative ways in which technology is being used to make human rights organizations more effective. Some examples included:

- A software package that helps governments and civil society systematize information about human rights abuses. The software is designed to facilitate the collection of detailed stories, and to turn those stories into data that can be used to present a complete and accurate picture of human rights violations.
- A platform that facilitates citizen journalism in a post-conflict country by enabling activists to bear witness to human rights abuses and to share their stories. The platform enables blogging, the upload of digital and video images, the use of data visualizations, etc.
- A technology that enables live-streaming of video from anywhere in the world. The video images can be embedded on social media platforms, and videos are immediately archived in the cloud. This has been useful for facilitating coverage of protests throughout the Arab Spring, human rights abuses in Syria, and in a range of other contexts.
- An NGO that harnesses the power of social media tools to build social movements at a scale and a pace that was not previously possible. Social media is critical to quickly building a membership base with very low barriers to entry. Campaigners then use this platform to quickly push for action. This approach has been applied to build an anti-slavery movement (Walk Free) and a global LGBT movement (All Out), among others.
- An online marketplace where dissidents can connect with one another and get the support they need, such as legal assistance and connections to media.
- A data visualization that captures the increasing weakness of the Syrian government by representing the pace at which key members of the Assad regime defect. This is a valuable complement to traditional text journalism.

Two key challenges were raised by a number of the presenters. First, most victims of abuse are generally unaware of the risks of digital activism, and these risks may be discounted compared to the risks of physical harm they face. But designers of tech-based platforms need to be cognizant of these risks, and design with an eye toward protecting victims. Second, access remains an important issue, with internet connectivity and language representing major barriers to human rights defenders and victims engaging with various tools and UN processes in general.

Mapping the Problem/Solution Space

Building on these innovative examples and in preparation for the design workshop, the group engaged in a brainstorming exercise about how new technologies might be useful to special rapporteurs in three areas: obtaining information, managing information, and broadcasting information/strengthening follow-up.

Obtaining information. A key priority in this area is to "democratize" the sources and types of information that special rapporteurs utilize. Existing platforms such as SMS and USTREAM can be useful, as can technologies for crowd-sourcing input. Technology can also play a critical role in facilitating information verification (e.g. digital signatures, underlying meta data that records time, place, etc.), and ensuring secure communication (e.g. encryption) to process complaints or receive input. Some also raised the possibility of using new data analytics software, such as stream analysis, to help special rapporteur's stay abreast of trends and developments.

Managing information. The key innovation would be an online mechanism for logging and tracking individual complaints. Any one of the various models or software available for customer relations management could be used as a template, and each case would have a unique ID. This mechanism could be restricted to internal use or have aspects that were available to public, especially after cases are resolved.

Broadcasting information and strengthening follow-up. New technologies could play a critical role in increasing the accessibility of special rapporteur's work to various audiences. Translation is a top priority, and innovations in translation that combine machine learning tools and crowd-sourcing can produce accurate translations quickly. The visibility of findings and recommendations – as well as their timeliness – can be improved through the use of social media and giving more attention to branding and use of social networks in dissemination. Reports can be made more accessible to the general public by using data visualization tools to more effectively communicate patterns and trends. There was also some discussion of using crowd-sourcing tools to solicit input and feedback on country-specific recommendations during the drafting process.

The Design Workshop

On day 2, participants engaged in a hands-on design workshop with the goal of thinking through how some of the envisioned platforms might actually be tailored to meet the needs of specific constituencies ("users") that have a stake in the work of special rapporteurs.

Design thinking is a methodology for innovation that draws on creative and analytical approaches. It leverages the potential of cross-disciplinary collaboration and combines methods and tools from engineering, design, the arts, the social sciences, and the business world. Workshop participants first engaged in an "empathy exercise" to put participants in their user's frame of reference. Setting aside preconceived notions, participants brainstormed how their user might act and think, internally and externally. Participants identified the needs of the individuals - or "users" - they represented, defined the problems to be addressed, suggested possible solutions and, finally, prototyped approaches that might better address their user's needs. By utilizing this process to uncover the real human needs that must be addressed, participants developed an unexpected range of possible solutions. The power of design thinking lies in combining reflection and action, and providing tools to move from abstract and complex problems towards concrete prototypes and solutions.

Users & Needs

Participants were divided into groups that represented the range of constituencies that have a stake in the work of the special rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, with teams composed of individuals from diverse backgrounds. The six user groups included: (1) victims of abuse, (2) governments that restrict freedom of association and assembly, (3) a human rights campaigner interested in pressuring the target government, (4) a foreign affairs official responsible for policy toward the target country, (5) the special rapporteur, and (6) an official at OHCHR. These user groups were chosen because they have specific and distinct needs, which are sometimes in tension with one another. For example, victims are primarily concerned with their freedom, while government officials prioritize order and control. Human rights campaigners seek to protect rights, while foreign ministries aim to make progress on a wide variety of issues. The special rapporteur wants to make an immediate impact on the issue at hand, while the OHCHR must consider its broader impact across mandates and its relations with member states.

In the need-finding exercise, a number of key themes emerged. First, for a number of stakeholders, issues of access to the special rapporteur mechanism were paramount. Victims want to be able to provide information in ways that generate a meaningful response, while other stakeholders put a high priority on having access to timely, secure, and relevant information from the special rapporteur relating to what he/she has uncovered. A number of stakeholders also share a need for more effective ways to process and analyze the information gathered by special rapporteurs, in support of actionable steps. Finally, across user groups there was attention to each stakeholder's distinct personal needs – for example, victims are looking to be treated with dignity and respect and to have their security protected throughout their engagement with a special rapporteur.

Prototyping Solutions

Building on the need-finding exercise, each stakeholder group conceptualized and "built" a prototype of a tech-based innovation that might address one of the key needs they identified. The prototypes were experiential, in the sense that participants used skits and designed visuals to represent the experience of using a new website, for example. Each innovation reflected a key insight drawn from an understanding of the particular needs of a class of users.

<u>The need for a victim-oriented reporting platform</u>

One powerful insight concerned the importance of orienting the system of reporting, tracking, and responding to complaints toward the needs of individual victims of human rights abuse. A number of groups highlighted the fact that it is difficult for victims and human rights defenders to navigate the current system to report a case or track its progress. One needs to know and understand the role of each special rapporteur and to find their individual contact information. And then, even when a complaint is submitted, individuals often do not receive a response.

A number of prototypes addressed this issue. One example was "RapPortal," a web-based interface for reporting abuses both on-line and via mobile phone. This app would provide information about the special rapporteur's role and duties as well as a "My Info" section that would track an individual's case through the system and notify them when there was a response. With a secure submission portal and a personal account system, the application also aimed to consolidate a

toolbox for individuals seeking to register a complaint while navigating a complex system. Other features that were suggested to create a more victim-oriented platform included a map of the world that displayed where action had been taken previously and a back-end system which would funnel complaints directly to the appropriate special rapporteur, rather than relying on individuals to figure out who to contact directly. This single interface would be advantageous for victims, but also for other stakeholders who want to know of the work of special rapporteurs.

Managing incoming data and a public presence

A second key insight was that a number of stakeholders – special rapporteurs included – would benefit from a dashboard-style tool that collates and analyzes data on the work of special rapporteurs and manages their public profile. Linked to the victim orientation above, the need for a case-management system was often emphasized, particularly one that allows special rapporteurs to manage their own case load and for victims to track the case's progress. On the private side of the system, the platform would aggregate data relevant to each mandate, then analyze and visualize that information for mandate-holders and OHCHR staff. In addition, the platform would also provide a way to manage the outward-facing online presence of the special rapporteurs. The dashboard would broadcast their work by providing transparent data on individual complaints and requests for country visits; sharing country reports, recommendations, and follow-up; and by offering a space for online interviews, social media updates, and semi-formal reports. One advantage of such a platform is that it would facilitate timely reporting and more consistent public engagement from special rapporteurs outside of the long time lag between a country visit and a final report.

Sharing best practices

One group recognized the possibility that government officials in a country accused of restricting freedom of assembly might actually be looking for more effective ways to maintain order/control while protecting civil liberties. Their prototype capitalized on the possibility of developing tools to facilitate on-line sharing of best practices. For example, a campaign to promote crowd control techniques that comply with human rights norms could involve the creation of a web platform which includes videos in which police officials share best practices in crowd management, outline best practices in training, and monitor worldwide protest and government responses via live-streaming video. This approach could uncover common ground between governments, police forces, and peaceful demonstrators that collectively seek to ensure freedom of assembly and speech while maintaining community security.

Addressing the resource gap

A final need identified was the lack of financial resources and human capital to support the work of special rapporteurs. Some special rapporteurs are able to raise additional funds, but most find themselves resource-constrained in terms of the impact they can have. Recognizing this need, one group prototyped a new tool for crowd-sourcing support for U.N. human rights mechanisms called aidarapporteur.com. The core idea was that special rapporteurs could capitalize on the network of students and student-led groups affiliated with Model U.N. programs around the globe to complete specific tasks. This online platform would serve as a clearinghouse for special rapporteurs to post specific tasks and be matched with service providers. Language translation was identified as a primary candidate for crowd-sourcing support. The group envisioned offering incentives or prizes to encourage participation.

Next Steps

A final discussion focused on how to translate creative ideas into action. A number of viable proposals utilized existing technology and could be adopted by special rapporteurs and OHCHR staff without too much difficulty. These ideas included (1) translation services using machine learning and crowd-sourcing techniques, particularly for the most common U.N. languages; (2) greater use of existing platforms (e.g. social media, USTREAM, Youtube, etc.) for soliciting information and sharing findings; (3) use of video authentication software, if necessary, to validate materials that are provided to special rapporteurs; and (4) exploration of stream analysis, to enable special rapporteurs to make use of the information that is now available on social media platforms to track emerging events and issues. In addition, it was agreed that some form of technology training for mandate holders and OHCHR staff is vital.

The group agreed that other proposals – including a public-facing app for submitting petitions/complaints and a dashboard/case management system – require buy-in from both special rapporteurs and the OHCHR. They would represent a change in the way special rapporteurs carry out their mandates, and broad engagement and consultation would be necessary to develop a functioning structure given the diversity of thematic and country-focused mandates. There was some discussion as to whether these approaches could or should be piloted by a small number of special rapporteurs in the near-term or begin discussions across the wider OHCHR. Either way, the special rapporteurs agreed that this set of issues should be presented to the Special Procedures Coordinating Committee with the goal of identifying next steps.

It was agreed that the technological expertise required to build and sustain technological platforms in support of U.N. special rapporteurs exists and that potential sources of funding could be cultivated. It will be critical, however, to identify a procurement process that enables the OHCHR to partner with innovative technologists, rather than the large firms that generally bid for U.N. contracts. For example, funding could be provided through the U.N. Foundation to support such an effort, which might create more flexibility to partner with a smaller, more innovative firm. The group also recognized that the OHCHR could draw on voluntary efforts including Coding for Social Good and the philanthropic work of Google's engineers to identify individuals who could lend their technical expertise.

Of course, new technologies will not be a panacea to address all the challenges of increasing the efficacy of the U.N. human rights monitoring mechanisms, and they will not eliminate the need for greater financial resources and human capital to support special rapporteurs. There was consensus, however, that exciting possibilities already exist for harnessing new technologies to support the work of mandate holders, as well as a committed core of technologists and human rights activists who are willing to advance that effort.