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Risk and the Pluralism of Digital Human Rights Fact-Finding and Advocacy



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Accepted version (PDF, 299Kb)

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Publication Date

2018

Journal Title

New Technologies for Human Rights Law and Practice

ISBN

9781316838952

Publisher

Cambridge University Press

Volume

Part II - Technology and Human Rights Enforcement

Number

9

Pages

188-214

Type

Book chapter

Metadata

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Citation

McPherson, E. (2018). *Risk and the Pluralism of Digital Human Rights Fact-Finding and Advocacy*. In Land, MK. Cambridge University Press, *New Technologies for Human Rights Law and Practice*. [Book chapter]. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316838952.009>

Abstract

In this chapter, I argue that, while the rise of ICTs has certainly created new opportunities, it has also created new risk – or negative outcomes – for human rights practitioners. This risk is silencing, and unequally so. The chapter begins by outlining how risk is entwined with communication in the digital age. Rather than considering risk in isolation, we can think of it as manifesting via “risk assemblages,” or dynamic combinations of actors, technologies, contexts, resources, and risk perceptions (Lupton, 2016). In the subsequent two sections, I detail selected types of risk for human rights communication resulting from new combinations of actors and technologies involved in digital fact-finding and advocacy. For fact-finding, these include the risk of surveillance, which has consequences for participants’ physical security, and the risk of deception, which has consequences for their reputational integrity. For advocacy, these include the risk of mistakes, which can in turn risk reputational integrity, and the risk of miscalculations, which can jeopardize precious resources. In the following section, I explain how this materialized risk combines with risk perceptions to create a silencing double bind. Human rights practitioners may be silenced if they don’t know about risk – and they may silence themselves if they do. This silencing effect is not universal, however, but disproportionately affects human rights practitioners situated in more precarious contexts and with less access to resources, with ensuing consequence for the pluralism of human rights reporting. The chapter finishes by outlining four ways of loosening the risk double bind: educational, technological, reflexive, and discursive approaches to working with risk.

Keywords

human rights, social media, pluralism, risk, communication risk, advocacy, fact-finding, information and communication technologies, ICT4D, sociology of technology

Sponsorship

Isaac Newton Trust (1208(J))
ESRC (ES/K009850/1)

Embargo Lift Date

2100-01-01

Identifiers

External link:

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/new-technologies-for-human-rights-law-and-practice/risk-and-the-pluralism-of-digital-human-rights-factfinding-and-advocacy/FBF030B438D1F6CB7631C533A8A99D41>

External DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316838952.009>

This record's DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.16915>

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, human rights violations including censorship, discrimination, arbitrary detention and xenophobia were reported from different parts of the world. Amnesty International has responded that "Human rights violations hinder, rather than facilitate, responses to public health emergencies and undercut their efficiency." The World Health Organization (WHO) has stated that stay-at-home responses for slowing the pandemic must not be mandated at the expense of human rights. Broader Additional human rights protections. Government measures may also implicate a number of other rights, including the rights to life and health, the freedoms of association and movement, and the right to an effective remedy when violations occur. Recommendations. To promote rights-respecting governmental measures during a public health emergency