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## Networked Activism

By: Molly Beutz Land  
Professor, New York Law School  
(<http://www.nyls.edu/mland>)

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# Networked Activism

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Molly Beutz Land\*

The same technologies that groups of ordinary citizens are using to write operating systems and encyclopedias are fostering a quiet revolution in another area—social activism. On websites such as Avaaz.org and Wikipedia, citizens are forming groups to report on human rights violations and organize email writing campaigns, activities formerly the prerogative of professionals. Because the demands of human rights work often require organizations to professionalize in order to be successful in their advocacy, human rights provides an ideal case study for evaluating the effect of lowered barriers to online group formation on citizen participation in activism. This article considers whether the participatory potential of technology can be used to both broaden the mobilization of ordinary citizens in human rights advocacy and provide opportunities for individuals to become more deeply involved in the work.

Existing online advocacy efforts reveal a de facto inverse relationship between broad mobilization and deep participation. Large groups mobilize many individuals, but each of those individuals has only a limited ability to participate in decisions about the group's goals or methods. This inverse relationship is principally a problem of size. As groups grow in size, they may replicate the process of professionalization in order to avoid the problems that would be associated with decentralized decision-making. Thus, although we currently have the tools necessary for individuals to engage in advocacy without the need for professional organizations, we are still far from realizing an ideal of fully decentralized, user-generated activism.

This article argues that a model of “networked activism” can help resolve the tension between mobilization and participation. The article first provides an overview of human rights advocacy, describing both the ways in which the work has, of necessity, become professionalized and the critiques that have stemmed from these developments. The article then creates a typology of online activism—sharing, aggregation, and collaborative production—and evaluates the extent to which these activities achieve broad

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\* Associate Professor of Law, New York Law School. Special thanks to Susan Benesch, Elise Boddie, Elizabeth Chambliss, Tai-Heng Cheng, Bruce Elman, Diane Fahey, Doni Gewirtzman, James Grimmelmann, David Johnson, Salil Mehra, Patrick Meier, Frank Munger, Beth Noveck, and Rebecca Roiphe for invaluable feedback. Jason Buckweitz, Nicole Kennedy, and Shalizeh Sadig provided excellent research assistance. The author grants permission for copies of this article to be made and distributed for educational purposes, provided that the copies are distributed at or below cost and the author and publisher are clearly identified.

mobilization and deep participation. Sharing is highly participatory and involves broad mobilization, but participation decreases dramatically with the introduction of group activities such as aggregation and collaborative production. Online human rights activism thus seems faced with two equally unsatisfactory choices—involving many individuals in ways that are meaningful but potentially of limited efficacy, or professionalization and its associated disadvantages.

Drawing on the insights of network theory, a model of networked activism would help ensure both deep participation and broad mobilization by encouraging the formation of highly participatory small groups while providing opportunities for those small groups to connect with one another. Based on a series of interviews with human rights and other public interest organizations,<sup>1</sup> the article recommends specific design elements that might foster a model of networked activism in the human rights context. The article concludes that although online activism is unlikely to replace some of the functions served by human rights organizations, efforts to create synergies between traditional and online activities have the potential to provide avenues for real, meaningful, and effective citizen participation in human rights advocacy.

## I. THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Recent decades have witnessed an unprecedented upsurge in the number and influence of human rights non-governmental organizations (“NGOs”)—groups that rely in whole or in part on the language, institutions, and norms of international human rights law to achieve their goals.<sup>2</sup> Many human rights organizations, particularly international human rights NGOs, are highly professionalized, with budgets, staff, and extensive administrative structures. Although it began as more of a grassroots movement, human rights work today is generally carried out by credentialed experts, who are often lawyers specializing in human rights fact-finding and advocacy.<sup>3</sup>

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2. These norms include the rights protected by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, *opened for signature* Dec. 16, 1966, 1966 U.S.T. 521, 999 U.N.T.S. 171 (Mar. 23, 1976), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *opened for signature* Dec. 19, 1966, 993 U.N.T.S. 3 (Jan. 3, 1976), among others.

3. Robert Putnam recounts a similar observation with respect to another social movement with grassroots origins. ROBERT D. PUTNAM, *BOWLING ALONE: THE COLLAPSE AND REVIVAL OF AMERICAN COMMUNITY* 159 (2000) (citing Ronald Shaiko’s observation that “[t]he era of flannel-shirted, ‘Flower Power’ antiestablishmentarianism has virtually vanished. Today . . . public interest organizations are

The professionalization of human rights is in many ways a reflection of the maturation of the field. Human rights organizations have become increasingly specialized, invested in their business models, and subject to significant competition for the public's attention.<sup>4</sup> This professionalization of human rights advocacy has been a response to the very specific challenges that human rights NGOs have encountered in their work. Yet professionalization has also been criticized as distancing the human rights discourse from ordinary individuals and thereby robbing the movement of its ability to capture the imagination of the public and to ensure accountability to important constituencies. This section explores the ways in which the demands of human rights work have required professionalization and some of the critiques associated with that development.

The term "professionalization" is used in this article to describe the process by which, over time, certain activities become associated with individuals who have developed expertise in a particular area. This acquired expertise is recognized by society through various credentialing systems.<sup>5</sup> Over time, decision-making is concentrated in the hands of these experts and becomes "off-limits" for ordinary individuals who lack the expertise and necessary credentials to be recognized as legitimately engaging in the activity in question.<sup>6</sup>

#### A. *Causes and Consequences*

One of the most common activities of human rights NGOs is norm articulation or standard setting.<sup>7</sup> In addition to their crucial work in connection with the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,<sup>8</sup> human rights organizations have been instrumental in the drafting and passage of a variety of international instruments.<sup>9</sup> In many instances,

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hiring economists, Ivy League lawyers, management consultants, direct mail specialists, and communications directors.") (internal quotation marks omitted).

4. See Neil Weinstock Netanel, *New Media in Old Bottles? Barron's Contextual First Amendment and Copyright in the Digital Age*, 76 GEO. WASH. L. REV. 952, 974 (2008) (describing characteristics of mature industries); Michael M. Boone & Terry W. Conner, *Change, Change, and More Change: The Challenge Facing Texas Law Firms*, 63 TEXAS B.J. 18, 20 (2000) (same).

5. See Clay Shirky, *Social Facts, Expertise, Citizendium, and Carr*, MANY-TO-MANY, Nov. 20, 2006, <http://many.corante.com/archives/authors/Clay.php>.

6. Any form of collective action requires some type of organization—an agreed-upon set of arrangements by which the work of the group will be accomplished. Professionalization involves work arrangements in which specific roles are typically performed only by individuals with certain credentials. Although professionalization and organization can be distinct, the two often go hand-in-hand, as decision-making is centralized with credentialed experts.

7. See Kathryn Sikkink, *Transnational Advocacy Networks and the Social Construction of Legal Rules*, in GLOBAL PRESCRIPTIONS: THE PRODUCTION, EXPORTATION, AND IMPORTATION OF A NEW LEGAL ORTHODOXY 37, 41 (Yves Dezalay & Bryant G. Garth eds., 2002).

8. See, e.g., WILLIAM KOREY, *NGOs and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "A Curious Grapevine"* 39, 45 (1998).

9. See, e.g., Kenneth Anderson, *The Ottawa Convention Banning Landmines, The Role of International Non-Governmental Organizations and the Idea of International Civil Society*, 11 EUR. J. INT'L L. 91 (2000); THEO VAN BOVEN, *The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in International Human Rights Standard-*

NGOs have been involved not only in articulating and building consensus for relevant norms, but also in helping to establish the institutions designed to enforce those norms.<sup>10</sup>

Professionalization has allowed human rights organizations to develop the expertise necessary to effectively engage in the activities of norm articulation and institution building. The process of norm development requires participants not only to have expertise in the substance of the issue area, but also to be well connected to others working on the issue. For example, Helena Cook, discussing the drafting of the U.N. Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, noted that the success of an NGO's participation in the drafting process depended on the expertise and experience of its representatives.<sup>11</sup> Organizations have found it easier to maintain the necessary level of experience and expertise by limiting participation in norm-setting activities to a limited number of experts.

Information gathering and dissemination is another significant function that human rights organizations perform.<sup>12</sup> Although NGOs also provide information for international authorities and engage in capacity building,<sup>13</sup> they are most well-known for their strategy of "naming and shaming"—the process of gathering information about a country's human rights record and publicizing that information in an effort to pressure or shame the government into changing its conduct.<sup>14</sup> Given the limits of enforcement structures on the international level, applying pressure by publicizing abuses is one of the most important tools available to human rights organizations.<sup>15</sup> The efficacy of naming and shaming as an enforcement technique depends critically on the quality of the information gathered. Unless human rights reports are accurate, they will be vulnerable to attack by the

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*Setting: A Prerequisite for Democracy*, in HUMAN RIGHTS FROM EXCLUSION TO INCLUSION: PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES—AN ANTHOLOGY FROM THE WORK OF THEO VAN BOVEN 347, 353–54 (Fons Coomans et al. eds., 2000).

10. See, e.g., Gay J. McDougall, *Decade of NGO Struggle*, 11 HUM. RTS. BRIEF 12, 13 (2004); Nathalie Prouvez & Nicholas M.L. Bovay, *The Role of the International Commission of Jurists*, in NGOs AND HUMAN RIGHTS: PROMISE AND PERFORMANCE 119, 128 (Claude E. Welch, Jr. ed., 2001).

11. See Helena Cook, *Amnesty International at the United Nations*, in "THE CONSCIENCE OF THE WORLD": THE INFLUENCE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS IN THE UN SYSTEM 181, 192 (Peter Willems ed., 1996).

12. See, e.g., MARGARET KECK & KATHRYN SIKKINK, *ACTIVISTS BEYOND BORDERS* 16 (1998). Although most often associated with international NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, research and monitoring are central to the missions of many domestic NGOs as well. See, e.g., Susan Dicklitch, *Action for Development in Uganda*, in NGOs AND HUMAN RIGHTS, *supra* note 10, at 182, 188 (discussing the research of the organization Action for Development in Uganda).

13. See, e.g., Cook, *supra* note 11, at 198, 204; Andrew Clapham, *UN Human Rights Reporting Procedures: An NGO Perspective*, in THE FUTURE OF UN HUMAN RIGHTS TREATY MONITORING 175, 179–80 (Philip Alston & James Crawford eds., 2000); Morton E. Winston, *Assessing the Effectiveness of International Human Rights NGOs*, in NGOs AND HUMAN RIGHTS, *supra* note 10, at 25, 49–50.

14. See Naz K. Modirzadeh, *Taking Islamic Law Seriously: INGOs and the Battle for Muslim Hearts and Minds*, 19 HARV. HUM. RTS. J. 191, 199 (2006); Claude E. Welch, Jr., *Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch: A Comparison*, in NGOs AND HUMAN RIGHTS, *supra* note 10, at 85, 107.

15. See Sikkink, *supra* note 7, at 49–53 (describing the publication of rule-breaking behavior as a process of socializing states to conform to human rights norms).

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states they target and will be ineffective in pressuring states to change their behavior.<sup>16</sup> Accurate reporting is also important in mobilizing the press and public opinion, since the public is more likely to support information it finds legitimate and credible.<sup>17</sup>

The importance of accuracy in fact-finding has driven human rights NGOs toward increased professionalization. Accurate fact-finding requires the expertise necessary to identify and obtain information about violations, as well as the ability to filter credible from non-credible information and to conduct on-the-ground research.<sup>18</sup> The demands of accuracy have led human rights NGOs to create elaborate review processes in which information is filtered through a few experienced staff members in order to maintain quality control.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, human rights organizations also use the information they gather to lobby domestic and international authorities to take particular actions with respect to violator states. Information about violations has played an important role in the passage of human rights legislation in the United States.<sup>20</sup> NGOs have also used the information they gathered to lobby regional human rights or governmental bodies.<sup>21</sup>

The requirements of advocacy have created a demand for expertise in communicating with the media and making the requisite contacts with decision-makers. Effective media work, for example, requires language skills, preexisting contacts, and the ability to present one's case.<sup>22</sup> Lobbying requires both knowledge and connections—that is, “not only know-

16. See, e.g., Diane F. Orentlicher, *Bearing Witness: The Art and Science of Human Rights Fact-Finding*, 3 HARV. HUM. RTS. J. 83, 91 (1990) (describing the attacks of the Reagan administration on Human Rights Watch's reporting of abuses in El Salvador); Ann Marie Clark, “A Calendar of Abuses”: *Amnesty International's Campaign on Guatemala*, in NGOs AND HUMAN RIGHTS, *supra* note 10, at 55, 62 (describing the response of the Guatemalan government to Amnesty International's 1979 report on human rights abuses in Guatemala, in which the government called the information “fabulous tales”).

17. See, e.g., KOREY, *supra* note 8, at 346.

18. See ANN MARIE CLARK, DIPLOMACY OF CONSCIENCE: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL AND CHANGING HUMAN RIGHTS NORMS 16 (2001) (referring to the importance of expertise); JONATHAN POWER, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL: THE HUMAN RIGHTS STORY 121, 122 (1981) (noting the track record of Amnesty International in knowing, “unlike a court or a parliamentary investigation, whom they can believe and whom they can discount”).

19. See KOREY, *supra* note 8, at 346; Welch, *supra* note 14, at 105. For example, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch's main offices centrally manage the organizations' research functions. See *id.* at 97; cf. Winston, *supra* note 13, at 31 (noting that Amnesty International “must seek the approval of its worldwide membership before making any significant changes in the organization's policies or priorities”).

20. See KOREY, *supra* note 8, at 202 (describing the role of NGO lobbying in the passage of the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which placed human rights conditions on the U.S.-Soviet trade relationship).

21. See *id.* at 359; Prouvez & Bovay, *supra* note 10, at 132; Widney Brown, *Human Rights Watch: An Overview*, in NGOs AND HUMAN RIGHTS, *supra* note 10, at 72, 74, 79.

22. See Shayne Weyker, *The Ironies of Information Technology*, in GLOBALIZATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS 115, 123–24 (Alison Brysk ed., 2002); Hurst Hannum, *Implementing Human Rights: An Overview of NGO Strategies and Available Procedures*, in GUIDE TO INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS PRACTICE 19, 24 (Hurst Hannum ed., 2004).

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how but also ‘know-who.’”<sup>23</sup> As noted by Cook, Amnesty International’s “[f]ull-time professional staff . . . have the necessary political, technical or country specialisation and can build and maintain contacts with government delegates, U.N. staff, NGOs and the media.”<sup>24</sup> Professionalization also ensures that the NGO is able to adequately focus pressure on a particular decision-maker.<sup>25</sup> Without a centralized authority making decisions about what actions to take and whom to contact, the resulting efforts would be unlikely to exert sufficient pressure in any one place to make a difference.

Although the increased professionalization of human rights advocacy described above may enhance efficiency and effectiveness, it also constrains the work of NGOs. Filtering advocacy functions through a small number of individuals with expertise limits the human resources available for engaging in advocacy. For example, an NGO’s ability to engage in information-gathering activities is necessarily restricted by the number, location, and expertise of its researchers.<sup>26</sup> With a limited number of researchers, an international human rights organization may not be able to develop specialized, local knowledge about the context in question.<sup>27</sup> Local human rights NGOs, in turn, may possess specialized knowledge but lack the resources necessary to provide broad context.<sup>28</sup>

Limited resources also mean that human rights organizations may be unable to take risks. NGOs may need to focus on issues that can be conveyed most effectively to the media and the public, foregoing coverage of low-grade conflicts or complex issues.<sup>29</sup> For example, a primary rationale advanced by Ken Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, for his organization’s more limited reporting about violations of economic, social, and cultural rights, is that such violations are less likely to provide clarity about the nature of the violation, the identity of the violator, and the proper remedy. As a result, Roth argues, violations of economic, social, and cul-

23. Christer Jönsson & Peter Söderholm, *IGO-NGO Relations and HIV/AIDS: Innovation or Stalemate?*, in NGOs, THE UN, AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE 121, 136 (Thomas G. Weiss & Leon Gordenker eds. 1996).

24. Cook, *supra* note 11, at 186; see Makau Mutua, *Standard Setting in Human Rights: Critique and Prognosis*, 29 HUM. RTS. Q. 547, 579 (2007).

25. CLARK, *supra* note 18, at 56 (noting that Amnesty International’s “hierarchical organizational structure . . . enables [it] to direct transnational public pressure against the target government”).

26. See, e.g., Hannum, *supra* note 22, at 20; Welch, *supra* note 14, at 97.

27. See Manfred H. Wiegandt, *The Pitfalls of International Human Rights Monitoring: Some Critical Remarks on the 1995 Human Rights/Helsinki Report on Xenophobia in Germany*, 18 HUM. RTS. Q. 833, 835–37 (1996) (critiquing the report for failing to be “familiar with the specific environment”).

28. Cf. Robert Charles Blitt, *Who Will Watch the Watchdogs? Human Rights Nongovernmental Organizations and the Case for Regulation*, 10 BUFF. HUM. RTS. L. REV. 261, 289 (2004) (arguing that the lack of physical and financial resources can adversely impact the depth and quality of the research put forth by human rights organizations).

29. See, e.g., *id.* at 355 (stating that NGOs “feel the pinch to break the reporting stalemate by devising dramatic new angles, uncovering even greater atrocities,” or focusing on issues that promote marketing or fundraising).

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tural rights are less likely to capture media and public attention.<sup>30</sup> Human rights organizations may also focus their advocacy on actions they believe will have the greatest impact, paying less attention to serious situations in which the outcome of advocacy is less certain.<sup>31</sup>

Filtering information through a few professionals also limits the diversity of the perspectives contributing to the reporting. This can have consequences for the quality of the reporting. Jack Balkin, for example, notes that when media sources are concentrated, there is a risk that some sources will only provide information consistent with their own perspective and that the reporting as a whole will suffer.<sup>32</sup> Concentrating human rights advocacy in a few voices can similarly lead to dominance of a limited number of perspectives. Human Rights Watch (“HRW”) and Amnesty International (“AI”), for example, have been criticized for their focus on civil and political rights at the expense of economic, social, and cultural rights and their choices about which countries to include in their reports.<sup>33</sup> A decision by one of these organizations concerning whether to cover a particular issue is more meaningful than it might otherwise be because of the prominence of each of these organizations in the human rights field.

In addition, professionalization creates distance between human rights work and the public at large. Kenneth Anderson argues, for example, that international human rights NGOs are “a vehicle for international elites to talk to international elites about the things—frequently of undeniably critical importance—that international elites care about.”<sup>34</sup> David Rieff maintains that human rights work, lacking a broad base of support among the public, will be unsustainable in the long term.<sup>35</sup> Limiting human rights advocacy to a select cadre of professionals undermines the extent to which the public can connect with human rights issues.<sup>36</sup>

30. Kenneth Roth, *Defending Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Practical Issues Faced by an International Human Rights Organization*, 26 HUM. RTS. Q. 63, 65 (2004); see also KECK & SIKKINK, *supra* note 12, at 27 (noting that campaigns require a “‘causal story’ that establishes who bears responsibility or guilt” and that “the causal chain must be sufficiently short and clear to make a case convincing”).

31. See Modirzadeh, *supra* note 14, at 198.

32. See Jack M. Balkin, *Digital Speech and Democratic Culture: A Theory of Freedom of Expression for the Information Society*, 79 N.Y.U. L. REV. 1, 30 (2004).

33. See, e.g., Makau Mutua, *Human Rights International NGOs*, in NGOs AND HUMAN RIGHTS, *supra* note 10, at 151, 157. Although both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International now report on economic, social, and cultural rights violations, KOREY, *supra* note 8, at 16, Winston, *supra* note 13, at 47, their coverage of these violations has been critiqued as too limited. See *id.*; Mutua, *supra*, at 156.

34. Anderson, *supra* note 9, at 118. Although commentators decrying the elitism of human rights organizations often have in mind international NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, the same critique can be raised of many domestic human rights organizations. See, e.g., McDougall, *supra* note 10, at 15; Hugo Slim, *By What Authority? The Legitimacy and Accountability of Non-governmental Organisations*, presented at The International Council on Human Rights Policy International Meeting on Global Trends and Human Rights—Before and After September 11, Jan. 10–12, 2002, para. 4, <http://www.jha.ac/articles/a082.htm>.

35. See David Rieff, *The Precarious Triumph of Human Rights*, N.Y. TIMES MAG., Aug. 8, 1999, at 37; see also PUTNAM, *supra* note 3, at 160 (“Citizenship by proxy is an oxymoron.”).

36. The need to connect with and mobilize the public is even more important today, since organizations are less able to pressure states to change their behavior through shame sanctions alone. See

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Human rights organizations are also distanced from the individuals on whose behalf they work. Although hailed as representatives of the public interest,<sup>37</sup> human rights organizations have also been called “decidedly undemocratic and unaccountable to the people they claim to represent.”<sup>38</sup> Welch argues, for example, that it is “rare for the subjects of NGOs’ attention”—that is, the individuals who are affected by their actions and on whose behalf they work—“to take active parts in setting goals.”<sup>39</sup> Even membership organizations such as Amnesty International are limited in the extent to which their membership structure provides accountability to this particular constituency.<sup>40</sup>

There are, of course, other mechanisms that constrain the action of human rights organizations beyond direct accountability to those affected by their work. As Paul Wapner argues, NGOs are simply “differently” accountable because they answer to other constituencies.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless,

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*Ensuring a Responsibility to Protect: Lessons From Darfur*, 14 HUM. RTS. BRIEF 26, 27 (2007) (describing the failure of naming and shaming techniques in pressuring Sudan to end abuses in Darfur); Welch, *supra* note 14, at 107 (noting that naming and shaming “works best with governments willing to acknowledge their responsibility to protect human rights and able to take effective action when abuses occur”).

37. See, e.g., Antonio Donini, *The Bureaucracy and the Free Spirits: Stagnation and Innovation in the Relationship Between the UN and NGOs*, in NGOs, THE UN, AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE, *supra* note 23, at 83, 84 (stating that NGOs are “the closest approximation to direct popular participation” in the intergovernmental machinery of the United Nations) (quoting *Report of the Secretary-General on the Review of Arrangements for Consultation with Non-Governmental Organizations*, U.N. Doc. E/AC.70/1994/5 (May 26, 1994)); Cyril Ritchie, *Coordinate? Cooperate? Harmonise? NGO Policy and Operational Coalitions*, in NGOs, THE UN, AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE, *supra*, at 177–78 (stating that NGOs are “a basic form of popular representation in the present-day world”) (quoting former Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali).

38. P.J. Simmons, *Learning to Live with NGOs*, 112 FOREIGN POL’Y 82, 83 (1998); see also Anderson, *supra* note 9, at 111 (maintaining that the idea that NGOs are “the legitimate representatives in the international sphere of ‘people’ in the world,” is nothing more than an illusion); Rieff, *supra* note 35, at 41 (calling the human rights movement “an undemocratic pressure group, accountable to no one but its own members and donors, that wields enormous power and influence”); Kenneth Anderson, *Do International NGOs Have Too Much Power?* 6–7 (Wash. Coll. of L., Research Paper No. 2008-67), [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1297443](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1297443) (arguing that any claims of representativeness are “gravely suspect” and that NGOs should be understood as representing themselves only and not the “peoples of the world”).

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39. Claude E. Welch, Jr., *Conclusion*, in NGOs AND HUMAN RIGHTS, *supra* note 10, at 261, 266; see also Mutua, *supra* note 33, at 578 (noting that “standard setting in human rights is an elite-driven and not victim-centered process”) (emphasis omitted).

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40. See KOREY, *supra* note 8, at 302. As Andrew S. Natsios explains, “Unlike a profit-making business where consumers can judge the quality of the service or product that they have purchased, the beneficiaries of the NGO contributions in a relief intervention have no regular way of registering individually their approval or dissatisfaction to donors of an organization . . . .” Andrew S. Natsios, *NGOs and the UN System in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies: Conflict or Cooperation?*, in NGOs, THE UN, AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE, *supra* note 23, at 71.

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41. Paul Wapner, *The Democratic Accountability of Non-Governmental Organizations: Defending Accountability in NGOs*, 3 CHI. J. INT’L L. 197, 198 (2002). NGOs may be accountable to their membership, staff, boards of directors, donors, the NGOs and intergovernmental organizations with whom they work, the norms of international human rights, the media, and the public at large. See *id.* at 201–04; Rajesh Tandon, *Board Games: Governance and Accountability in NGOs*, in BEYOND THE MAGIC BULLET: NGO PERFORMANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE POST-COLD WAR WORLD 53, 56–57 (Michael Edwards & David Hulme eds., 1996); Blitt, *supra* note 28, at 322, 332, 369; Kenneth Roth, *Human*

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these constituencies may not have a sufficient incentive to effectively constrain NGO actions, and the interests of these constituencies may diverge from those of the individuals affected by the NGO's activities.<sup>42</sup> Although international human rights NGOs are increasingly forming coalitions to address this concern, their NGO partners may not necessarily be any more accountable to the constituencies who will be affected by the advocacy work in question.<sup>43</sup>

### B. *Broad Mobilization*

Broad mobilization of ordinary individuals in human rights advocacy has the potential to have a democratizing effect, bridging the distance between ordinary individuals and human rights discourse. Opening up the activities of human rights advocacy would respond in significant ways to the negative consequences associated with the increasing professionalization of human rights work by augmenting the volume and diversity of resources devoted to human rights.

First, involving more people could help address the limits on capacity and diversity associated with professionalization. A greater number of lay participants means more contributors in more locations. Peer-produced human rights reports, for example, may enjoy a greater diversity of perspectives, as well as contributions by individuals with specialized or local knowledge. Peer-production also allows individuals to contribute in ways that best fit their skills and interests, thus eliminating the transaction costs associated with matching people to particular tasks.<sup>44</sup> As a result, there is a greater likelihood that individuals will be able to take responsibility for tasks uniquely suited to their skills, ability, and interest. Because of lower transaction costs and greater resources, such projects will also be in a better position to address situations in which advocacy might previously have been thought to have low chances of achieving change.<sup>45</sup>

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*Rights Organizations: A New Force for Social Change*, in *REALIZING HUMAN RIGHTS: MOVING FROM INSPIRATION TO IMPACT* 225, 237 (Samantha Power & Graham Allison eds., 2000); see generally P.J. Spiro, *The Democratic Accountability of Non-Governmental Organizations: Accounting for NGOs*, 3 *CHI. J. INT'L L.* 161, 163–68 (2002).

42. See Molly K. Beutz, *Functional Democracy: Responding to Failures of Accountability*, 44 *HARV. INT'L L.J.* 387, 401–02 (2003); Welch, *supra* note 39, at 268; see also Zie Gariyo, *NGOs and Development in East Africa: A View from Below*, in *BEYOND THE MAGIC BULLET*, *supra* note 41, at 156, 161.

43. See Welch, *supra* note 39, at 267 (noting that just because an organization is “based in and staffed by nationals does not automatically mean a domestic NGO is representative of its society as a whole, or perhaps even of those whose rights have been threatened”); Mutua, *supra* note 24, at 593 (noting that the staff of domestic NGOs may be just as “divorced from the people on whose behalf they advocate” as their international partners).

44. See ERIC VON HIPPEL, *DEMOCRATIZING INNOVATION* 93–94 (2005); see also JAMES SUROWIECKI, *THE WISDOM OF CROWDS* 161 (2004).

45. See CLAY SHIRKY, *HERE COMES EVERYBODY: THE POWER OF ORGANIZING WITHOUT ORGANIZATIONS* 236 (2008) (“Failure is free, high-quality research, offering direct evidence of what works and what doesn't.”).

Second, a broader base of participation means that it is more likely that individuals who are affected by human rights advocacy will participate in decisions about those activities. Joanne Lebert, for example, notes that “the advent and widespread use of information and communication technologies is affecting Amnesty in yet another unexpected way. Some of those that AI purports to represent now have the means to speak for themselves.”<sup>46</sup> Although increased participation cannot by itself ensure accountability,<sup>47</sup> it can support and strengthen efforts to hold organizations accountable for their actions.<sup>48</sup> Allowing those affected by the violations in question to provide input on what should be done will not only strengthen the legitimacy of the advocacy that results, but will also put additional pressure on the government, which will be less able to dismiss the critiques.<sup>49</sup>

Mobilizing ordinary citizens to get involved in human rights advocacy has proven helpful in narrowing the distance between human rights activity and the public. The social movement that developed around the abuses occurring in Darfur, for example, captured public imagination in a way that few human rights issues have.<sup>50</sup> Such broad mobilization can have the effect of transforming human rights advocacy from a remote activity in which only professionals and elites engage, to something that is of direct and immediate relevance to citizens. Involving more people has the potential to build a stronger foundation of support for human rights advocacy and human rights norms among the general public.<sup>51</sup>

46. Joanne Lebert, *Wiring Human Rights Activism: Amnesty International and the Challenges of Information and Communication Technologies*, in *CYBERACTIVISM: ONLINE ACTIVISM IN THEORY AND PRACTICE* 209, 228 (Martha McCaughey & Michael D. Ayers eds., 2003).

47. For example, it may be difficult, if not impossible, to identify and ensure the participation of all who are affected by a particular action. Cf. Kathryn Sikkink, *Restructuring World Politics: The Limits and Asymmetries of Soft Power*, in *RESTRUCTURING WORLD POLITICS: TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, NETWORKS AND NORMS* 301, 311 (Sanjeev Khagram et al. eds., 2002) (noting that “networks are far from perfectly representative”).

48. Strategies for increasing participation have already been used by development-oriented NGOs as a means of ensuring accountability. See, e.g., Janaki Ramesh, *Strategies for Monitoring and Accountability: The Working Women’s Forum Model*, in *BEYOND THE MAGIC BULLET*, *supra* note 41, at 114, 117 (noting the use of “grassroots involvement in planning” and “staff who come from the communities in which they work” as measures of ensuring accountability); Parmesh Shah & Meera Kaul Shah, *Participatory Methods for Increasing NGO Accountability: A Case Study from India*, in *BEYOND THE MAGIC BULLET*, *supra* note 41, at 215, 216 (describing participatory methods used by NGOs to enhance accountability). R

49. Korey notes, for example, that the expansion of NGO activity in Southeast Asia in the 1980s and the increasing mobilization of these organizations leading up to the 1993 World Conference in Vienna made it more difficult for authoritarian governments to “dismiss[] NGO criticisms as concerns of foreigners who do not know their [Asian] cultures.” KOREY, *supra* note 8, at 285 (citation omitted). R

50. See Colin Thomas-Jensen & Julia Spiegel, *Activism and Darfur: Slowly Driving Policy Change*, 31 *FORDHAM INT’L L.J.* 843, 849 (2008). Despite limited progress on Darfur, the pressure generated by widespread participation caused both the United States and China to become involved far more actively than would otherwise have been the case. See *id.* at 850.

51. Participation can also foster what Clark calls “an international sense of obligation,” which, to her, is necessary for the development of international human rights norms. CLARK, *supra* note 18, at 128. R

Although most of the organizations interviewed did not collect extensive information about their users because of security or privacy reasons, information provided by two interviewees indicates that projects aimed at broad mobilization are involving individuals who were not previously active on human rights issues.<sup>52</sup> Data collected by Change.org, for example, indicates that a majority of its half a million members are involved in public interest advocacy and service for the first time.<sup>53</sup> The organization Avaaz indicated that approximately 30% of its members are not involved in any other civil society organization.<sup>54</sup>

## II. TECHNOLOGY AND MOBILIZATION

Although broad mobilization responds in several ways to the critiques of professionalization, efforts to increase participation in human rights advocacy are often limited in the extent to which they allow individuals to take ownership of the group's work. As groups grow in size, they begin to centralize authority over the group's goals and methods in a smaller group of individuals with credentials and experience, and the level of participation of any one individual in that group drops dramatically. This move indicates the existence of an inverse relationship between broad mobilization and meaningful participation. Because organizations may have to sacrifice deep participation to achieve broad mobilization, participatory models of activism may end up replicating many of the aspects of professionalization associated with established groups.

The purpose of this section is to explore this inverse relationship between mobilization and participation. The section first illustrates the ways in which individuals and organizations are using information and communication technologies to mobilize broad constituencies to become involved in human rights advocacy. The platforms and groups discussed in this section are focused on international public interest issues and were selected based on their innovative use of technology and the capacity of their strategies to be used for human rights advocacy.<sup>55</sup> The online activities of these organi-

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52. For a discussion of social mobilization more generally and the reasons why individuals participate in political, social, and civic institutions, see generally PUTNAM, *supra* note 3; SIDNEY VERBA ET AL., *VOICE AND EQUALITY: CIVIC VOLUNTARISM IN AMERICAN POLITICS* (1995); STEVEN J. ROSENSTONE & JOHN MARK HANSEN, *MOBILIZATION, PARTICIPATION, AND DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA* (1993).

53. See Interview with Joshua Levy, Managing Editor, Change.org (Jan. 27, 2009) (on file with author).

54. See Interview with Ricken Patel, Executive Director, Avaaz.org (Jan. 15, 2009) (on file with author).

55. This article explores the particular challenges of participatory models of production in the context of human rights and social activism. For a thoughtful and innovative analysis of how new forms of organization enabled by technology can be used to increase participation in government, see, for example, BETH SIMONE NOVECK, *WIKI GOVERNMENT: HOW TECHNOLOGY CAN MAKE GOVERNMENT BETTER, DEMOCRACY STRONGER, AND CITIZENS MORE POWERFUL* (2009), and Beth Simone Noveck, *Wiki-Government*, 2008(7) *DEMOCRACY: A JOURNAL OF IDEAS* 31 (2008).

zations fall into three categories—sharing, aggregation, and collaborative production.<sup>56</sup>

This section argues that although ordinary individuals have available to them today more tools to accomplish tasks that previously required professionals than ever before, this does not mean that we are on the brink of realizing fully decentralized activism. Efforts designed to achieve broad mobilization gravitate toward small, hierarchically-organized decision-making models, thus appearing to replicate the problems associated with professionalization. This, however, is largely a function of size. The lack of control associated with participatory models and user-generated content means that it is more difficult to ensure accuracy, avoid unintended consequences, and ensure focused action. To mitigate these risks in the context of large group action, groups often vest authority in a small group of professionals charged with making decisions for the group. Without a model for resolving this key mediating tension of size,<sup>57</sup> citizen activism may be locked into a set of choices that continually force groups to replicate the process of professionalization.

#### A. *Types of Mobilization*

There are several different ways in which individuals and organizations are using information and communication technologies to engage broad audiences in human rights advocacy—sharing, aggregation, and collaborative production. Sharing of online content is by far the most common. Aggregation and collaborative production are forms of group interaction in which individuals join together to engage in a common pursuit. Aggregation and collaborative production have significant potential to involve individuals in human rights advocacy, but are limited in the extent to which those taking part are able to influence the goals and methods of the group.

*Sharing.* Sharing refers to the act of making information available to others for a variety of purposes, including motivating, educating, or coordinating action.<sup>58</sup> Individuals can share information about human rights issues on a variety of online platforms, ranging from Facebook to Twitter to Flickr. Countless human rights organizations have websites with reports about human rights abuses and information about how to take action.<sup>59</sup>

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56. These categories are somewhat narrower than those identified by Clay Shirky. See SHIRKY, *supra* note 45, at 49 (classifying group activity in the categories of sharing, cooperation, and collective action). Aggregation and collaborative production are two types of what Shirky calls cooperation. See *id.*

57. My thanks to James Grimmelmann for this phrase.

58. See TOM PRICE, *CYBER ACTIVISM: ADVOCACY GROUPS AND THE INTERNET* 5 (2000). Although broad-based, user-generated sharing is often associated with “Web 2.0” technologies, many of the technologies that enable sharing, such as email and SMS, have been available for some time.

59. This is in part due to the low entry costs of online communication. See, e.g., KEVIN A. HILL & JOHN E. HUGHES, *CYBERPOLITICS: CITIZEN ACTIVISM IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET* 133–35 (1998); Sandor Vegh, *Classifying Forms of Online Activism: The Case of Cyberprotests Against the World Bank*, in *CYBERACTIVISM*, *supra* note 46, at 71, 74.

Organizations also use the Internet to distribute information about the activities of governmental or inter-governmental institutions.<sup>60</sup> Non-profit organizations have been using social networking sites to draw attention to their work, raise awareness, and solicit donations. The United Nations Children's Fund, for example, was able to increase exposure to its videos by creating a page on MySpace and updating it regularly.<sup>61</sup> Email, blogs, and Internet websites provide opportunities for previously disparate communities to exchange information and coordinate their activities.<sup>62</sup> In addition, more and more of this content is generated by ordinary individuals, not professionals, and shared horizontally between users of the site instead of vertically between source and recipient.<sup>63</sup> Citizen reporting, for example, involves users sharing images of human rights violations captured on a mobile phone or reporting election irregularities via text messaging services, all without the intermediation of a professional organization.<sup>64</sup>

A leading effort to foster user-generated human rights activism is the website The Hub, a project of the human rights documentary organization WITNESS.<sup>65</sup> Initially created to provide a safe place for activists to upload video of human rights abuses,<sup>66</sup> The Hub allows any individual with a valid email address to upload videos, audio, and photos about human rights issues.<sup>67</sup> The Hub describes itself as an "interactive community for human rights," and the organization is considering plans to include a video advocacy toolkit, discussion pages, petitions, interactive maps, and technology that will allow users to upload images or video from their cell phones.<sup>68</sup>

Another important effort to promote user-generated activism is the website 24 Hours for Darfur. Inspired by YouTube and founded by a group of

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60. See, e.g., Video: Banned UN Speech: Human Rights Nightmare (Hillel Neuer 2007), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhWgZu6tcZU>; see also Wyatt Galusky, *Identifying with Information: Citizen Empowerment, the Internet, and the Environmental Anti-Toxins Movement*, in *CYBERACTIVISM*, *supra* note 46, at 185, 189.

61. See Posting of Joanne Fritz to About.com Guide to Nonprofits Blog, <http://nonprofit.about.com/b/2008/05/01/unicef-uses-web-20-to-double-video-views.htm> (May 1, 2008).

62. See, e.g., LaVon Rice, *Queer Africa: Despite State Repression and Persecution, LGBT Organizing Has Taken Off Across the Continent and Disapora*, *COLORLINES MAG.*, May 1, 2007, at 38.

63. Hunter and Lastowka describe this as the "newly enabled, decentralized amateur production sphere, in which individual authors or small groups freely release their work to other amateurs for experience, redistribution, and/or transformation." Dan Hunter & F. Gregory Lastowka, *Amateur-to-Amateur*, 46 *WM & MARY L. REV.* 951, 958 (2004).

64. See Katrin Verclas with Patricia Mechael, *A Mobile Voice: The Use of Mobile Phones in Citizen Media* (MobileActive.org, New York, N.Y.), Nov. 2008, at 10–17, <http://mobileactive.org/files/A%20Mobile%20Voice-The%20Role%20of%20Mobile%20Phones%20in%20Citizen%20Media.pdf> (describing various examples of citizen reporting).

65. WITNESS is dedicated to "put[ting] cameras into the hands of everyday people around the world so that they can document abuses by authorities." Henry Jenkins, *Human Rights Video in a Participatory Culture*, *MEDIA SHIFT IDEALAB*, Apr. 6, 2008, <http://www.pbs.org/idealab/2008/04/human-rights-video-in-a-participatory-culture005.html>.

66. See Interview with Sameer Padania, Hub Manager, Witness (Jan. 15, 2009) (on file with author).

67. See About The Hub, <http://hub.witness.org/en/AboutHub> (last visited Apr. 6, 2009).

68. See *id.*

Yale Law School students, the project collects and displays personal video appeals about the global response (or lack thereof) to the atrocities in Darfur. Although many of those who have uploaded statements are politicians and celebrities, most are ordinary individuals—students, ministers, professors, programmers, artists, teachers, amateur filmmakers, human rights observers, theater interns, journalists, a Guatemalan anti-genocide activist, and a volunteer emergency medical technician. The site explains that “[w]orking with the Darfurian Community in the US and abroad we have begun to collect video testimonials from Darfurians. We aim to use our online presence to document the views of Darfurians and broadcast their opinions to the world.”<sup>69</sup> The range of content on 24 Hours for Darfur is as diverse as the contributors. Participants urge politicians to “save Darfur,” call on the media to devote more attention to the genocide, criticize governments for not accepting more refugees, emphasize the importance of environmental issues in the conflict, and recommend the deployment of peacekeepers to protect civilians.<sup>70</sup>

*Aggregation.* A second type of online activity that increases the participation of ordinary individuals in human rights advocacy is aggregation or mass activism. In such group activity, the action or commitment required of each individual is small, but the aggregation of each of these individual’s actions creates an overall effect that is significant.<sup>71</sup>

Co-founded by Res Publica and MoveOn, Avaaz is a membership website that Ricken Patel, its Executive Director, describes as an effort to close the global democratic deficit.<sup>72</sup> Avaaz periodically sends emails in thirteen different languages to its large membership base asking individuals to sign a petition, donate money, or send an email. Members of Avaaz “respond by

69. 24HoursforDarfur.org, Contribute to 24 Hours for Darfur, <http://www.24hoursfordarfur.org/contribute/?subpage=about-pane> (last visited Apr. 7, 2009).

70. There are countless other examples of ordinary individuals sharing information about human rights violations online. Flickr, for example, hosts thousands of amateur photographs tagged with the phrase “human rights.” See Flickr, <http://www.flickr.com/search/?q=%22human+rights%22&m=text> (showing 65,785 results for a search for “human rights” as of Apr. 6, 2009). Mainstream social networking sites like YouTube and MySpace are increasingly host to amateur videos about human rights issues. See, e.g., Associated Press, *China Blocks YouTube After Videos of Tibet Protest Are Posted*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 17, 2008, at C6; Video: Tanzania Police Brutality: Zanzibar Nov 2005 (Part 2) (“chokocho,” Aug. 28, 2006), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1-YuxjdcvU>.

71. See SHIRKY, *supra* note 45, at 181 (noting that technology allows advocates to “lower the hurdles to doing something in the first place, so that people who cared a little could participate a little, while being effective in the aggregate”); see also Verta Taylor & Nella Van Dyke, “Get Up, Stand Up”: *Tactical Repertoires of Social Movements*, in THE BLACKWELL COMPANION TO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS 262, 281 (David A. Snow et al. eds., 2004) (noting that numerical strength “is one way that social movements exercise influence”); KECK & SIKKINK, *supra* note 12, at 23 (“In democracies the potential to influence votes gives large membership organizations an advantage over nonmembership organizations in lobbying for policy change . . .”).

72. See Interview with Patel, *supra* note 54. Avaaz describes itself as “a new global web movement with a simple democratic mission: to close the gap between the world we have, and the world most people everywhere want.” Avaaz.org, About Us, <http://www.avaaz.org/en/about.php> (last visited Mar. 10, 2009).

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rapidly combining the small amounts of time or money they can give into a powerful collective force.”<sup>73</sup> Avaaz’s website explains:

Technology and the internet have allowed citizens to connect and mobilize like never before. The rise of a new model of internet-driven, people-powered politics is changing countries from Australia to the Philippines to the United States. Avaaz takes this model global, connecting people across borders to bring people powered politics to international decision-making.<sup>74</sup>

As of mid-August 2008, Avaaz’s membership had increased “to almost 3.4 million people from every country of the world, an average growth of over 40,000 people per week.”<sup>75</sup> Avaaz members had engaged in “nearly 8 million actions, donated over 2.5 million Euro (\$3.5 million), and told over 30 million friends about Avaaz campaigns.”<sup>76</sup>

Kiva is a microlending site that aggregates multiple small donations to meet requests for small business loans around the world.<sup>77</sup> Like Avaaz and 24 Hours for Darfur, one of Kiva’s goals is to empower ordinary individuals to engage in activism. A press release explains, “Just as YouTube has changed the way we watch video and Wikipedia has changed the way we find information, Kiva.org—the world’s first online person-to-person microlending platform—is changing the way we give back.”<sup>78</sup> Kiva’s site notes:

The ease with which we can now gather information from around the world has changed the way the public want to give. By creating a platform through which people can connect—much the same as MySpace or Craigslist—Kiva is giving philanthropy a 2.0 twist, enabling individuals to give an entrepreneur halfway around the world their vote of confidence with just \$25.<sup>79</sup>

As of mid-August 2008, Kiva had provided over \$39.2 million dollars in the form of over 55,000 loans in 42 countries from over 320,000 lenders.<sup>80</sup> Kiva notes that its members are “sending \$1 million to the developing world every 12 days.”<sup>81</sup> Kiva’s success has also led to emulation. Opportu-

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73. *Id.*

74. *Id.*

75. Ricken Patel, *What We Have Achieved Together*, AVAAZ UPDATE (Avaaz Found., New York, N.Y., Aug. 20, 2008) (on file with author).

76. *Id.*

77. See Kiva.org, What is Kiva? We Let You Loan to the Working Poor, <http://www.kiva.org/about> (last visited Apr. 6, 2009).

78. Press Release, Kiva.org, Kiva.org Exceeds \$25 Million in Loans From Internet Community—\$25 at a Time (Apr. 2, 2008), [http://www.kiva.org/about/release\\_20080402](http://www.kiva.org/about/release_20080402).

79. Kiva.org, Press Center: Story Ideas: Philanthropy 2.0, <http://www.kiva.org/about/ideas/> (last visited Apr. 6, 2009).

80. See Kiva.org, Press Center: Facts & Statistics, <http://www.kiva.org/about/facts/> (last visited Apr. 6, 2009).

81. See Kiva.org, *supra* note 78.



nity International, an established microfinance organization, has followed Kiva's lead and introduced an online site, OptInNow, that allows individuals to donate money that is then aggregated and lent to entrepreneurs around the world.<sup>82</sup>

*Collaborative Production.* Ordinary individuals are also beginning to collaborate to produce goods that were formerly produced by human rights professionals.<sup>83</sup> For example, collaboratively edited articles about human rights are beginning to appear on Wikipedia. Although there are significant differences between the human rights reports of Human Rights Watch and the human rights articles on Wikipedia, the scope of coverage on many topics is comparable.<sup>84</sup> Ushahidi, a leading organization on the use of collaborative technologies in accomplishing human rights objectives, provides platforms for groups to "crowdsource" reporting on human rights issues by aggregating information submitted by the public.<sup>85</sup> Its platforms rely primarily on the aggregation of data, but also employ human and technological filters in order to sort and package the information in usable and reliable forms.<sup>86</sup> Although there are significant challenges to using participatory models to produce human rights reports,<sup>87</sup> the existence of such collaborative work demonstrates the viability of collaborative production in the human rights context.

### B. Meaningful Participation

As effective as these platforms and groups have been in broadly mobilizing individuals to become involved in human rights issues, it is unclear how successful they will be in transforming that initial act of participation into a deep and sustained commitment to the work.<sup>88</sup> Of course, some—if

82. See Opportunity Int'l, Get Involved: Introducing OptInnow: Help End Global Poverty. Faster, <http://www.opportunity.org/Page.aspx?pid=566> (last visited Apr. 6, 2009).

83. See SHIRKY, *supra* note 45, at 50 (describing collaborative production as the situation in which "no one person can take credit for what is created, and the project could not come into being without the participation of many"). Benkler describes such commons-based peer production as "a new modality of organizing production: radically decentralized, collaborative, and nonproprietary; based on sharing resources and outputs among widely distributed, loosely connected individuals who cooperate with each other without relying on either market signals or managerial commands." YOCHAI BENKLER, *THE WEALTH OF NETWORKS: HOW SOCIAL PRODUCTION TRANSFORMS MARKETS AND FREEDOM* 60 (2006).

84. For a comparison of reports by Human Rights Watch and articles on Wikipedia, see Molly Beutz Land, *Peer Producing Human Rights*, 46:4 ALBERTA L. REV. 1 (2009).

85. About Ushahidi: Introduction and History, <http://www.ushahidi.com/about> (last visited July 24, 2009); Swift Developer Site, <http://swiftapp.org/> (last visited July 24, 2009). See NOVECK, *supra* note 55, at 18 (noting that "crowdsourcing generally refers to aggregating the responses of individuals across a network").

86. Swift Developer Site, *supra* note 85; About Us, <http://legacy.ushahidi.com/about.asp> (last visited July 24, 2009) ("We are working with local Kenyan NGO's [sic] to get information and to verify each incident.").

87. See Land, *supra* note 84, at 8–12.

88. This is also the question now faced by the Obama administration—how to "transform[ ] the YouTube-Facebooking-texting-Twittering grass-roots organization that put Mr. Obama in the White House into an instrument of government." Jim Rutenberg & Adam Nagourney, *Melding*

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not most—of those who participate will be content with their initial level of involvement. As Ricken Patel, Executive Director of Avaaz, argues, it is not necessarily the case that those who become involved *want* to be empowered in deciding what the group does.<sup>89</sup> In addition, efforts that result in more individuals simply being involved in or exposed to human rights issues are, by themselves, critically important. In politically restrictive environments, even the very act of forming or joining a group can be a significant threat to political authority.<sup>90</sup>

Nonetheless, there are several benefits to deep participation that make it worthwhile to investigate how organizations can most effectively encourage this kind of involvement. Providing opportunities for deeper participation would increase both the capacity and the resources available for human rights advocacy. Robert Putnam explains, for example, that “[w]hat really matters from the point of view of social capital and civic engagement is not merely nominal membership, but active and involved membership.”<sup>91</sup> Participants who take part in determining a group’s goals and methods are more likely to make significant contributions, to contribute in meaningful ways, and to involve other individuals from their social network.<sup>92</sup> Without deep participation, an individual’s commitment may not be sustainable. As one interviewee explained, technology makes it easy for individuals to sign up for a cause but to just as easily “tune out” at a later point in time.<sup>93</sup>

One of the most effective ways to foster deep commitment is to allow individuals to take ownership of their work and to participate meaningfully in determining the goals and methods of the group. The more influence individuals have over the trajectory, goals, and mission of the group, the more committed they will feel.<sup>94</sup> Comparing the relatively low impact of demonstrations at the 2004 Republican National Convention with the effect of demonstrations in the Philippines, Spain, and Korea, for example, Manuel Castells and his co-authors argue that “while in the Philippines, Korea, and Spain a combination of factors converged to stimulate spontane-

*Obama’s Web to a YouTube Presidency*, N. Y. TIMES, Jan. 26, 2009, at A1; see Interview with Patel, *supra* note 54.

89. See Interview with Patel, *supra* note 54. Patel explained that Avaaz initially considered the possibility of using a more participatory model for its site but ultimately opted for an approach that combined clear directives informed by periodic polling of the membership concerning the organization’s direction and priorities. He argued that organizations are successful if they offer people what they need, and what people need is not the opportunity to become more involved but rather assistance in becoming more effective in the things that they do. See *id.*

90. See SHIRKY, *supra* note 45, at 166–67 (describing how flash mobs in Belarus were arrested for meeting in Oktyabrskaya Square to eat ice cream).

91. PUTNAM, *supra* note 3, at 58.

92. Research indicates that the more highly connected an individual is in terms of being linked to more people or linked to people who are more centrally located, the more likely he or she is to become involved in a movement. See, e.g., Mario Diani, *Networks and Participation*, in THE BLACKWELL COMPANION TO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, *supra* note 71, at 339, 344.

93. See Interview with Kyra Stoddart, Online Marketer, Amnesty International USA (Jan. 9, 2009) (on file with author).

94. See HOWARD RHEINGOLD, SMART MOBS: THE NEXT SOCIAL REVOLUTION 35 (2002).

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ous uprisings, in the United States the process was more centrally managed, thus removing, to some extent, the element of interpersonal communication flow based on friendship networks.”<sup>95</sup>

Although each of the sites discussed above has succeeded in reaching out to an unprecedented number of ordinary citizens, the participation of any one of those individuals is fairly limited. Data provided by interviewees indicates that only a small percentage of those mobilized develop a sustained commitment to the cause.<sup>96</sup> According to Ricken Patel, for example, approximately ten to fifteen percent of the 3.5 million Avaaz members might donate or attend rallies and few are able to become involved in making decisions about the direction of the group.<sup>97</sup> Although Avaaz surveys its members each week to obtain their feedback regarding the issues Avaaz should address,<sup>98</sup> the priorities and methods of the organization are actually determined by a fairly small group of decision-makers.<sup>99</sup>

This pattern of broad mobilization but limited involvement is consistent throughout the sites examined. Anyone can contribute video statements to 25 Hours for Darfur or make loans on Kiva, but a far smaller group actually makes the decisions about each organization’s direction. Although The Hub provides opportunities for individuals to connect with other groups online and to form their own, it is nonetheless run centrally. For example, its team of editors handpicks “the three most urgent videos contributed to The Hub” to profile on its site.<sup>100</sup> Amnesty International USA has 600,000 Facebook cause members, but far fewer of those individuals take action or engage in online discussion.<sup>101</sup> Although many individuals contribute to Wikipedia articles, they are primarily written by only a handful of contributors, and the number of those who exert a significant influence over the page’s content and approach is even smaller.<sup>102</sup> Ushahidi provides

95. MANUEL CASTELLS, ET AL., *MOBILE COMMUNICATION AND SOCIETY: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE* 210 (2007).

96. Identifying criteria for and measuring the depth of an individual’s online participation is challenging. See, e.g., Department for Innovation, Universities, & Skills, *Evaluation of Online Engagement*, [http://interactive.dius.gov.uk/diuswiki/wiki/Evaluation\\_of\\_Online\\_Engagement](http://interactive.dius.gov.uk/diuswiki/wiki/Evaluation_of_Online_Engagement) (last visited Apr. 6, 2009).

97. See Interview with Patel, *supra* note 54.

98. See *id.* Other organizations have also used procedural mechanisms to solicit member involvement in group decision-making processes. The group Nosamo, for example, advocating on behalf of a political candidate in Korea, used electronic voting and open chat rooms to obtain input on and deliberate about decisions. Such processes are helpful but limited, since decisions are still made by a much smaller group. See CASTELLS ET AL., *supra* note 95, at 195; see also Ronda Hauben, *The Rise of Netizen Democracy: A Case Study of Netizens’ Impact on Democracy in South Korea* (unpublished dissertation, Columbia University), <http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/other/misc/korean-democracy.txt> (last visited Apr. 6, 2009).

99. Avaaz’s website explains that it is “served by a small team of global campaigners working in many countries to identify and develop opportunities for members to take action.” Avaaz.org, *About Us: Our Team*, <http://www.avaaz.org/en/about.php> (last visited Apr. 6, 2009).

100. See *About The Hub*, *supra* note 67.

101. See Interview with Stoddart, *supra* note 93.

102. See JONATHAN ZITTRAIN, *THE FUTURE OF THE INTERNET—AND HOW TO STOP IT* 143 (2008) (describing how Wikipedia has developed a system of self-governance in which the activity of building

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another example of this tension. Although it offers a promising model for generating peer-produced human rights reporting in situations of crisis, the use of human and technological filters means that control over content is vested in a few individuals, the dilemma that participatory production models are designed to avoid.

The pattern in which a few people engage in most of the work or enjoy most of the connections is an example of the “power law,” a mathematical expression that describes a pattern of unequal distribution in the relationship between two variables.<sup>103</sup> In terms of social activism, the power law represents an inverse relationship between meaningful participation and broad mobilization. In other words, broad mobilization is possible, but only at the cost of the meaningful involvement of those mobilized in decisions about the group’s goals and methods of work. Because of the apparent inverse relationship between participation and mobilization, projects aimed at fostering social activism seemingly must choose between mobilizing large numbers of individuals to become involved in human rights projects and providing those individuals with opportunities for meaningful participation.

The inverse relationship between broad mobilization and deep participation, however, is not new to social activism. Amnesty International has long engaged in a form of offline mass activism through its Urgent Action appeals. These appeals, now delivered electronically, call on a large number of individuals to write letters with respect to a particular issue or cause.<sup>104</sup> Like Avaaz and the other organizations examined in this section, Amnesty International has also experienced challenges in involving its membership base in decisions of the organization. Despite its membership foundation, day-to-day decisions about the organization’s goals and strategies are still centralized. Its membership only participates in deciding questions regarding potential significant changes in AI’s mandate.<sup>105</sup>

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and editing the encyclopedia is done in groups that coalesce into nano-communities around each article).

103. See SHIRKY, *supra* note 45, at 128; see generally ALBERT-LÁSZLÓ BARABÁSI, LINKED: THE NEW SCIENCE OF NETWORKS (2002). The power law “is a continuously decreasing curve, implying that many small events coexist with a few large events.” *Id.* at 67. In circumstances that follow a power law distribution, most of the asset falls into the hands of very few, whereas most of the participants have very little of the asset. See *id.* at 67–68. In lay terms, the power law has also been described as the 80/20 principle—that 80% of wealth goes to 20% of the population. See *id.* at 66.

104. See Amnesty International, *Call on Sudan to Arrest Suspected War Criminals*, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/appeals-for-action/call-sudan-arrest-suspected-war-criminals> (last visited Apr. 6, 2009) (authentication required). Other organizations also rely on urgent action networks, including Casa Alianza, Organisation Mondiale Contre la Torture, and the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (now Human Rights First), to mobilize constituencies. See Laurie S. Wiseberg, *The Internet: One More Tool in the Struggle for Human Rights*, in NGOs AND HUMAN RIGHTS, *supra* note 10, at 238, 241.

105. See Welch, *supra* note 14, at 109. Welch observes:

Contrary to announced intent, the policies of organizations deeply committed to member participation are determined essentially by staff, not by members—the noted “iron law of oligarchy.” Although AI’s International Council examines broad policy matters, including the mandate, and although the International Executive Committee supervises national sec-

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### C. *The Problem of Size*

Despite the significant benefits associated with meaningful participation, there are several reasons why groups nonetheless gravitate toward models that replicate the professionalization of more traditional organizations. In addition to the reasons for professionalization described earlier, this is principally a problem of size. Decentralizing decision-making among a large group of participants can create real risks, particularly for human rights work. These risks include the difficulty of ensuring accuracy, the heightened possibility of unintended consequences, and the greater difficulty in ensuring focused action. In trying to avoid some of the negative consequences associated with decentralization, groups may take on many of the features of professionalization critiqued earlier.

When decision-making authority is decentralized among a large number of participants, it becomes difficult to ensure both accuracy and the perception of accuracy. Collaboratively produced human rights reports, for example, may be ineffective without centralized control to ensure the reliability of the information they contain. Human rights reports lose much of their power if states are able to dismiss them as inadequately verified or to challenge their methodology in other ways.<sup>106</sup> Corrective editing, the approach adopted by Wikipedia, may provide some control but depends on the ability of other editors to verify the information produced; this, however, is difficult to do in human rights investigation, where much of the information is collected via oral interview or first-hand observation.<sup>107</sup> Further, even if accurate, the perception of unreliability alone can be enough to provide a basis for rejecting the report as illegitimate.

In addition, there is a high risk of unintended consequences in a project in which many actors contribute to the direction and implementation of the project. Although the lack of control allows groups to experiment and take risks, it also means that it is more difficult to guard against unexpected results. The international reaction to the case of Amina Lawal, the Nigerian woman who was sentenced to be stoned to death for adultery, illustrates this point. The case provoked a vigorous international response, including email petitions that circulated online. Nigerian activists attempted to stop the petitions because they were afraid that the international attention would create a backlash and damage Lawal's case.<sup>108</sup> The decentralized na-

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tions, the overwhelming majority of operational decisions are made within the International Secretariat.

*Id.* at 91. It is for this reason that Amnesty International's structure has been criticized as combining "a patina of popular participation in establishing priorities with the reality of centralized authority." *Id.*

106. See Orentlicher, *supra* note 16, at 92-93.

107. For a detailed discussion of the prospects for using participatory models to collaboratively produce human rights reports and the challenge of ensuring the accuracy of such reports, see Land, *supra* note 84 at 12-15.

108. See Elisabeth Jay Friedman, *The Reality of Virtual Reality: The Internet and Gender Equality Advocacy in Latin America*, 47:3 *LATIN AM. POL. & SOC'Y*, 1, 21 (2005).

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ture of the response meant the attorneys could not easily control for such risks.

It is also more challenging for large groups to maintain the kind of direction that is necessary to ensure effective advocacy. Although large groups have influence based on their numbers, there may be a greater risk of inconsistent messages, an overabundance of calls to action, or unpredictable timing.<sup>109</sup> International bodies are “unlikely to respond positively if they are bombarded with information about a situation that clearly is less compelling than others of which they are aware.”<sup>110</sup> Several interviewees also noted the tension between greater participation and the risk that such participation would have negative consequences for an organization’s communications strategy.<sup>111</sup> With many voices participating, it is also much more difficult to prevent certain issues from dominating the media and the public’s consciousness at the expense of other pressing problems.<sup>112</sup> Widespread participation can accentuate the way in which issues become the focus of a news cycle. Information reported by one source is picked up by other sources, vaulting some stories to the headlines in an echo-chamber effect.

It is also difficult to allocate appropriate resources and decide on strategy when decision-making is decentralized. Although a participatory model can capitalize on the diverse expertise of its participants, there is no guarantee that this expertise will necessarily correspond to the particular needs of the project. For example, there may well be more diversity in the topics covered on the human rights pages of Wikipedia, but there is no guarantee that there will be a Wikipedia entry on any particular topic on any given day. Nor is there any guarantee that members will all agree on the right course of action or methodology.<sup>113</sup>

The experience of 24 Hours for Darfur illustrates the tension between participatory models of production and the direction that is needed for effective advocacy. The site was created as a vehicle for broadcasting the opinions of others and therefore deliberately avoided direction regarding messaging.<sup>114</sup> The result, however, was that it was much more difficult to

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109. See Weyker, *supra* note 22, at 122.

110. Hannum, *supra* note 22, at 36.

111. See, e.g., Interview with Emma Daly, Communications Director, Enrique Piraces, Senior Online Strategist, and Jim Murphy, Online Editor, Human Rights Watch (Jan. 15, 2009) (on file with author); Interview with Sharon Kelly, Director of Communications, Human Rights First (April 27, 2009) (on file with author); Interview with Eric Cade Schoenborn, Director of Website Communications, American Civil Liberties Union (Jan. 13, 2009) (on file with author); Interview with Martin Vogel, Former Project Lead for Action Network iCan (Jan. 5, 2009) (on file with author).

112. Cf. Sikkink, *supra* note 47, at 309.

113. See *Electronic Protest: Wakey-wakey*, ECONOMIST, Feb. 17, 2007, at 62 (“As the e-protest movement grows broader, its focus will surely become less sharp. After all, everyone can agree that governments should ‘do more’ about climate change, but when it comes to choosing between specific responses it may be harder to teach the world to click in perfect harmony.”).

114. See Interview with Jonathan Loeb, Managing Director, 24 Hours for Darfur (Jan. 29, 2009) (on file with author).

communicate the views of contributors to decision-makers.<sup>115</sup> Although the site was tremendously effective in achieving its goals of giving voice to and documenting public concern about the violence in Darfur, it was more challenging to transform these expressive acts into political pressure without centralized direction.

Finally, large groups also suffer from collective action problems. Social movement and public choice theory have long recognized that size is critical to group activity, and, in particular, that large groups may not be conducive to action. Mancur Olson, for example, observed that dividing the benefits of collective action among a large number of participants decreases the incentive for any one to take part.<sup>116</sup> Although his theory has subsequently been criticized as inadequate in light of many other reasons for participation in collective action,<sup>117</sup> Olson's central insight still underscores the difficulty of fostering collective action in large groups.

One of the responses to the risks associated with participatory models of activism is to reassert control by either limiting the size of the group or vesting authority in a smaller subset of individuals within the group.<sup>118</sup> There are several advantages associated with this move toward small groups. Accuracy, for example, is easier to ensure because members of the group are better able to trust one another to produce reliable information. The kinds of strong ties that form the foundation of trusting relationships are more readily built and maintained in small groups.<sup>119</sup> In addition, trust is generally built on reputation, which is easier to establish in small groups. Individuals have a greater chance of having interacted with each other, and it is more likely that members will know other members who can vouch for someone new.<sup>120</sup>

115. See Interview with Benjamin Plener, Former Co-Director, 24 Hours for Darfur (Jan. 11, 2009) (on file with author).

116. See MANCUR OLSON, *THE LOGIC OF COLLECTIVE ACTION: PUBLIC GOODS AND THE THEORY OF GROUPS* 48 (rev. ed. 1971).

117. Many have argued that reasons other than self-interest may motivate people to participate in a collective enterprise. See, e.g., Hyojoung Kim & Peter S. Bearman, *The Structure and Dynamics of Movement Participation*, 62 *AM. SOC. REV.* 70, 71 (1997) (reviewing social movement literature); James A. Kitts, *Mobilizing in Black Boxes: Social Networks and Participation in Social Movement Organizations*, 5(2) *MOBILIZATION: INT'L J.* 241, 244-45 (2000) (providing an overview of theories about how networks contribute to mobilization).

118. In other words, groups are likely to "be left with a core of say 5 to 7 dedicated individuals who must see and understand their duties to the group or everything will land on the shoulders of one, maybe two main leaders." Steven Clift, *Notes—BBC iCan Beta Launch, Extensive Clift Comments*, Oct. 24, 2003, <http://www.mail-archive.com/do-wire@lists.umn.edu/msg00081.html>. Increasing hierarchy as organizations grow is common offline, as well. Susan Dicklitch explains, for example, that as the Ugandan NGO Action for Development expanded, it became necessary to restructure to increase participation and minimize communication bottlenecks, which had the negative consequence of "creat[ing] a more bureaucratic and rigid structure at the expense of voluntarism." Dicklitch, *supra* note 12, at 188-90.

119. See SUROWIECKI, *supra* note 44, at 123; Judith Donath, *Signals in Social Supernet*, 13(1) *J. COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMM.* (2008), <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/donath.html>.

120. Johnson and Noveck propose that we leverage the reputations of groups of which one is a member to evaluate whether to trust a new participant. See David R. Johnson & Beth Simone Noveck,

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Small groups also allow the development of collective identity, which is critical to the long-term influence of social change groups: “When a group has a strong collective identity, the movement can garner support and power because the participants feel that they are all working toward common goals, have defined opponents, and have an integrated sense of being that is incorporated into the movement ideologies.”<sup>121</sup> Collective identity, in turn, depends on the ability of the group to create a “shared definition system” through “a series of self-revaluations of shared experiences, shared opportunities, and shared interests.”<sup>122</sup> The development of such a shared definition system requires the kind of communication that occurs in small groups. Small spaces are required for group constitutive communications; in large spaces, the conversations can degenerate or dissipate.<sup>123</sup>

Because it vests authority in a small group of individuals, professionalization resolves many of these problems. Yet small groups are also associated with a range of problems of their own. First, small groups often lack a diversity of perspectives that can be critical to ensuring good decision-making. A diversity of perspectives is necessary to “expand[ ] a group’s set of possible solutions and allow[ ] the group to conceptualize problems in novel ways.”<sup>124</sup> The absence of competing perspectives can also bias the group’s decision-making by entrenching certain perspectives.<sup>125</sup> Second, the limited number of perspectives involved also makes it easier for a few voices to dominate. For example, it is far easier in small groups “for a few biased individuals to exert undue influence and skew the group’s collective decision.”<sup>126</sup> In part, this is also because small groups tend to emphasize “consensus over dissent,” thus foregoing necessary disagreements about strategy or action.<sup>127</sup> Third, in limiting decision-making authority to only a few credentialed experts, the increased capacity and diversity associated with broad mobilization are lost and the group’s decision-making suffers as a result.

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In Groups We Trust: Enabling On-Line Collaboration with Group-Backed Reputation (unpublished working paper, on file with author).

121. Martha McCaughey & Michael D. Ayers, *Introduction*, in *CYBERACTIVISM*, *supra* note 46, at 1, 8. R

122. See Michael D. Ayers, *Comparing Collective Identity in Online and Offline Feminist Activists*, in *CYBERACTIVISM*, *supra* note 46, at 145, 151–52. R

123. See Clay Shirky, Speech at E-Tech: A Group Is Its Own Worst Enemy (Apr. 24, 2003), [http://www.shirky.com/writings/group\\_enemy.html](http://www.shirky.com/writings/group_enemy.html) (“Scale alone kills conversations, because conversations require dense two-way conversations.”).

124. SUROWIECKI, *supra* note 44, at 36. R

125. See ANDREW L. SHAPIRO, *THE CONTROL REVOLUTION: HOW THE INTERNET IS PUTTING INDIVIDUALS IN CHARGE AND CHANGING THE WORLD WE KNOW* 112 (1999) (noting that control over information makes it less likely that one will be confronted with viewpoints contrary to or different from one’s own); Donath, *supra* note 119 (“Close networks of strong ties tend to be homogeneous and insular, reinforcing beliefs rather than introducing new ideas.”). R

126. SUROWIECKI, *supra* note 44, at 30. R

127. See *id.* at 180.



## III. NETWORKING ACTIVISM

The inverse relationship between participation and mobilization appears to create a set of unsatisfactory choices for projects seeking to foster citizen participation in human rights advocacy. Because of the risks associated with participatory models, attempts to provide both broad mobilization and deep participation are likely to falter. Professionalization avoids these risks but eliminates many of the benefits associated with broad mobilization.

The choice between mobilization and participation, however, may not be necessary. Network theory, a branch of mathematics that is often used to explain the functioning of the Internet, provides several insights that can be used to obtain the benefits of both small and large groups while mitigating the risks associated with either. Network theory views group activity as composed of small groups located within larger networks of linked organizations and thereby provides an approach to online activism that avoids the two equally unsatisfactory choices of professionalization and chaos.

This section outlines the insights network theory has to offer online activism and evaluates the ways in which an approach based on network theory would address the problems of both large and small groups.<sup>128</sup> This section then explores what an approach of networked activism might mean for human rights advocacy, evaluating specific proposals for online activism in terms of the ability of each to increase participation and mobilize individuals. Although the purpose of this article is not to reexamine the question of what motivates people to engage in collective action,<sup>129</sup> it does draw on social movement literature for insights as to what types of group or network structures will most effectively allow individuals to deepen their participation in groups.

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128. Although beyond the scope of this article, it is also possible to imagine opening up systems of norm articulation to peer-production within international bodies such as United Nations agencies, much in the way others are currently advocating for greater openness in governmental processes within the United States. See NOVECK, *supra* note 55. Increased participation and ease of group formation might have a democratizing effect on international institutions and international relations, which themselves are viewed as suffering from legitimacy and accountability deficits.

129. This question is central to social movement literature. See, e.g., RESTRUCTURING WORLD POLITICS, *supra* note 47; KECK & SIKKINK, *supra* note 12; FRONTIERS IN SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY (Aldon D. Morris & Carol McClurg Mueller eds., 1992); Eduardo Canel, *New Social Movement Theory and Resource Mobilization Theory: The Need for Integration*, in COMMUNITY POWER AND GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY: THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIAL LIFE (Michael Kaufman & Haroldo Dilla Alfonso eds., 1997); Gerald Marwell et al., *Social Networks and Collective Action: A Theory of Critical Mass*, 94 AM. J. SOC. 502 (1988); Mark S. Granovetter, *The Strength of Weak Ties: A Network Theory Revisited*, 1 SOC. THEORY 201 (1983); John D. McCarthy & Mayer N. Zald, *Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory*, 82 AM J. SOC. 1212 (1977).

### A. Hierarchical Modularity

In the online context, it is the networked nature of the Internet that provides a foundation for both participation and mobilization, thus avoiding the risks of professionalization and small group insularity. Network theory describes networks as largely composed of tightly bound small groups that are connected to one another through weak ties.<sup>130</sup> Human rights activism could adopt the insights of network theory by fostering the formation of highly participatory small groups while providing opportunities for those small groups to connect with one another to achieve broad mobilization.<sup>131</sup>

Network theory emphasizes the nature of both the ties that connect individuals within groups and those that connect the groups to one another. In describing the work of Mark Granovetter, for example, Barabási explains that there are two different kinds of ties that individuals can form—strong ties that connect members within smaller groups and weak ties that connect small groups with one another.<sup>132</sup> Strong ties require more time and investment and are generally most easily formed in small groups.<sup>133</sup> Weak ties, in contrast, are those that cross group boundaries. The existence of these weak ties between groups means that it is possible for many small groups to join forces with one another to coordinate their action.

Because of the weak ties that connect groups to one another, small groups are far less isolated than they appear. Even a few links between tightly clustered groups “are sufficient to drastically decrease the average separation between the nodes,” thus greatly reducing the distance between any two points in the online context.<sup>134</sup> These weak ties are responsible for what has been called the “small world” phenomenon—the idea that everyone is connected to one another via far fewer connections than might be anticipated.<sup>135</sup> The small world phenomenon explains why even though individuals participating in protests in Spain following the 2004 bombing

130. See generally BARABÁSI, *supra* note 103; Granovetter, *supra* note 129.

131. For a more detailed discussion of the meaning of the term “network,” see, for example, ANNE-LISE RILES, *THE NETWORK INSIDE OUT* 3 (2000) (“By the ‘Network,’ I mean to refer to a set of institutions, knowledge practices, and artifacts thereof that internally generate the effects of their own reality by reflecting on themselves.”); Sanjeev Khagram et al., *From Santiago to Seattle: Transnational Advocacy Groups Restructuring World Politics*, in *RESTRUCTURING WORLD POLITICS*, *supra* note 47, at 3, 7 (defining transnational advocacy networks as “sets of actors linked across country boundaries, bound together by shared values, dense exchanges of information and services, and common discourses”).

132. See BARABÁSI, *supra* note 103, at 43; see also Lior Jacob Strahilevitz, *Social Norms from Close-Knit Groups to Loose-Knit Groups*, 70 U. CHI. L. REV. 359, 359 (2003) (describing the differences between close-knit and loose-knit groups).

133. See Judith Donath, *Signals in Social Supernet*, 13 J. COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMM. (2007), <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/donath.html> (“A close-knit network of strong ties can supply extensive support. Being a member of such a group requires a large commitment of time and attention; there is frequent contact among the members of the group, often together.”).

134. See BARABÁSI, *supra* note 103, at 53 (describing the work of mathematicians Duncan Watts and Steven Strogatz).

135. See, e.g., SHIRKY, *supra* note 45, at 214; BARABÁSI, *supra* note 103, at 30.

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in Madrid were only sending text messages about the protest to people they knew, the messages diffused outwards to an exponentially growing community of interest.<sup>136</sup> In this way, network structure provides individuals with greater access to social capital than would be the case in a more traditional form of community.<sup>137</sup>

Drawing on these insights, a model of “networked activism” recognizes that large groups can be composed of small groups connected to each other. “Networked activism” is thus a model of what Barabási calls “hierarchical modularity,” a system in which “[n]umerous small but highly interlinked modules combine in a hierarchical fashion into a few larger, less interlinked modules.”<sup>138</sup> Because it provides spaces for both large and small groups, networked activism offers a means for achieving broad mobilization while maintaining the small spaces that enable deep participation. Hierarchical modularity also helps us shift our understanding of the primary unit of organization in social activism from the individual to the group.<sup>139</sup> In this view, groups are composed not of individuals but of smaller groups connected internally through strong ties and externally through weak ties. Thus, the basic structure characterizing group activity is not individuals joining together but rather a web or network of connections.

Understanding the group as the primary unit of organization in group activity highlights the way in which groups are more than simply a sum of their parts.<sup>140</sup> For example, small groups can separately develop specialized expertise. When these groups are then networked together, the network as a whole will benefit from the increased information and know-how of each small group. Separate development helps to reduce bottlenecks because labor can be divided among many smaller entities,<sup>141</sup> while the connections between these groups help foster the circulation of resources, including information and expertise.<sup>142</sup> Finally, separate development also allows significant experimentation. Small groups can innovate, and, if they are not successful, their failure will not significantly damage the network as a

136. See CASTELLS ET AL., *supra* note 95, at 201.

137. See Rogério da Costa, *On a New Concept of Community: Social Networks, Personal Communities and Collective Intelligence*, 2 INTERFACE 7 (2006).

138. BARABÁSI, *supra* note 103, at 236; see also HERBERT SIMON, *THE SCIENCES OF THE ARTIFICIAL* 193–299 (1981) (arguing that nature is organized in levels).

139. My thanks to David Johnson for this point. The emphasis on groups requires recognition of “the nature of social movements as complex social systems.” Diani, *supra* note 92, at 351. Diani explains further: “While movements undoubtedly consist of participating individuals, of strings of protest events, and of organizations, it is the connections between those components that differentiate social movements from atomized, isolated instances of political behavior.” *Id.*

140. See Clay Shirky, *Social Software and the Politics of Groups*, Mar. 9, 2003, [http://shirky.com/writings/group\\_politics.html](http://shirky.com/writings/group_politics.html); see also Clay Shirky, *Group as User: Flaming and the Design of Social Software*, Nov. 5, 2004, [http://shirky.com/writings/group\\_user.html](http://shirky.com/writings/group_user.html).

141. BARABÁSI, *supra* note 103, at 237. The founder of Protest.net has remarked that one of the advantages of the website is to allow smaller groups to connect with larger ones, because this allows protests to “harness brainpower in small groups that don’t get too big and unwieldy, and the small groups are plugged into the larger movement.” PRICE, *supra* note 58, at 29.

142. See Diani, *supra* note 92, at 348.

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whole.<sup>143</sup> The advantages of specialization, division of labor, and experimentation associated with the separate development of small groups are critical in addressing the critiques of professionalization.<sup>144</sup>

Coalition building is a form of networked activism and enjoys these same advantages. Coalitions allow small groups to specialize, which in turn provides the larger coalition with expertise and local knowledge at a lower cost than if that knowledge had been obtained centrally.<sup>145</sup> Coalitions also allow NGOs to minimize the amount of time and resources necessary to allocate tasks. Members of the coalition can simply contribute in the ways that are most suited to their expertise and position. For example, the loose coalition of NGOs that made up the International Campaign to Ban Landmines allowed each group to establish its own agenda but provided them with common information about what needed to be done.<sup>146</sup> Coalitions also allow actors with a diversity of perspectives to come together for a common project—a diversity that allows experimentation and fosters better strategic decision-making overall.

Networked activism also may be able to address, at least in part, many of the challenges associated with both small and large groups. Because individuals would participate primarily in small groups, networked activism is better able to ensure more meaningful participation. Although Kathryn Sikkink argues that networks will be less effective the more participatory they become,<sup>147</sup> the small group format helps address this risk. Small groups are able to exert the kind of centralized control necessary to provide an organization with influence. Within each small group, it will be easier for participants to ensure accuracy, avoid unintended consequences, and provide direction. Although the risks associated with decentralization cannot be completely eliminated in light of the fact that no one group would

143. See BARABÁSI, *supra* note 103, at 236; see also, e.g., SHIRKY, *supra* note 45, at 236; Carliss Y. Baldwin & Kim B. Clark, *The Architecture of Participation: Does Code Architecture Mitigate Free Riding in the Open Source Development Model?*, 52 MGMT. SCI. 1116, 1117 (2006). R

144. A model of networked activism may have the added benefit of helping us understand networks not as naturalized constellations of individuals connecting with other individuals, but instead as complex, norm-driven interactions between smaller groups. See, e.g., RILES, *supra* note 131, at 173–74 (network theory has “imbue[d] [the Network’s] extension and enhancement with a certain normativity”); see also Yves Dezalay & Bryant G. Garth, *Legitimizing the New Legal Orthodoxy*, in GLOBAL PRESCRIPTIONS: THE PRODUCTION, EXPORTATION, AND IMPORTATION OF A NEW LEGAL ORTHODOXY 306, 318 (Yves Dezalay & Bryant G. Garth eds., 2002) (discussing networks as both product and proponent of ideology). R

145. See, e.g., Welch, *supra* note 39, at 277 (“Coalition building can stretch resources by allowing NGOs to concentrate on specified areas of expertise.”); Lebert, *supra* note 46, at 210–11 (“At the grassroots level, [Amnesty International] researchers are using e-mail to establish, nurture, and maintain their regional networks of trusted contacts. These contacts consisting of local human rights defenders and Amnesty sympathizers, can instantly communicate the details of local developments to researchers based in London.”). R

146. See Dorothy E. Denning, *Activism, Hacktivism, and Cyberterrorism: The Internet as a Tool for Influencing Foreign Policy*, <http://www.nautilus.org/archives/info-policy/workshop/papers/denning.html>. R

147. See Sikkink, *supra* note 47, at 312 (“The more viewpoints taken into account, the less likely a network will be able to keep a narrow focus on a small set of issues.”). R

have control over actions taken by others, the control exerted over the actions of each small group can reduce these risks in ways that may allow the network to capitalize on the benefits of participatory models and user-generated content.

The connections between these small groups may also mitigate many of the problems that would otherwise be associated with small groups. Establishing ties between groups, even if those ties are weak, can expose small groups to the viewpoints of others, thus increasing the range of perspectives considered.<sup>148</sup> When groups rely on these ties to engage in activism, the decisions produced will have more diversity of input, thus making it less likely that a few viewpoints will dominate and fostering a greater sense of connection between the members of the small group and society.

### B. Design Elements

Because it recognizes that collaborative production occurs best in interconnected small groups, a model of networked activism would counsel the adoption of mechanisms to encourage both small group formation and the development of connections between those groups. Shifting our understanding from a focus on individuals to groups as the building blocks of group activity allows us to adopt design elements that are explicitly focused on achieving these two goals.<sup>149</sup> The purpose of this section is to develop concrete technological recommendations for implementing a model of networked activism in the context of human rights advocacy. These recommendations are offered more as a way of highlighting some of the design choices that projects should consider than as an attempt to provide any particular blueprint for citizen activism. Design choices will necessarily vary widely by context, and it is often the process of implementation itself—rather than any specific set of choices—that yields the greatest insight into effective design.<sup>150</sup>

*Foster appropriate interactivity.* One of the first elements of networked activism is allowing individuals to interact with each other. The kind of interaction at issue here is not vertical interaction between the organization and the individual but horizontal interaction between individual users of the site. Interactivity is critical in allowing people to become more deeply involved in the advocacy effort. As the Public Relations Director of Kiva explained, “We’ve observed that people like to be a part of something.

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148. “The weak ties, or acquaintances,” says Barabási, “are our bridge to the outside world, since by frequenting different places they obtain their information from different sources than our immediate friends.” BARABÁSI, *supra* note 103, at 43; see also Granovetter, *supra* note 129, at 202.

149. See Shirky, *Social Software and the Politics of Groups*, *supra* note 140 (noting that because groups are fundamentally different from individuals, “[t]his means that designing software for group-as-user is a problem that can’t be attacked in the same way as designing a word processor or a graphics tool”).

150. As Noveck has noted, “Design science celebrates failing early and often until the right design is achieved.” NOVECK, *supra* note 55, at 187.

Originally, they wanted to be a part of Kiva. . . . Then we found people wanting to connect in smaller groups—it makes people feel good.”<sup>151</sup>

Interactivity, however, needs to be of the type that makes sense for the organization given its goals and constituencies. For example, Human Rights Watch has found it particularly useful to participate in a discussion group aimed at readers of the *Washington Post* because its key constituency, elites and policy-makers, frequented that discussion group.<sup>152</sup> Soliciting the participation of the general public would be less critical for an organization like Human Rights Watch than it might be for a group with a more explicit grassroots mandate, such as Amnesty International. For Human Rights Watch, broader participation would be most helpful when it is important to generate public support for a position, such as a legislative proposal.<sup>153</sup>

*Provide tools for group formation.* One of the easiest ways online sites can encourage the formation of small groups is to provide either the space or information needed for individuals to identify and contact like-minded others to form their own initiatives. Kiva, for example, allows group lending, a functionality that is also being implemented by Opportunity International.<sup>154</sup> Kiva also posts the names of all the individuals who have chosen to lend to the same microfinance applicant, thereby providing a basic framework for those who share common interests to come together.

Several other groups provide explicit mechanisms for individuals to connect with one another and form groups to accomplish particular goals. Two such sites are Change.org, a platform for the creation of groups dedicated to social change, and iCan, a civic engagement initiative launched by the BBC that was later renamed Action Network and which came to an end in 2008.<sup>155</sup> On Change.org, individuals can create groups by asking others to commit to “actions,” which can range from donating money to a particular institution to becoming educated about a topic.<sup>156</sup> iCan was designed to “provide[ ] a space for the creation and organization of local action groups, incorporating a set of tools into the site that facilitate[ ] the operation of

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151. Interview with Fiona Ramsey, Public Relations Director, Kiva (Dec. 23, 2008) (on file with author); *see also* Interview with Daly et al., *supra* note 111 (noting that “people want to be involved and feel they have the right to do so”).

152. *See id.*

153. Human Rights Watch cited as an example of successful interactivity a Facebook group created concerning the abuse of domestic workers in Lebanon. The group sought to raise awareness about the issue among the general public in order to reach employers of domestic workers and was viewed as quite successful in doing so. *See id.*

154. *See* Interview with Ramsey, *supra* note 151; Interview with Don Ingle, Vice President, Public Relations, Opportunity International (Jan. 9, 2009) (on file with author).

155. There are several other platforms aimed at fostering group formation. Like Change.org, Care2.org allows individuals to form and join groups on a range of social justice issues ranging from animal rights to global warming and human rights. Ning provides a platform for creating social networks on any issue. Sites such as eDemocracy.org and New Tactics in Human Rights allow individuals to form groups for purposes of discussion.

156. *See* Change.org Home Page, <http://www.change.org/> (last visited Apr. 7, 2009).

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these groups.”<sup>157</sup> Citizens could propose initiatives, which might be “anything from a pothole that requires repair to a move to block the destruction of a park.”<sup>158</sup>

*Capitalize on existing networks.* Organizations seeking to provide ways for individuals to form groups to engage in advocacy should also consider capitalizing on existing networks rather than creating new ones. Non-profit organizations might not have the resources necessary to create new social networking opportunities and doing so might also result in unnecessary duplication of effort. Instead, platforms might seek to integrate their content into existing networks.<sup>159</sup> Amnesty International USA, for example, decided not to build social networking functionality into its website because of the proliferation of other social networking opportunities on sites like Facebook and LinkedIn. Instead, it created ways to connect its content with those sites by, for example, sending action notices to Facebook users or creating a Facebook application that allows users to add badges for particular campaigns and share them with friends.<sup>160</sup>

Capitalizing on existing networks provides an additional benefit—namely, that individuals are more likely to contribute and take part in a particular action if someone in their social network asks them to do so.<sup>161</sup> Even if it is difficult to convince people to take action on a particular issue, they may be willing to ask others to do so. In addition, technological tools make it easy for people to call on their networks, through, for example mobile technology, email, or online sites.<sup>162</sup>

*Foster coalition building.* In addition to allowing individuals to form groups, a model of networked activism would provide ways for these groups to connect with one another to form coalitions to work on issues they might

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157. A Civic Media Success Story: Examining the BBC Action Network, <http://civic.mit.edu/blog/abhidas/a-civic-media-success-story-examining-the-bbc-action-network/> (Nov. 3, 2007, 14:43) (submitted by Abhimanyu Das).

158. *Id.*

159. See Interview with Matt Halprin, Partner, Omidyar Network (Jan. 30, 2009) (on file with author); Interview with Schoenborn, *supra* note 111.

160. See Interview with Stoddart, *supra* note 93. The Genocide Intervention Network created a Facebook widget that allows an individual to update his or her profile with information about the activities of the organizations he or she supports. Interview with Janessa Goldbeck, Director of Membership, Genocide Intervention Network (Jan. 15, 2009) (on file with author).

161. See Interview with Halprin, *supra* note 159; see also VERBA ET AL., *supra* note 52, at 142–43. Note, however, that in some cases, social ties can sometimes also discourage participation. According to Kitts,

While movement scholars have generally argued that social ties facilitate participation, no one has identified any intrinsic property of social ties that unequivocally promotes protest, collective action, or organizational participation. . . . First, not all social referents (e.g. friends, parents, coworkers) support activism. Some may discourage participation or compete for an actor's time or other resources. Second, not all ties are positively valued. An actor may ignore or even rebel against some referents' attempts to influence her.

Kitts, *supra* note 117, at 242–45.

162. See, e.g., Interview with Halprin, *supra* note 159 (address books); Interview with Katrin Verclas, Co-Founder and Editor, MobileActive.org (Jan. 9, 2009) (mobile technology) (on file with author); Interview with Ingle, *supra* note 154 (Internet interfaces).

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not be able to address alone. Among other things, sites might foster coalition building by providing a technological framework that facilitates role division and task allocation. Groups are most successful when the work to be accomplished is “described and broken down into specific tasks, which small groups of people can elect to undertake.”<sup>163</sup> Yet the investment required to coordinate the work of those involved can be an impediment to coalition building. Beth Noveck has argued that technology can help to reduce some of the resources needed for this coordination.<sup>164</sup> Coordination costs may be manageable in a small group but unmanageable in larger coalitions. Providing the technology necessary to identify and allocate tasks within the coalition—such as online identities that can be easily assumed by different members of the coalition<sup>165</sup>—can reduce these costs and thus facilitate coalition building.

*Offer search tools.* Platforms can also encourage networked activism by providing users with tools that allow them to organize, classify, and search content on the site. One of the most useful tools in this respect is the ability to tag content by location and issue. Tagging allows users to categorize material in certain ways so that it can easily be found by other users. iCan users, for example, could search for projects concerning specific issues or locate projects within their geographic community.<sup>166</sup>

Local or geographic tags are likely to be particularly productive in mobilizing individuals.<sup>167</sup> As noted by Steven Clift, one of the elements that contributed to iCan’s success was its emphasis on local action. Prior to launching the site, iCan had conducted independent research to evaluate the ways in which individuals become involved in civic projects. The research indicated that people are most likely to get involved in local issues, because the relevance of these issues to their everyday lives is most apparent.<sup>168</sup> As individuals deepen their commitment to activism, they are likely

163. NOVECK, *supra* note 55, at 151. For example, protests of the 2000 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia were organized around affinity groups of five to twenty-five people. According to Larry Elin, “Within each affinity group, specific individuals assumed roles—support, media, etc.—and the group chose one individual to represent the affinity group at the ‘spokes council,’ where the entire protest is planned.” Larry Elin, *The Radicalization of Zeke Spier: How the Internet Contributes to Civic Engagement and New Forms of Social Capital*, in *CYBERACTIVISM*, *supra* note 46, at 97, 107.

164. See Beth Simone Noveck, *A Democracy of Groups*, 10 *FIRST MONDAY* (2005), <http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1289/1209>.

165. See *id.* (“For example, in a deliberative exercise, the moderator can assume a particular avatar (a skin or costume), which can then be passed from person to person in the world so that everyone can easily identify the moderator (or the librarian or the current speaker or the ostracized member).”).

166. See Interview with Vogel, *supra* note 111.

167. Some of iCan’s most successful projects were instances of local action. For example, in one case, a resident initiated a campaign to protest a road closure that would have diverted traffic through the neighborhood. She was joined by hundreds of other residents, who coordinated leafleting, a petition, a march, and parliamentary lobbying. The effort was successful and an alternate transportation plan was chosen. See *A Civic Media Success Story*, *supra* note 157.

168. See Interview with Vogel, *supra* note 111; see also Clift, *supra* note 118. Clift argues in favor of using “online tools to foster the creation of local citizen-based chapters (think Rotary or Lions service club model) to host viable local online public issues forums.” *Id.*

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either to begin to work on other issues of importance to their local community, or to broaden their efforts on a particular issue to a wider geographic area.<sup>169</sup> Being able to classify and search for particular projects or participants also fosters group formation, as it provides individuals with a way to locate projects of interest and thereby activate the “latent community” to which they already belong.<sup>170</sup>

*Ask or get out of the way.* In addition to providing the means by which individuals and groups can connect to one another, sites can also foster networked activism by providing users with the right level of guidance regarding what kinds of actions they should undertake. In general, the right level is likely to be either quite a bit or none at all. That is, to be successful, sites must either make a very specific and concrete request for action or provide individuals with the tools they need to create actions entirely on their own.

In most cases, a specific request—an “ask”—will be needed in order to motivate individuals to become involved. In the words of one human rights advocate, “you have to give them [the public] something to do.”<sup>171</sup> Individuals are more likely to contribute when they believe their contributions will be effective.<sup>172</sup> Acting alone, they may lack confidence that their actions will have the intended effects. When a trustworthy organization has done the necessary research and has identified a particular action for them to take, however, individuals are more likely to believe that action will be effective and will therefore be more likely to take part.

In approaching new participants, the “ask” should be limited in scope in order to be successful. Avaaz noted that its rate of participation dropped by fifteen percent as soon as individuals were asked to “join Avaaz.”<sup>173</sup> Specific questions also help ensure that responses are “better targeted and more relevant.”<sup>174</sup> Interviewees also emphasized the importance of ensuring that the request is as easy as possible to fulfill. The Genocide Intervention Network, for example, not only asked people to contact their legislators, but also created a hotline that made making those calls as convenient as possible. Callers only needed to provide their zip code and their calls were

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169. See Interview with Vogel, *supra* note 111. The research consisted of following approximately fifteen people who had made the transition to activism and evaluating the path they took in achieving that transition. See *id.*

170. See SHIRKY, *supra* note 45, at 102.

171. Interview with Daly et al., *supra* note 111.

172. See Interview with Ben Naimark-Rowse, Advocacy and Co-Director, 24 Hours for Darfur (Jan. 11, 2009) (on file with author); Interview with Patel, *supra* note 54; see also SHIRKY, *supra* note 45, at 132; Florence Passy & Marco Giugni, *Social Networks and Individual Perceptions: Explaining Differential Participation in Social Movements*, 16 Soc. F. 123, 143 (2001) (“[T]he feeling that one’s involvement would matter to the cause at hand is a strong incentive for actually becoming involved.”).

173. See Interview with Patel, *supra* note 54; see also Interview with Plener, *supra* note 115 (describing barriers to recording video).

174. NOVECK, *supra* note 55, at 173.

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routed to the appropriate office. The hotline even gave the caller talking points to use during the call.<sup>175</sup>

As an alternative to this more managed approach, organizations might also consider simply giving users the tools they need and then getting out of their way. For example, organizations might consider the content they provide to the public as less a finished product and more as material that can and should be used and transformed by others. Toward this goal, a website might provide an interface that allows others to build software that accesses, integrates, and manipulates the site's information and functionality. Such an approach would embody what Jonathan Zittrain calls "generativity" because of its capacity "to produce unanticipated change through unfiltered contributions from broad and varied audiences."<sup>176</sup> Common examples of such flexible and dynamic platforms are Google Maps and Facebook Connect. Google Maps provides its mapping functionality to others to include on their sites, while Facebook Connect allows others to create programs that integrate the data of individual Facebook users.<sup>177</sup> In her recent book, Beth Noveck discusses a variety of such "mash-ups" undertaken in the public interest, including iLiveAt (providing local data, such as crime statistics and post office locations for addresses in D.C.), Newsmap (displaying Google News articles sorted by country), and the Tunisian Prison Map (geographically depicting reports of abuses in prisons in Tunisia).<sup>178</sup>

Although only a few individuals may take the initiative to create something that builds on an organization's platform, those individuals that do are likely to create products or functionality that the organization could not have anticipated and which it would not have had the resources to create on its own. Assuming the organization is able to resolve the security and privacy concerns that could be associated with allowing outside programs to access and manipulate data in this way, giving individuals the opportunity to build the things they want and deem necessary can motivate people to get involved.<sup>179</sup> As Beth Noveck explains, "Users need to be able to 'play with' information to make it meaningful and readily perceivable."<sup>180</sup> Martin Vogel, the former project leader for iCan, argues that one of the reasons iCan was not as successful as it might have been was the inflexibility of the site's technology. Vogel maintains that the site should have been built in a more modular fashion—by, for example, providing an application program-

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175. See Interview with Goldbeck, *supra* note 160.

176. ZITTRAIN, *supra* note 102, at 70.

177. For example, a non-Facebook site could build a login function that relies on a user's Facebook password.

178. NOVECK, *supra* note 55, at 109–16.

179. See Interview with Naimark-Rowse, *supra* note 172 (noting that providing individuals with ownership of the goals of a project provides enticement to get involved).

180. Noveck, *supra* note 164.

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ming interface that would allow the creation of software that would interact with the iCan platform.<sup>181</sup>

Individuals may be less interested in taking part in group activities or discussions that are orchestrated or consciously directed toward specific goals because the incentive associated with the creative process is absent. Projects therefore need to either provide individuals with a very specific and limited task or refrain from providing direction and simply wait to see what users create on their own. At the same time, however, even those organizations that get out of the way do not necessarily need to remove themselves entirely from the process. Sites can still provide models for and information about effective organizing and coalition building. New Tactics in Human Rights, for example, provides excellent information about “tactical innovation and strategic thinking” in the context of human rights advocacy drawn from the experience of practitioners around the world.<sup>182</sup>

*Crowdsource the goal.* To the extent an organization chooses to define the objectives of group activity itself, it might also consider employing crowdsourcing mechanisms to bolster individual investment in those goals.<sup>183</sup> For example, Change.org created a website called “Ideas for Change in America” that allowed individuals to propose actions for social change and then vote on the suggestions. The top ten results were announced at the National Press Club and accepted by the head of WhiteHouse.gov for the Obama administration.<sup>184</sup> Kiva’s platform, which allows lenders to choose those to whom they lend, relies on crowdsourcing to determine which projects receive funding. Kiva’s partners select entrepreneurs to feature on the site, but, consistent with Kiva’s philosophy of avoiding judgments about particular projects and “let[ting] the lenders speak,” the lenders themselves determine who will receive their loans.<sup>185</sup>

*Provide context.* It is also important to ensure that a site provides sufficient “context” for social action. According to Josh Levy of Change.org, action for social change will be most successful when it arises out of a particular context, such as a thematic discussion or shared space.<sup>186</sup> Levy explains that Change.org had seen its efforts to promote actions for social change level off over time and concluded that this was in part due to the structure of its site. Prior to its recent redesign, the site had simply allowed individuals to create groups on its main page. This meant, however, that

181. See Interview with Vogel, *supra* note 111.

182. See About the New Tactics in Human Rights Project, <http://www.newtactics.org/en/about> (last visited Apr. 7, 2009).

183. The objective of the group is similar to what Clay Shirky calls the group’s “promise,” or the reason why individuals choose to join the group. SHIRKY, *supra* note 45, at 260.

184. See Interview with Levy, *supra* note 53.

185. See Interview with Ramsey, *supra* note 151. Ramsey describes a situation in which some Kiva members were upset that a loan request for a cock fighting business had been posted on Kiva’s site. Although the request was eventually removed by Kiva’s partner organization, Kiva allowed the posting and encouraged members to discuss their positions on the site. See *id.*

186. Interview with Levy, *supra* note 53. In Levy’s words, “action as a node is meaningless.” *Id.*

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actions were decontextualized, isolated from any community or content that would make them meaningful. In revamping its site, Change.org created issue-specific pages and hired bloggers to write about those issues. The introduction of content about particular issues was aimed at fostering the development of a community around those issues and thereby connecting proposed actions to a substantive and social context. According to Levy, Change.org anticipates that providing this kind of context will lead to more effective actions because actions will become a natural outgrowth of the discussions taking place within that community.<sup>187</sup>

Context may foster more effective actions because of the increased knowledge and investment of those who participate. Actions that are tied to a particular substantive or social context are more likely to be proposed and undertaken by individuals who are knowledgeable about and invested in the issue, either because they learn about the issue through the substantive context of the site or because their interest in the issue leads them to participate in the community. As a result, those contributing are more likely to have carefully considered what kinds of actions are necessary and to have crafted actions that will be appropriate and effective in light of the project's needs. Actions that appear appropriate and effective are more likely to attract others who will be committed and cooperative participants.

Actions that are decontextualized, in contrast, are more likely to be proposed by individuals with less commitment to or understanding of the issue. Although well-meaning, such actions may be vague and lack substantive grounding. For example, one action proposed on Change.org prior to the site's redesign asked participants to generate ideas on how to empower women in Africa in the struggle against HIV/AIDS.<sup>188</sup> Although a number of people signed up, no ideas were generated; one individual wrote "How? Is there any way to address the issue in the region?"<sup>189</sup> Removed from any discussion about women's rights or the specific challenges at the intersection of HIV and gender, those viewing the action likely lacked the knowledge on which to draw in proposing ideas or the commitment to researching possible responses.

In part, context may also be important because of the culture it creates. Although technology can help foster collective action (and poor technology can hinder it), technology alone is not enough; in addition, there needs to be the right message and underlying commitment.<sup>190</sup> On social activism

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187. *See id.*

188. *See* Empower African Women to Halt the Spread of the HIV Virus, [http://www.change.org/actions?category\\_id=0&city=&event\\_id=18233&keyword=empower&state=0](http://www.change.org/actions?category_id=0&city=&event_id=18233&keyword=empower&state=0) (last visited June 5, 2008) (between research and publication of this article, Change.org's website was redesigned and this content has been removed).

189. *Id.*

190. As one interviewee explained, people became involved in Obama's campaign not because of his use of technology but because they believed in his candidacy. *See* Interview with Levy, *supra* note 53; *see also* Interview with Verclas, *supra* note 162 (stating that collective action is not spontaneous but requires an existing constituency that is ready to take part).

sites, providing context for users' interactions—for example, in the form of a blog or discussion board—would be a way of creating a feeling of shared community interest or common culture, thereby bolstering users' investment in the activities of that community.<sup>191</sup> The establishment of regulatory norms and processes to enforce those norms can also play a role in creating culture of cooperation.<sup>192</sup> Whether through conversation or regulation, processes that encourage individuals to contribute in cooperative ways may also foster collective action.

#### CONCLUSION

A model of networked activism seeks to democratize human rights advocacy by providing a framework that can be used to broadly mobilize individuals on human rights issues and encourage them to participate fully in the work. In so doing, this model attempts to mediate the tension between mobilization and participation that arises when efforts to broadly mobilize the public provide individuals with only limited opportunities to take part in defining the goals and methods of the group.

The trade-off between participation and mobilization should not seem unfamiliar. As groups increase in size, it becomes less feasible for everyone to participate meaningfully. Democracies have developed several techniques to allow participation while nonetheless accommodating broad mobilization. Networked activism seeks to take advantage of one of these techniques—namely, federalism. Federalism allows both participation and mobilization by creating small units that are bound together in a larger republic. Like federalism, networked activism emphasizes the connections between small groups, taking the group as its fundamental unit of measurement and providing mechanisms for those groups to connect with one another.

What, if any, consequences will the greater participation of ordinary individuals in human rights advocacy have for traditional human rights organizations? Several interviewees expressed the view that technologies of mobilization simply provide new channels for communication. Despite the importance of having a presence in those channels, these technologies are viewed by many not as “game changers” but rather as new tools for an old problem of communication.<sup>193</sup> As one interviewee emphasized, technology

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191. See Interview with Schoenborn, *supra* note 111 (noting that the content of a site can encourage people to respond in a particular way and can reflect conversation happening there).

192. See David A. Hoffman & Salil Mehra, *Wikitruth Through Wikioorder*, 59 EMORY L.J. (forthcoming 2010) (on file with author) (describing the way in which Wikipedia's dispute resolution process coordinates social production by “weeding out” those users who are unlikely to cooperate and “weeding in” or encouraging cooperation in others).

193. See Interview with Goldbeck, *supra* note 160; see also Interview with Schoenborn, *supra* note 111; Interview with Daly et al., *supra* note 111.

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is simply an additional language that human rights organizations can use to convey their message in an engaging and compelling fashion.<sup>194</sup>

Yet the transformative potential of networked activism lies not in the technology it uses but in the actions it fosters. The real challenge to human rights organizations is the potential assumption, by amateur activists, of actions previously undertaken by human rights professionals. Although none of those interviewed for this article indicated the existence of tension between established organizations and efforts to foster citizen activism, broad mobilization does carry the potential for conflict. Established human rights organizations have invested time and energy in establishing their position and reputation with governments and the public, and the introduction of new voices could have a destabilizing effect.<sup>195</sup> If the involvement of ordinary individuals in reporting and publicizing human rights abuses continues to grow, organizations specializing in such activities may well find themselves challenged by these new entrants.

There are many functions, however, that cannot so easily be taken up by amateur activists. Fact-finding, for example, may be particularly difficult for ordinary citizens to undertake. Although they can contribute to fact-finding efforts in important and significant ways, they may not have the resources, expertise, or reputation necessary to produce credible and persuasive reports of human rights abuses.<sup>196</sup> Similarly, ordinary individuals may not have the contacts or insider know-how necessary to lobby effectively for legislative change. As one interviewee explained, even when a grassroots effort is able to get the phones of a legislator ringing, there are other realpolitik pressures that might prevent the government from acting. In such situations, the high-level contacts and insider knowledge of an organization such as Human Rights Watch are invaluable.<sup>197</sup>

Further, it is unlikely that amateur activists will pose the same type of challenge to human rights organizations that bloggers pose to newspapers because of the different business models of each industry. Human rights organizations depend on a variety of sources of funding, including foundations and individual donors. Amateur activism is unlikely to affect directly those sources of funding in the way that Internet news sites might cause individuals to cancel their newspaper subscriptions. Indeed, several interviewees mentioned that human rights organizations are now fulfilling some of the functions of investigative journalists, since they are increasingly bet-

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194. See Interview with Naimark-Rowse, *supra* note 172.

195. A recent investigation by NBC concerning possible perpetrators of human rights violations illustrates the tension that could arise between established organizations and new market entrants. NBC has launched a program that will televise confrontations with individuals accused of involvement in human rights abuses. Human Rights Watch has expressed concern about the sufficiency of the evidence on which NBC relied to accuse an individual of taking part in the Rwandan genocide. See Brian Stelter, *On Trail of War Criminals, NBC News Is Criticized*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 11, 2009, at A1.

196. See Land, *supra* note 84, at 12–15.

197. See Interview with Naimark-Rowse, *supra* note 172.

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ter positioned to fund this kind of research.<sup>198</sup> With time, however, projects based on citizen activism may provide more competition for established organizations. The capacity of citizen activism to serve as a vehicle for experimentation and innovation may attract attention from institutional and individual donors alike and thus increase competition for funding.

There are several ways in which human rights organizations and citizen initiatives can cooperate to take advantage of the strengths of both. First, professional organizations can use information generated by amateurs to identify emerging international issues and trends. The BBC, for example, was able to identify topics of national interest for its news coverage by monitoring issues around which groups were organizing on iCan and looking for common concerns. Human rights organizations could use a similar system to guide their reporting and inform their long-term priorities.<sup>199</sup>

Second, human rights organizations with policy expertise can establish partnerships with grassroots initiatives on issues where public support can play a role in achieving legislative change. Organizations with lobbying expertise can provide insight into which decision-makers to target—such as trade ministries on climate change, for example—and how to frame a message most effectively for those recipients.<sup>200</sup> Such coalitions have become increasingly common: Human Rights Watch, for example, partnered with Avaaz on a campaign concerning the Congo. HRW sent Avaaz the relevant information and Avaaz created an advertising campaign around that information.<sup>201</sup>

Third, human rights organizations can, with appropriate safeguards, make their content available to the public. Individuals might use the organization’s content (such as its research, documents, or reporting) in a variety of ways—for example, to map out human rights violations or solicit additional information about the details of incidents. An organization might also make information publicly accessible and rely on users to conduct a review of the information that the organization could not otherwise accomplish in a timely manner. The website Talking Points Memo, for example, posted White House emails in its document collection database; readers of the site were among those who discovered that White House officials in the Bush administration had used email accounts owned by the

198. See, e.g., Interview with Daly et al., *supra* note 111; Interview with Kelly, *supra* note 111; Interview with Schoenborn, *supra* note 111.

199. See Interview with Vogel, *supra* note 111. Human rights organizations also may be able to use information generated by amateurs in their reporting. The conditions under which this might be possible are discussed elsewhere. See Land, *supra* note 84, at 15–23 (proposing several participatory models for fact-finding).

200. See Interview with Naimark-Rowse, *supra* note 172.

201. Interview with Daly et al., *supra* note 111. Avaaz pursues partnerships with organizations that have relevant expertise for almost all of its campaigns in order to help ensure that its contemplated actions are useful and productive. Interview with Patel, *supra* note 54.

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Republican National Committee to conduct White House business.<sup>202</sup> Although it is impossible to anticipate all of the possible ways in which information might be used, this is precisely the benefit of allowing content to be transformed by users. Organizations may not necessarily be able to predict, much less implement, all of the applications that could contribute to the protection of human rights.

Although we often hear undifferentiated praise for the ability of technology to “democratize” everything from activism to commerce to China, this article concludes that the picture is necessarily more mixed. If by democratization we mean only broad mobilization, this may indeed be the case. Yet such mobilization may come at the price of meaningful participation. The insights of network theory, however, indicate that this trade-off is not absolute and that there may be ways to foster both participation and mobilization through the approach of networked activism. As is the case in any industry when the barriers to entry are reduced, the outcomes of a surge of participation in human rights activism are unclear. Peer-produced activism is unlikely to entirely displace the functions of professional organizations, but it has the potential to complement them in important ways. Evaluating the opportunities and challenges for these technologies in the context of human rights is a critical first step toward setting funding priorities and developing legal and advocacy initiatives that capitalize on the strengths of these new technologies in advancing human rights objectives.

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202. See Interview with Schoenborn, *supra* note 111; Paul Kiel, CREW: White House Breaking Records Law? (Mar. 15, 2007), [http://tpmmuckraker.talkingpointsmemo.com/2007/03/crew\\_white\\_house\\_breaking\\_reco.php](http://tpmmuckraker.talkingpointsmemo.com/2007/03/crew_white_house_breaking_reco.php); Evading Investigation Through GWB43.com, [http://www.correntewire.com/evading\\_investigation\\_through\\_gwb43\\_com/](http://www.correntewire.com/evading_investigation_through_gwb43_com/) (Mar. 3, 2007, 13:27); Rove’s “Dirty Tricks” Email Servers, <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2007/3/4/135310/0946/> (Mar. 17, 2007, 11:19 PDT).



