

9.0 The communications desk: IT and more

As information and communication technologies (ICT) play a major role for a regional human rights organization, its provisions and accessibility are vital for the AHRC/ALRC. The exchange of information is key in overcoming a culture of human rights violations by way of publicising, raising action, collecting support, documenting and raising awareness. One of the key roles in that is documentation. Several cases per day are brought from the local context to international attention.

The purpose of ICT in human rights is to bring people together as fast and as conveniently as possible in order to share information. This allows urgent interventions with greater participation of society. The emphasis on ICT makes the difference between the AHRC and many other organizations in Asia, as it tries to create a more capable platform of action and communication.

In order to fulfil this role, the AHRC's Communications Desk is trying to develop new tools for human rights work. In 2005 the desk developed the Urgent Appeals Online Response System (www.ahrchk.net/ua/support.php) and the AHRC online petition system. The desk is trying to promote the use of ICT among local human rights groups through consultations, meetings and technical support.

Major plans for the future include a comprehensive database for victims of extrajudicial killings and disappearances, more interactivity on websites, an improved Urgent Appeals Online response system and multimedia provisions with online audio-visual files.

IT provisions of the Communications Desk

On a regular basis, the Communications Desk has to ensure the stable availability of web servers and websites, database servers, mail servers, the email dissemination system (mailing list), internet access and technical facilities in the office, such as file server access, provision of desktop computers, printers, telephones and so forth. Some of these services are outsourced to commercial partners. Security for data (backup solutions) and protection from hackers and viruses are a major concern of the Desk.

Additionally, the Communications Desk has to assist the AHRC/ALRC staff, from the point where their technical understanding or experience ends. In this way the Communications Desk provides services to other Program and Country Desks.

IT services that can be requested from the Communications Desk include: making layouts for new websites, publications and other materials; content organization on websites; enabling internet, file server and printer access for new staff; installation of software to office computers; setting up online petitions; dissemination of technically advanced newsletters such as PH and article2; programming of new tools like feedback forms; tutoring on computer, software usage and the like.

Non-IT activities of the Communications Desk

Non-IT activities include knowledge management and data organization in the digital libraries and archives and the video collection of the AHRC/ALRC; the update of online databases e.g. for statements; daily reading of AHRC/ALRC general incoming requests and redistributing them to appropriate staff; gathering of contents for thematic websites; graphic design; establishment of partner programs and volunteer gathering; workflow considerations and efficiency optimization.

The discussion of our first interest group meeting, to generate more ideas and reflections on our use of IT services and online communication means is summarized below:

We can understand communications to consist of the following four components: A-Content, B-Presentation style, C- Distribution Channel, D- Target Audience

A. Content

- Individual case of human rights violation from partner organization
- More widely known human rights violation picked up from media
- Highlighting general human rights issues as a country phenomenon
- Demand for specific actions from domestic institutions
- Report on institutional developments
- Report on political developments
- Commentary on developments with the view to opinion-making
- Highlight international responses to human rights situations e.g. Louise Arbour statement, rapporteur visit
- In- depth reports on situations
- First hand news on developments

B. Presentation style

- Using different content types: UA, Statement, Press Release, Open Letter, Special Report, Column/Commentary
- Different writing styles may be required based on content type or even combined:
 - non-sensational, objective statement of facts o awareness-creating, concern creating calls to the public or even agitations
 - opinion or "speech giving" style motivational writing, opinion leading, inspirational
 - demanding, reaction-oriented, (letter style)
 - report style: conclusion drawing, analysis, elaborating claims
 - recommendations
 - interviews (dialogue style with different speakers)
 - reader attracting, interest-catching
 - academic writing based on objective and clear facts making use of and references to other writings
- Using / preparing different versions of the same document
 - original article
 - attracting/summary paragraph (e.g. of a statement) for highlighting on the front page of our website

- attracting introductory paragraph e.g. of a UA for a different audience (weekly digest)
- pieces of one article in order to distribute the document over several pages (more clicks, more visits, more content exposure) e.g. "click here to read part II of this article"

C. Distribution channels

• Website

- Website found by going to address
- Website found through general content search engine such as Google
- Website found through news search with search engine
- Article found on website through other related content on website
- Article found on website through link in email
- Website found through links from other pages
- RSS feed
- RSS feed on other website
- RSS feed on other blog
- RSS feed subscribed by user through his/her computer/net device
- Email
- Article in individual email (such as statement)
- Article listing in emails such as Weekly Digest
- Facebook
- Facebook Personal account updates on Friends pages
- Facebook organization account updates on Fan's pages
- Facebook Cause connection
- Twitter
- YouTube video

D. Target audience

1. Grass roots human rights community in an Asian non-rule of law country
2. Human rights interested persons/groups/NGOs in an Asian non-rule of law country
3. General public in an Asian non-rule of law country (a) with access to web (b) relying on non-digital communication such as press)
4. Journalists and media in Asian country (a) national level media b) very local media
5. Government officials, politicians, parliamentarians in Asian countries
6. International media and national media in countries outside Asia
7. International human rights mechanisms (Human Rights Council, Special Procedures, Treaty Bodies)
8. The international public and national public in rule of law countries
9. Governments and development related bodies in rule of law countries
10. Academics, scholars, researchers

Combining choices from A, B, C, and D strategically is one aspect of successful communication.

Given that framework we may look into different ways to increase our readership for online communications:

1. Providing new content type pieces such as "News and country developments" as in daily news or more frequent updates which would result in:

- a) better google rankings - bringing in more readers
- b) attract more readers outside the "human rights community"

Issues to be considered here are:

- i) the capacity of country and programme desk staff to follow up the situation closely and to put in the time to write more general news & developments
- ii) how wide to open the field of articles/issues in terms of their relation to human rights.

2. Having our external writings more presented in our online presence

This includes 'columns or commentaries' similar to UPI Asia online. This option has two advantages:

- a) allows expression in a more outspoken way since statements given in such writings "do not necessarily reflect the position of the AHRC/ALRC"
- b) more writers and readers are involved in our website where such writings are located

Issues to be considered here are:

- i) In what way does that affect the editing resources
- ii) On what level to decide on allowing / disallowing individual authors or writings to be reproduced on the website

3. Country level promotion of AHRC's online presence

This would thus create more distribution channels. Local partner organizations with websites/blogs can be invited to reproduce an AHRC RSS feed on their page or links to the website. Country and Programme Desk coordinators would have to be centrally involved in this. The communications desk should make it more easy to pick up feeds, e.g. by putting 'how-tos' on our website that other organizations can follow.

4. Graphical elements based on weekly highlights on the front page of humanrights.asia

Similar to Amnesty and Human Rights Watch websites we could start with a graphically supported story on the front page.

Problem: getting good quality photographs regularly.

Solution: make photo database management more sophisticated and get dedicated person to do that e.g. intern/volunteer. Also request country and programme desk coordinators to remind local partners to share more photos and remind folk school participants about photo sharing.

Other aspects: What is the quality image editing capacity?

5. Start counter linking initiatives with other sites

This way the AHRC page is linked on more pages and would get a better Google ranking.

Problem: limiting linking to those organizations that are trusted, dealing with follow up requests of other sites, where to locate and highlight the links - probably country sections.