After discussing the theoretical conflicts inherent in the measurement of human rights violations and in the formalization of data in computerized systems, this study examines a model of information flow within human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in order to make recommendations about the design of appropriate data standards.

The fact-finding practices and 2001 annual reports of Amnesty International, Freedom House, and Human Rights Watch were examined using discourse analysis. These findings were used to make inferences about how these NGOs analyze, organize, and record data (after fact-finding and before reporting). One current data standard was examined to see how it might support or hinder these intermediate steps. The author proposes that a data standard using a minimal set of elements, rather than a greater set that allows for wide interpretive variation, might permit human rights NGOs to exchange data on individual violations without impeding their distinctive rhetorical goals.
INSIDE THE BLACK BOX: FITTING DATA INPUTS TO COMMUNICATIVE OUTPUTS IN HUMAN RIGHTS INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

by
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INTRODUCTION

In the field of human rights, in order to make comparisons among states, observe trends over time, or even take responsive action, a means of measuring human rights violations is necessary. The basic questions that must be answered when describing a specific event where human rights may have been violated are: What happened? Who did what to whom? What actions were taken in response? Classification systems are established for answering these questions and for information management—victim vs. perpetrator, individual vs. state, international vs. local law. However, the definitions contained within these systems tend to be culturally or situationally biased. Ultimately, data are collected and analyzed using whatever definitions are available, but lives are literally at stake in these epistemological decisions.

Arguably, every organization and state, perhaps even every person, could reach a different decision about the meaning its data should carry, prioritizing different facts as it works to craft a story of What Really Happened. The purpose of this study was to gain perspective on how widely these stories vary among the most well recognized human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the world: Amnesty International, Freedom House, and Human Rights Watch. By tracing the path of similar data gathered in the field by all three agencies and comparing the end products—annual reports released to the general public—I attempt to garner insight into the intervening steps, where the data are analyzed and recorded in proprietary and closely guarded information systems. Upon finding that these NGOs’ reports do, in fact, offer varying interpretations
of similar “facts,” I discuss the current state of standards for data sharing among human rights organizations, and how well these standards do (or might) support the creation and maintenance of diverse interpretations.

Current and future standards are discussed in light of two bodies of theoretical work. First, critiques of human rights measurement suggest a tension between offering a complete, generalized picture of worldwide events and a contextual, local understanding of individual events. Human rights NGOs attempt to collect data that can serve both purposes, striking a balance between abstraction and context that suits the needs and mission of their organization. Second, the same tension is discussed in the information science literature, as an epic battle between utopian and anti-utopian perspectives on computerization and formalization. Because the ultimate rhetorical work of human rights NGOs appears to be highly contextualized and idiosyncratic (based on these findings), I suggest that data standards created for purposes of exchange among NGOs should include only a few of the least contestable elements, which would allow organizations to add their own layers of context to the framework subsequently.
BACKGROUND AND THEORY

On the Problems of Human Rights Information

Human rights gained international attention after the atrocities of World War II. The interest sparked by the war eventually led to the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document that was approved by a consensus of 48 nations in 1948 (Cooper, 2001). The “universality” of this document was reaffirmed at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, where 172 states adopted the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (Cerna, 1994). Today, after over half a century, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) has been translated into over 300 languages.

The UDHR is comprised of over 30 articles, each affirming a different civil, political, social or cultural right, such as:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. [Article 1]
No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. [Article 5]
Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. [Article 18]
Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family. [Article 25:1]

(Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948)

Some of these rights are rarely met by every nation that adopted the declaration; for example, not even in the United States does every citizen enjoy a “standard of living
adequate for the health and well-being of himself.” However, disputes over the
universality of these rights do not end there. Many non-Western nations say that these so-
called “universal” rights overemphasize Western values, and particularly the rights of
individuals over collective rights (Cerna, 1994). These arguments are especially bitter
where cultural rights, such as religion, the status of women, and family planning, are
concerned. For example, Article 18 guarantees the right of a person to choose and change
his religion, which is expressly forbidden in the Muslim faith by the Koran (Cerna,
1994). Issues of sexuality are also hotly contested. Even organizations with well defined
internal mission statements face disagreements when they operate on a worldwide scale:
the Latin American offices of Amnesty International, an international non-governmental
organization, are dominated by religious conservatives who did not believe that Amnesty
should fight to secure the release of people imprisoned because of homosexuality,
although unjust imprisonment is one of Amnesty’s most prominent causes (Baehr, 2000).
Even among Western democracies, differences in interpretation arise. The legality of
abortion, for example, differs among nations that appear to support similar standards of
rights (Baehr, 2000).

Beyond the UDHR, then, several categories of human rights exist at varying
levels of granularity. First, there are local laws and customs, which vary widely based on
regional cultural norms. Second, there are international accords, which may or may not
reflect the local values of all the signatory states. But ultimately, and most importantly,
scholars suggest that a consensus may be emerging on abuses of what are termed “non-
derogable” rights, such as freedom from genocide, slavery, torture, and disappearances.
Many feel that even diverse Asian and Western states “can agree on minimum standards
of civilized behavior” (Cerna, 1994, “The Challenge to Universality” section, ¶ 4). It is these non-derogable rights that most international human rights agencies are fighting to maintain worldwide.

Peter Baehr, a human rights scholar and Professor Emeritus of Human Rights at Utrecht University, argues that the “debate [over human rights monitoring] has an empirical as well a [sic] strongly emotional and normative character” (2000, p. 27). The empirical question is to investigate whether these “universally” adopted rights are, in fact, generally accepted and practiced everywhere. The normative question is whether they should be. This paper will focus on the former, empirical question. How can one accurately determine whether and to what extent violations of non-derogable rights are occurring?

In order to answer this question—as well as to make comparisons among states, observe trends over time, or even take responsive action—some means of measuring human rights violations is necessary. Cross-national and time-sensitive assessments can influence the level and type of foreign aid a state will receive, the reparations available to victims, and future policy changes. The basic questions that must be answered when describing a specific event where human rights may have been violated are:

- What happened?
- Who did what to whom?
- What actions were taken in response?

Huggins (2000) outlines two main approaches to gathering the kind of
information that can address these basic questions, **stockpiling** and **storytelling**. The difference between these is like the distinction between aggregate statistics and case studies, with the attendant benefits and drawbacks of each. Stockpiling “emphasizes the collection and dissemination of facts about atrocity” and focuses on “assembling statistically visible evidence on violence” and “has implications for social action” (p. 51) While stockpiling data is quantitative in nature and manageable, it can lead to homogenization, where only certain kinds of victims are counted among the statistics. Stockpiling is counterbalanced by storytelling, which “focuses on how people experience the past by producing social memory out of their everyday stories about systemic violence” (p. 53) While storytelling provides personal details that stockpiling misses, it denies that there is a power structure inherent in human rights violations, i.e., that perpetrators usually have more power, and are backed by political machinations that operate on a meta-level above the particular individuals involved. Stories come across as person-to-person conflicts, rather than David-and-Goliath instances of systematic state-sponsored suppression.

Currently, most studies and organizations attempt to answer questions about the presence and extent of human rights abuse using three statistical (stockpiling) measurements, either independently or in some combination:

- **Intensity** describes the level of violations, or the frequency of occurrence
- **Scope** describes the form of the violation, or the actual type of act that occurred
- **Range** describes the person(s) affected by the event
Intensity is the most commonly used indicator, particularly as a means of comparison across contexts. Measuring intensity or frequency first requires that you decide what constitutes an “occurrence” of the thing you are counting. In Argentina, between 1976 and 1983, citizens commonly “disappeared,” or were “kidnapped by gangs of armed men, often in the middle of the night from their family homes. […] Disappearance was followed by forced removal to clandestine detention centers, extensive torture, and, almost always, murder” (Brysk, 1994, “Human Rights in Argentina” section, ¶ 2). However, the focus of post-1983 national investigations was on unresolved cases. Incidents where the disappeared was executed or reappeared in prison after many years were therefore not counted as disappearances by the government, but were counted by human rights agencies. The final counts of disappeared victims ranged from the government’s official tally of 9000 to as high as 30,000 (Brysk, 1994). Obviously, nuances in definition dramatically affect the eventual outcome.

Scope, in a quantitative setting, addresses the issue of whether certain types of human rights crimes are worse than others, and if so, exactly how much worse. A study by Charles Humana (1992) attempted to address this problem in his compilation of human rights scores by assigning relative weights three times higher to the seven crimes he considered most severe. While scholars acknowledge Humana’s work as pioneering and a step in the right direction (Gupta, 1994), the weighting he uses is arbitrary and biased by his personal and cultural history. A more recent study (Gupta, 1994) used a statistical technique known as discriminant analysis to “define the continuum [of abuse severity] with the help of the obvious cases at the extreme ends” (“Defining the Methodology” section, ¶ 12). The study found, for example, that torture was a better
predictor of a country having a poor overall human rights record than access to birth control. The study also found that “there is no statistical basis to support the main argument of the apologists of cultural relativism” (Summary, ¶ 4). In other words, the countries with the worst scores for the acts with the highest weight (thought to be the most universally “wrong”) also had the worst records overall.

Range also provokes questions about relative worth. Specifically, it can seem that in some cases of human rights abuse, certain types of lives count more than others. The crime may be considered worse depending on who has been victimized; for example, the recent kidnapping and murder of American journalist Daniel Pearl prompted widespread international outcry, far more than for the torture of Afghan civilians under Taliban rule. Some causes evoke more organized protest due to the type of victim: in the Argentinean case, parents and grandparents were mobilized to fight when countless children were kidnapped from their murdered mothers and sold into illegal adoptions. Both these cases aroused more anger and action than does the killing of some poor, single, adult man with no international prestige. When tallying the range of human rights abuses, then, questions of the victims’ fame and passivity may play a role.

Not only do these three common statistical measures introduce questions of subjectivity, but the very notion “victimhood” does as well. In her article deconstructing the labels assigned to participants in human rights cases, Huggins (2000) points out that it was common in many Latin American countries for agents of the state and some citizens alike to distinguish between the innocent victims of system terror, i.e., those who had been mistakenly and/or unfairly tortured, and the violent activist political “subversives” who [...] presumably deserved what they had gotten. [emphasis mine] (“Deconstructing Status” section, ¶ 1)

Deciding who fills the role of “perpetrator” is often no less clear, as demonstrated by the
aphorism, “One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.” The current political situation between Israel and Palestine, where both states claim that the other is the perpetrator (of massacres in refugee camps and of terrorist bombing of civilians, respectively), illustrates that in many situations, the good guys and the bad guys are indistinguishable, or at least related. Huggins (2000) further suggests that perpetrators and victims should more rightly be seen as opposite ends of a continuum, and that perpetrators achieve status closer and closer to one extreme of that continuum through a series of training exercises, orders, and degradation rituals.

Finally, the gross collection of data in itself poses a problem. With so many conflicting views on what constitutes a violation, how to weight the severity, and who is a victim, trustworthy sources are hard to come by. Many organizations rely on interviews with victims and their families; mainstream news and media sources; and information from the controlling government of the state or community being investigated. Each of these sources brings a potential bias to the collection of data for the statistical measure mentioned above, though several sources taken together might improve the trustworthiness of the findings through triangulation.

Tying these delicate balancing acts together, one human rights theorist maintains:

What must be avoided is a dependence on statistics alone in an area such as human rights, where needed data either are not available or are not meaningful unless interpreted within a historical and political context. (Goldstein, 1992, p. 54) [emphasis mine]

On the Nature of Computerized Information

The tension between context and abstraction has also played itself out in the information science literature, albeit in different terms. In an early treatise on the theory
of information, Fred Dretske (1983) argues that learning is a process of further abstracting and classifying those elements that we call information, so that these elements transcend their singular “analog” form and become “digitalized” into a composite whole (p. 61). This is precisely the aim of human rights agencies, which attempt to abstract information from beyond its local context into a more complete picture of progress and setbacks in human rights abuses throughout the world. Joseph Goguen (1997) characterizes the dichotomy differently, as a process of transcendence from “wet” to “dry” information. For Goguen, “wet” information is fully context sensitive, whereas “dry” information—or the ultimate goal of rational transcendence, objective truth—is fully abstracted and can be understood by anyone anywhere at any time. Both of these information theorists’ ideas are reminiscent of Karl Popper’s famous theory of describing worlds of knowledge (1972). To Popper, “world 3” is “the world of the logical contents of books, libraries, computer memories, and suchlike” (p. 74). World 1 is the physical world, and world 2 is our personal understanding of it, or our conscious experience. It is world 3 that constitutes objective knowledge, by which Popper means Truth with a capital T: world 3 is “autonomous” and its elements can exist prior to their discovery by humans. World 3, in a sense, is the holy grail of rationalism, a world where truth can be said to exist independently and eternally, an abstraction that transcends the concrete reality of world 1 and the bias of world 2's human comprehension.

Within information science, there is a vigorous ongoing debate about the benefits and drawbacks of the “digitalizing” or “drying out” of information, particularly in relation to the computerization of data that was previously communicated orally or in writing. Rob Kling (1996) characterizes the debate as a battle between utopian and anti-
utopian narratives of computerization. The utopian “story” works to promote the project of transcendence toward dry information and toward Truth. From this viewpoint, which is largely accepted by most organizations, computerization is progress, in and of itself: more abstract and more formalized means more efficient and closer to the truth. Other researchers are creating an anti-utopian story, in which abstraction leads not to enlightenment and productivity but to alienation. Theorist Mark Poster (1990) offers perhaps the darkest anti-utopian vision, arguing that computerization allows us to transcend the usual constraints of space and time. In Poster's mind, though, such transcendence serves only to strain the representative relationship between words and the things they signify, so that the subjects of electronic databases are disembodied, subverted, and ultimately dehumanized. Murphy (2000) offers a sociologist’s perspective on the field of computerization, claiming that computer space is meant to be a disembodied region where complexities and interpretation are reduced or eliminated. However, Murphy believes that this approach cannot hold: computerized information cannot and should not escape the contamination of perception and language.

As with many debates, the solution may lie somewhere in between. Computerization, especially coupled with standards for data storage, can support more efficient communication and decrease workloads on individual organizations. However, the worries of the anti-utopians cannot be dismissed lightly, particularly in a context-sensitive field like human rights, where the work is about real people in real pain in highly idiosyncratic situations. The wet-dry debate of information science is reminiscent of the storytelling-stockpiling debate suggested by Huggins (2000), and the struggle, by whatever name, plays out in the daily work of human rights NGOs.
THE INFORMATION PRACTICES OF HUMAN RIGHTS NGOS

Despite these ambiguities, organizations still attempt to collect statistics and tell stories about human rights abuses, in the hopes that all humans will eventually enjoy at least a minimum standard of safety. But what data practices do human rights NGOs actually use to do this? How do they place the data they gather into an appropriate context, in order to evoke appropriate responses? HURIDOCS, a decentralized global network dedicated to increasing the efficiency and capacity of human rights information work, developed a model (Figure 1) to explain the flow of information within a human rights NGO (Dueck, Guzman, & Verstappen, 2001).

Figure 1.

Model of information flow in a human rights organization (from Dueck et al 2001, p. 22)
The model includes six steps: intake of initial information, fact-finding, analysis to arrive at findings, organizing and recording, analysis of trends and patterns, and intervention and communication. According to the model, the first three steps typically occur in chronological order; the final three steps may happen simultaneously and cyclically. At every stage, from gathering to final analysis, some information that is seen to be important is kept and propagated, while other bits are lost or dropped. What eventually remains, while ostensibly empirical data from a trusted authority source, carries implicit value judgments. Some researchers have suggested that sharing data gathered from different sources may result in a more complete (and perhaps less biased?) picture:

Major improvement in our knowledge of human rights abuses could be obtained if those social scientists who are interested in empirically studying this phenomena would [...] cooperate more closely together in developing comprehensive data sets. (McNitt, 1988, p. 99)

HURIDOCS attempts to facilitate this kind of data sharing through the use of electronic standards for recording human rights information. Its Events Standard Formats (Dueck et al., 2001; Dueck, Guzman, Verstappen, & Cifuentes, 2000) help organizations share computerized human rights data after it has been recorded, in order to disperse the burden of fact-finding and increase the speed and accuracy of communication.

Theoretically, it might be possible to follow the evolution of human rights information as it traces a path from initial fact-finding to final communication to the public within a single organization. Practically, however, this is not entirely feasible. For political and security reasons, most human rights organizations are willing to publicly share information about only some parts of their information management processes. In order to gain credibility and authority with their audiences, most NGOs offer at least a
rudimentary description of their fact-finding methods. They are, of course, willing to share a great deal of information at the end of the process (steps 5 and 6): for many organizations, the final communication products, in the form of press releases, letter-writing campaigns, and annual reports, are the bread and butter of their work. But what happens in between? In fact, the two middle steps of the information flow described above amount to a “black box” for the outside observer. Practices related to steps three and four of the model are closely guarded among human rights NGOs; access to their documentation must necessarily be limited to protect the confidentiality of their informants, the security of their records, and the continuation of their work.

Since the middle steps cannot be directly observed, the next best approach is to triangulate from what data are available—to describe the middle by starting from both ends. In the remainder of this paper, I will analyze publicly available documents about the gathering and disseminating phases of human rights NGOs in order to infer more about the nature of this “black box” and the kinds of computerized information systems that might support the recording of human rights data. The HURIDOCS model of human rights information management will be used as a framework to examine inputs and outcomes for the three best known human rights agencies operating on an international scale: Amnesty International, Freedom House, and Human Rights Watch. Initial research has indicated that intake and fact-finding practices (steps 1 and 2) happen more or less similarly across these human rights NGOs. Given that the agencies start from similar points, I will analyze instances of communication and analysis of trends (steps 5 and 6) from each agency, in order to make predictions about the analysis of findings and organizing/recording (steps 3 and 4). Specifically, I will discuss the following questions:
1. The relationship between fact-finding practices and outcomes for human rights NGOs. What do the relationships imply about organization and recording (since we cannot directly examine these practices)?

2. The Events Standard Formats for organization and recording supplied by HURIDOCS. Do the formats support the varied outcomes evident in the discourse of individual NGOs? How could they be improved?

Methods

This study is a case study in scope. The three NGOs chosen for study are the best known human rights agencies operating on an international scale: Amnesty International (AI), Freedom House, and Human Rights Watch (HRW).

Amnesty International (AI) was founded in 1961 by British lawyer Peter Benenson. Today the organization has more than one million members, subscribers and regular donors in more than 140 countries. Its nerve centre is the International Secretariat in London, with more than 410 staff members and over 120 volunteers from more than 50 countries around the world. (Amnesty International, 2000, ¶ 3)

Freedom House is a clear voice for democracy and freedom around the world. Founded nearly sixty years ago by Eleanor Roosevelt, Wendell Willkie, and other Americans concerned with the mounting threats to peace and democracy, Freedom House has been a vigorous proponent of democratic values and a steadfast opponent of dictatorships of the far left and the far right. (Freedom House, 2000, ¶ 1)

Human Rights Watch started in 1978 as Helsinki Watch, to monitor the compliance of Soviet bloc countries with the human rights provisions of the landmark Helsinki Accords. In the 1980’s, Americas Watch was set up to counter the notion that human rights abuses by one side in the war in Central America were somehow more tolerable than abuses by the other side. The organization grew to cover other regions of the world, until all the “Watch” committees were united in 1988 to form Human Rights Watch. (Human Rights Watch, 2002a ¶ 3)

For each NGO, two kinds of content were analyzed: statements from the agencies’ publications about their fact-finding practices, and publicly available annual reports on
the state of human rights in individual countries. Additionally, I analyzed the structure and organization of information within the standard format for events developed by HURIDOCS, an umbrella organization working, in part, to develop data standards for the dissemination and sharing of information related to specific human rights violations.

**Fact-finding practices:** Information about fact-finding practices was most commonly drawn from the Frequently Asked Questions section on the websites of the NGOs I studied. Some secondary sources on Amnesty International were also available and included in the analysis. While observation would have been the ideal method to learn about fact-finding practices, the FAQs from each agency can be seen as a kind of self-reporting method. Because the NGOs describe their methods in order to build accountability and credibility (in other words, to convince a sometimes skeptical public that their work is valid), one can assume that what they report is largely truthful and complete. Additionally, using FAQs allowed me to expand the range of the study, instead of limiting myself only to those countries and NGOs in which I had observed fact-finding practices.

**Annual reports:** Discourse analysis was used to examine several sections of annual reports from the three NGOs. As a method, discourse analysis is qualitative and highly particularistic, but my aim was to look for systematic patterns (similarities and differences) in the way that human rights organizations represented their work and situations of abuse. Over repeated readings of the text, I developed and refined categories of intention and purpose that were supported in the narratives of each group’s construction of the facts.

The annual reports cover events from 2001 in countries around the world.
Sections related to five countries were chosen for analysis, including Argentina, China, Israel, Kenya, and the UK. The countries vary along several dimensions, such as geographic location, religion, ethnicity, level of democratization, and relationship with Western nations; however, the sample is not meant to be fully representative of all nations or of all discourse from these NGOs. The sections analyzed comprised approximately 11,000 words each from Amnesty International and Freedom House and 19,000 from Human Rights Watch (over half of which were devoted to China and Israel). Reports from the U.S. Department of State were considered for inclusion as a counterpoint, but I believe that the work of NGOs is qualitatively different because they purport to be impartial, i.e., not tied to a state or a political organization. The goal was to see if differences exist among the discourses of organizations that could arguably be considered similar in nature.

Annual reports were chosen as the unit of analysis because they represent what is probably the most “distilled” form of human rights measurement available. Additionally, annual reports are one of the few forms of communication that all three agencies shared in common. The reports contain only what is left after every imaginable step of data filtering and analysis has been completed. An alternative analysis might have used statistical tables, but I chose reports because I am specifically interested in how these organizations craft compelling and persuasive stories. In what ways do they characterize nations, government officials, and victims (i.e., present them as characters or actors)? What trends do they argue are evident in the data from each country? In other words, how do they enact the last steps of the HURIDOCS model?

**Events Standard Formats:** In analyzing the content of the Events Standard
Formats (ESFs) for human rights violations outlined by HURIDOCS, I used two sources: (1) the manual describing the formats in detail (Dueck et al., 2001), and (2) a freeware Microsoft Access program distributed by HURIDOCS that implements the ESFs in database form (Dueck et al., 2000). The analysis involved classifying the data elements according to whether they were qualitative or quantitative. Qualitative elements were those that allowed free text entry; all other items were labeled as quantitative in some form or another. For example, elements that exploited various controlled vocabularies through the use of menus were considered to be categorical quantitative data. The qualitative elements were analyzed for the length of the available entry space. The quantitative elements were further examined to determine the type of authority control, if any, provided by the system.

Limitations: As noted above, the primary limitation of this study is that I could not directly examine the analysis and recording practices at the headquarters of Amnesty International, Freedom House, and Human Rights Watch, due to time and security constraints. However, I believe that reverse-engineering the processes (so to speak) by looking at the variation in inputs and outcomes for a controlled range of settings was the best available alternative. As a case study, the study is also limited in its scope. The results could be bolstered by studying other kinds of communication products (e.g., news briefs) and including other NGOs and government agencies of varying size and purpose. The cases selected, though, provide a strong indication that such an extensive investigation is worth undertaking.

I did not determine the extent to which the HURIDOCS Events Standard Formats are used in the three NGOs I studied; my tentative guess is that they are not used widely
throughout these agencies’ global networks, but might be used in smaller local NGOs that lack significant information management experience. In any case, the intent of this study was not to analyze the actual impact of these particular standards on the practices of these particular NGOs, but to characterize the middle steps of the information flow model in a general way, and then to examine how one example of a current data standard engages that theoretical characterization. Therefore, the paper should not be read as a critique of how well the ESFs suit the purposes of these three organizations; instead, it is an examination of how computerized formats might generally support the rhetorical transformations to which human rights organizations subject their data.

Gathering Information

The first two steps in the HURIDOCS model of human rights information management are “Intake of Initial Information” and “Fact-Finding,” or what I will together call gathering. AI, HRW, and Freedom House all use several diverse sources to gain the most complete picture of a human rights situation. All three agencies interview informants in the countries they investigate; all three also rely on published materials and interviews from other human rights organizations, local newspapers, and government sources. AI, however, is one of the only NGOs that attends the trials of the people it investigates (Poe, Carey, & Wazquez, 2001).

On the surface, fact-finding practices do not appear to vary much among these organizations, all of which operate on a global scale and under extreme time pressures. The information gathered includes individual testimony from victims, additional testimony from human rights experts and investigators, popular and trade publications, legal and legislative proceedings, and even (perhaps especially) state-sanctioned
messages (Amnesty International, 2003; Freedom House, 2002a; Freedom House, 2002b; Human Rights Watch, 2002a). Due to the limitations of the data, it would be impossible to state that the fact-finding practices are identical. However, with the exceptions of the trials of victims, the three NGOs report similar categories of practice: they monitor the same kinds of sources and interview the same kinds of individuals.

Analyzing Trends and Disseminating Information

Given that steps 1 and 2, intake and fact-finding, appear to be largely similar among the three organizations, my investigation turned to the output at steps 5 and 6. What becomes of the data at the other end of the cycle, after it has been processed, filtered, and reconstructed to fit preferred forms of communication? How do the organizations weave an enormous number of disparate facts into a cohesive narrative?

Before describing the differences among the reports, the common threads should be highlighted. First, the three organizations all use a combination of the three standard violations measurements, intensity, scope and range. Each agency addressed the scope of problems in each country by presenting reports of numerous types of violations, often explicitly broken out by category. Intensity tended to be addressed within these specific categories, rather than across categories or on a country-wide level:

Around 200 Falun Gong practitioners allegedly died in custody as a result of torture. (Amnesty International, 2002) ¹

A survey carried out by a women's rights group states that more than 49 women were murdered by their spouses in 1998 alone, a 79 percent increase in cases since 1995. (Freedom House & Karatnycky, 2002)

Finally, the range of victims of all three organizations included activists, political figures, journalists, and everyday citizens. They varied in the prominence given to the stories
surrounding different kinds of figures—Amnesty International emphasizes the “little
guy” more so than its counterparts, for example—but they do all attempt to paint a
picture of violations and victims that are systemic, from the vocal minority of famous
victims who are likely to be noticed and persecuted, to the innocent unknowns trying in
vain to live non-politicized lives.

Also, all three NGOs call on a discourse of innocence when it comes to civilians,
giving the populace the benefit of the doubt. Descriptions of demonstrations and other
forms of civil disobedience are most commonly preceded by the word “peaceful”: “Police
used violence to disperse peaceful demonstrations by human rights groups, opposition
politicians, environmental activists and others” (Amnesty International, 2002). This is
true even when the events are surrounded by violence; in its China report, for example,
Freedom House offers the bizarre and discordant account, “Most Uighur independence
activities appear to be peaceful, although armed groups have carried out several
bombings and assassinations” (Freedom House & Karatnycky, 2002). The NGOs, as
might also be true of mass media in democratized nations, seem more willing to play up
the violent reactions of police and the military than to question the intent or nature of
civilian measures.

When such measures are questionable, outside causes are provided as explanatory
mechanisms. Here, for example, Freedom House maintains that widespread rioting in
Argentina was in fact caused by a fiscal policy decision:

De la Rua ordered that limits on cash withdrawals from banks be established to stop a run on Argentina’s banking system, but the move sparked widespread protests. Within days, massive spontaneous demonstrations by housewives from the middle class—the most important sector of the government coalition’s base—were joined by the rioting and looting of supermarkets in poorer districts around the country […]. (Amnesty International, 2002)
At worst, citizens are “stone-throwing demonstrators” (Human Rights Watch, 2002b); even then, police fire on them and kill a thirteen-year-old boy. Citizens may be associated with violence, but they do not share in its perpetuation without provocation. Rather, violence is thrust upon them.

This points to a larger underlying (and unstated) agreement among the NGOs: human rights violations cannot be committed by a person (unless she is serving in an official capacity) or even by a group of people. By definition, human rights violations are problems of systems and officialdom, not of the populace. In other words, the race riots themselves aren’t the violation; the government’s inability to prevent or contain them is.

In the wake of Britain’s worst race riots and disturbances since 1985, which took place in several cities in England, Amnesty International warned that the government must actively tackle racism at all levels of society. (Amnesty International, 2002)

Later in this example, Amnesty International again goes out of its way to find explanations within the system for violence committed by groups not connected to the system (emphasis mine):

In April the Racial and Violent Crimes Unit of the Metropolitan Police said that racist attacks increased whenever politicians made inflammatory statements about asylum-seekers. (Amnesty International, 2002)

In the same paragraph, AI condemns “documented cases of discriminatory practices in relation to deaths in police custody” (Amnesty International, 2002). Racist attacks committed by police are condemnable violations, but racist attacks committed by the general population are the fault of politician’s flapping jaws.
Finally, while the typical human rights violation is primarily an act of commission—some barbarous action against humanity—all three NGOs also called a discourse of omission into play throughout their texts. In their view, old cases left unresolved or the failure to prevent a crime can be considered a violation.

The Court found that procedures for investigating the use of lethal force by the security forces failed to meet the requirements of the European Convention on Human Rights. It criticized the lack of independence of the investigating police officers from the officers implicated; the lack of reasons given for failure to prosecute; the lack of public scrutiny; the lack of information provided to the victims’ families by the authorities; and defects in the inquest procedure [...] (Amnesty International, 2002)

Finding Differences

The common elements described above are woven throughout narratives that, at first glance, appear to espouse the same notions of human rights. In truth, though, the reports carry great differences that are visible only upon closer inspection. Four main characteristics of difference emerged from my analysis: voice, ideal of freedom, frame, and outlook (see Table 1).

Voice is akin to what in literature might be called “genre” or “mood.” It describes the overall tone of the discourse, or (at a higher level of abstraction) the literary tradition that it most resembles. Ideal of freedom is, in some respects, the guiding beacon of the discourse. Of all the violations recounted, which are the worst or the most prominently featured, and upon what basic freedom(s) are those worst violations infringing? Frame refers to the scope of understanding each NGO applies to events: are they stockpiling or storytelling, as Huggins (2000) describes? Do they refer to outside forces for context and explanation, or do they simply let the reporting of each violation stand on its own?
Finally, **outlook** describes the mind-set of each organization as it relates to progress and positive change in the countries, either potential or realized.

**Table 1.**

**Characteristics of difference in the discourse of human rights NGOs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Amnesty</th>
<th>Freedom House</th>
<th>HR Watch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voice</td>
<td>Tragic</td>
<td>Historical</td>
<td>Journalistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal of freedom</td>
<td>Body</td>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame</td>
<td>Storytelling</td>
<td>Stockpiling</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outlook</td>
<td>Skeptical</td>
<td>Optimistic</td>
<td>Detached</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Amnesty International: Violently Romantic*

All quotes within this section are taken from (Amnesty International, 2002) unless otherwise indicated.

The annual country reports of Amnesty International (AI) are organized by type of offense, in bullet point or catalog style: Death penalty, Police, Torture and ill-treatment, etc. Some elements appear in nearly every country, such as torture and ill-treatment, whereas some are specific to a given situation, such as a Northern Ireland subheading for the UK report. The offenses generally have to do with bodily injury, including torture, prison conditions, and executions; AI’s most basic and important notion of freedom appears to be **freedom from bodily harm**, as will be demonstrated in the excerpts that follow. While AI does cover some civil and political liberties, such as freedom of speech, labor rights, and asylum, the bulk of its reports are devoted to violent, physically injurious events.
Illustrative cases are provided for each type of offense, called out into separate paragraphs punctuated by asterisks. These callouts are all the more visceral because they are juxtaposed with detached facts and aggregate claims, making the overall work of Amnesty International seem like a valiant crusade. The back-and-forth narrative tactic gives the text a villains-and-heroes rhythm, where the protagonists reflect archetypal literary notions of romantic and epic tragedies. The narratives also convey a deep sense of looking inward, to the plight of one person, for the fullest understanding of a situation. These constitute AI’s **tragic style and storytelling** frame of understanding.

There were numerous allegations of torture and ill-treatment by the ISA. Victims included Palestinian citizens of Israel and Palestinians from the Occupied Territories. Many of the latter were held in prolonged incommunicado detention for 20 days and sometimes for up to 70 days.

* Muna ‘Ubayd, a teacher and a Palestinian citizen of Israel, was arrested in August. She was held for 27 days in solitary detention in the Petah Tikva Detention Centre, apparently suspected of having had contacts with Hizbullah. During her interrogation she was reportedly manacled or tied to a chair, her blouse was pulled and she was thrown several times against the wall.

Amnesty International also appears more likely to name a single victim than a single perpetrator, naming only 12 individual officials versus 62 individual victims across all the reports. This, again, helps the audience to identify more strongly with the known victim than with the faceless, Kafkaesque state (or paramilitary group). Each statistic reported, whether an aggregate count or a blank, emotionless assertion, is punctuated by the symbolic plight of one person. Note below how Zhang Min’s personal story stands in stark contrast to allegations of wrongdoing by “authorities” and “officials.”

The campaign against groups branded as “heretical organizations” continued. There was mounting evidence that the authorities were permitting the use of violence against Falun Gong practitioners as one of the means to eradicate the group. […]

* Zhang Min, a Falun Gong practitioner from Yilan county, Heilongjiang
province, was reportedly arrested on 5 December for handing out Falun Gong leaflets. She died six days later, after police reportedly tortured her. Officials reportedly told her family that she had died of a heart attack, although she had no previous history of heart disease.

A somewhat skeptical tone is pervasive throughout Amnesty International’s reports. Stories about positive events are interwoven throughout the violent narratives, often nearly de-emphasized. AI is working for the release of prisoners, but does not necessarily see a release as a cause for celebration. Here, for example, a release is briefly noted, followed immediately by allegations of the wrongdoing that occurred during the victim’s time in prison.

* Cao Maobing, a labour activist at a silk factory in Funing, was released in July after seven months’ detention in Yancheng No. 4 Psychiatric Hospital. He alleged that he was forcibly given drugs and electric shocks. He was detained at the hospital after he led a strike and talked to foreign journalists.

In fact, most of the positive events that AI recounts, unlike its negative stories, are not about individual victims. Items that are characterized positively are in fact more likely to be stories about words and policy, e.g., press statements and court rulings.

In a landmark decision, Federal Judge Gabriel Cavallo ruled in March that the Full Stop and Due Obedience laws, which granted immunity from prosecution for human rights violations committed under the military government, were unconstitutional and void.

Given that AI spends so much time hammering home the plight of individuals, announcing only policy changes as positive leaves the reader feeling a bit empty; the laws are changing, sure, but whatever happened to that father of three who has been imprisoned and tortured since 1993? These last points contribute to an overall skeptical and pessimistic outlook. Such an outlook assumes that there will always be more work
to do, that even when prisoners are released and laws struck down, some other wrong has not been redressed. AI’s strategy is to emphasize systemic evil and contrast it against individual suffering, as if to garner the most emotional reactions—and possibly to instigate action—from its readers.

*Freedom House: History in Action*

All quotes within this section are taken from (Freedom House & Karatnycky, 2002) unless otherwise indicated.

The Freedom House reports are each presented in two sections: political background (what they call “Overview”) and “Political Rights and Civil Liberties.” In the latter, Freedom House seems to draw a higher proportion of its descriptions of direct human rights violations from other sources; for example, they cite a 2001 report by Human Rights in China in stating that “criminal defense lawyers ‘are often harassed and intimidated […] merely for actively defending the interests of their clients.’” However, the group’s description of political background rarely quotes outside sources, drawing instead from its own work and measurements.

Freedom House pays great attention to economic issues in its reports, describing issues that are important from a Western capitalist perspective, e.g., privatization, welfare, foreign debt, corruption.

Record unemployment, reduced and delayed wages to federal and provincial workers, and the closing of public schools have created the kind of social mobilization and protests unseen for nearly a generation.

The reports are rather holistic, noticeably more so than AI’s. Well-being for Freedom House must include social issues like health care and education in addition to economics
and politics.

Some one million Arab citizens (roughly 19 percent of the population) receive inferior education, housing, and social services relative to the Jewish population.

Labour achievements such as devolution, House of Lords reform, a stable economy, low unemployment, and improvements in primary education were overshadowed by criticism of the government’s failure to deliver on its key promise to revive public services. After years of underinvestment, transportational systems are in disrepair, secondary schools are substandard, and the National Health Service is ill-equipped to handle its workload.

Also in contrast to AI, Freedom House makes far less commotion about crimes against the body, particularly when it comes to individuals. Freedom House mentions only four individual victims by name throughout all five reports, and even the most violent incidents are described only in understated and impersonal terms.

Israelis experienced a pronounced decline in personal security in 2001. Over 100 Israelis were killed by Palestinian terrorist attacks. Islamic radicals and other Palestinian militants staged suicide bombings, ambushes, and car bombnings, eroding the public’s freedom of movement.

Instead, Freedom House adopts a much grander narrative style, much like reading a **history book**. Its reports provide something like the lay of the land—as if, in studying a still-life painting, the overall image, the artist’s methods, and the historical context were fully described, but very few details were provided about specific objects within the picture (e.g., you wouldn’t learn how many petals are on one flower or another). Every report covers far more time than just the year in question. The Israel report, for example, covers major political events and Israeli-Palestinian relations since 1948, discussing how “Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s Labor-led coalition government secured a breakthrough agreement with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1993” in order to explain what happened in the peace process during 2001. In each report, fully half of the
text is devoted to “Overview,” or the historical precedents for the human rights issues that are discussed in the last half. Freedom House’s analyses are contextually referent, presented from the perspective of looking back on something almost as it happens, striving to place the current situation and recent events within an existing framework or (infra)structure. The analyses are not, however, the plights of individuals; Freedom House’s basic approach is stockpiling, or making general (if not always quantitative) statements about the state of affairs.

As such, the reports place great importance on the ascent to power of current and recent heads of state, as if to ask: how did this all come to pass? “Juan Peron’s authoritarian rule in 1955” and Carlos Menem’s “six-year presidential term in 1989, amidst hyperinflation and food riots” are mentioned as influential political determinants of Argentina’s current political situation and leadership. Additionally, leaders tend to be mentioned in fairly neutral terms, rather than directly in conjunction with systematic violations or oppression:

A former Shanghai mayor and party boss, Jiang became state president in 1993 and was widely recognized as China’s new paramount leader following Deng’s 1997 death.

Unlike the other groups, Freedom House uses names of individuals for their historical context, not for assigning blame as perpetrators or for symbolizing injustice as victims.

Freedom House covers a veritable checklist of content, primarily concerned with whether people basically have the freedom to choose how to live their lives—or in other words, whether they have traditional political rights and civil liberties, as the title of the second half of each report suggests. The ability to democratically elect leadership, the freedom to publish and read media that is not state-sponsored or state-censored, and the
right to publicly exercise the religion of one’s choice are three of many such rights that are systematically reported for each country.

Finally, Freedom House carries a more optimistic stance in its reports than either Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch. Both the negative and positive reports are stated in general rather than individual terms, creating a better one-for-one balance. The reader can more easily reconcile the weight of a good policy against a bad one than they can reconcile a good policy shift against a person’s daily struggle in prison (as in AI’s reports). Additionally, the group plays up positive events by immediately tempering bad news, following it with good news wherever possible.

Despite Kenya’s history of authoritarian rule, many basic elements necessary for the development of a democratic political system exist. Opposition parties are active and vocal. Parliament is the setting for much of the nation’s political discourse. A varied and energetic civil society plays an important role in public policy debates.

Suicide bombings in Jerusalem and Haifa, and other attacks in late November and the first half of December killed dozens of people, forcing Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat to declare and enforce a cease-fire which significantly damped down the violence for the rest of the year.

Contrast this last statement with AI’s version, in which “a number of attempted cease-fires failed” (Amnesty International, 2002). Although Freedom House mentions violence first and the improvement—which AI claims to be nonexistent—is the note on which they end. Overall, they seem to say, things may be bad, but they are getting better.

**Human Rights Watch: The Rest of the Story**

All quotes within this section are taken from (Human Rights Watch, 2002b) unless otherwise indicated.

The Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports are similar to those of Freedom House
in that they try to capture the entire scope of a country’s situation, including a bit of recent history and a great deal of politics and policy. However, they also use some of the same tools as Amnesty International: they are more likely than Freedom House to use specific instances and the stories of individuals as a narrative hook (if not as an emotional bludgeon). The text is laced with instances of specific violations, but they are not visually distinguished as AI’s bullet-pointed stories are. In this sense, they are more illustrative than symbolic.

This man-on-the-street perspective, counterbalanced by the full background of the story, is common in journalistic writing, and indeed, this is the stylistic sense one gets from reading the HRW reports. They describe policy developments and other human rights concerns in much the same way a newspaper or magazine might.

At least sixteen people were arrested or sentenced in 2001 for using the Internet to send information or express views that the leadership disliked. Four others were tried at the end of September on charges of subversion for organizing a new youth organization and publishing articles about political reform. As of mid-November, there was still no information available on the outcome of Huang Qi’s secret trial in August 2001. Huang was charged with subversion for featuring articles about democracy on his website.

For HRW, the most prominently featured freedoms involve information and words. Freedom is characterized first as the right to access information or speak your mind, and second, as the absence of laws, decrees, and even press statements that hint at limiting these rights (apparently because such statements indicate the thinking that drives the policy-makers).

In December 2000, Guangdong’s publicity bureau told newspapers and journals not to publish articles by eleven prominent scholars. In June 2001, one of those named, economist He Qinglian, fearing imminent arrest, fled China.
More than the other two organizations, HRW includes and features the operation of NGOs and human rights advocates in each country, particularly the obstruction of their operation. Here again, the obstructions may also be characterized in terms of words and threats as opposed to actual violence.

In March, President Moi warned Kenyans to be wary of NGOs “pretending to fight for human rights,” accusing “con men who have formed NGOs calling themselves human rights activists,” of wanting to “destabilize the country” and to “cause confusion through foreign-funded seminars.”

However, the discourse of HRW seems to be, more than anything, chameleon-like in its ability to adapt to the nature of the country it describes. What is truly emphasized differs from country to country. In Argentina, the focus is resolving cases of “disappearance” and continued police brutality. In China, the issue is government-induced conformity of press and religion, as well as violence against ethnic minorities. The main Israeli and Kenyan issues are the Palestinian conflict and government corruption, respectively. Finally, the UK report focuses on the government’s imposition on civil liberties in response to the September 11 attacks, as well as the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Each of these situations, though, is primarily analyzed with respect to government policy and transparency—with respect to information. More emphasis appears to be given to the stance of the country than to what actually happens as a result of those stances. For example, in the case of China’s “Strike Hard” campaign, Amnesty International stresses the meteoric rise in executions following the campaign’s implementation; Freedom House stresses the disproportionate response of executing nonviolent offenders; HRW, by contrast, stresses the words of the president himself before mentioning the effects of the campaign.
On April 3, 2001, President Jiang initiated a three-month Strike Hard (yan da) campaign. Stressing the need to safeguard social stability and the reform process, he asked that improvements in fighting crime be made with “two tough hands.” The campaign featured hastily processed cases, denial of due process rights, summary trials, harsh sentences, mass sentencing rallies, and an upsurge in executions.

Also, HRW is the most likely group to actually name the people taking steps for or against a particular human rights violation. As mentioned above, they name individual victims as much as Amnesty International does; in contrast, though, they implicate individual government officials as perpetrators, directly tying an official to the system he represents. Note in the first excerpt below how the culpability for the act of declaring a “state of emergency” is placed squarely on the shoulders of David Blunkett himself, rather than the British Home Office. The second statement recounts how two particular officials explicitly supported groups undermining human rights, even without necessarily taking action themselves.

On November 12, Home Secretary David Blunkett declared a “state of emergency,” a requirement for derogation from certain provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights.

In a speech in March at a military ceremony in Córdoba, Defense Minister Jaunarena contended that the prolongation of the trials was not beneficial for anyone, neither for the victims nor for those who might be accused. Jaunarena’s predecessor as defense minister, Ricardo López Murphy, supported the army when, in the same month, 663 officers in active service presented a habeas data demand against CELS, demanding that it turn over information that might implicate the officers in human rights abuse.

Interestingly, for each country, HRW gives an overview of the human rights situation, and then devotes an entire section of the report, “The Role of the International Community,” to describing that country’s relation to the world around it: the United Nations, the United States, Europe, and neighboring countries. Whereas Amnesty
International wanted to fight equally hard for each individual person, and Freedom House referred primarily to the local context, HRW is externally referent in terms of prioritizing and understanding violations within a global context. They do, however, use examples of individuals to illustrate general principles, a mixture of stockpiling and storytelling techniques.

Many of the loans pledged by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (U.S. $198 million), and the World Bank (U.S. $150 million) remained suspended due to the lack of progress on anti-corruption efforts.

The European Union, under public pressure to show more progress from its human rights dialogues with China--nine had taken place since 1997--made public in January a set of objectives including China’s ratification of U.N. covenants, cooperation with U.N. human rights mechanisms, restrictions on the use of the death penalty, and international access to prisoners in Tibet and Xinjiang.

The ties to the external world that are posited by HRW extend beyond the response of outside entities to their culpability. The group calls other countries to task for failings and lack of improvement in the home country.

The Clinton administration continued its efforts to broker peace talks between Israel and the PA even in its final weeks. [...] The Bush administration conspicuously declined to replicate the same level of involvement in trying to bring the two sides together and confined itself to promoting the recommendations of the Sharm al-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee, whose report was issued on April 30.

Finally, as to the outlook, HRW carries by far the most neutral tone throughout its reports, even though all three organizations claim to strive for objectivity. Much like a newspaper article might, they seem careful to present signs of both progress and setback… or neither. For example, the report describes a China-E.U. summit during which the “two sides affirmed their interest in continuing the human rights dialogue,
although Zhu insisted that China’s human rights record was the best it had ever been.”

The outlook seems neither particularly hopeful nor particularly grim, but a detached presentation of “just the facts.”

The “Black Box”: Organizing and Recording Information

From the same data-gathering techniques applied to the same local situations, these three NGOs have arrived at very different conclusions—or perhaps, similar conclusions in very different clothes. Bruce Montgomery of the University of Colorado notes that “NGOs active in international human rights represent not one, but a constellation of causes, purposes, ideologies, and constituencies” (Montgomery, 1996, p. 88). These causes and purposes appear to drastically affect the data gathered as it filters through the HURIDOCS model in Figure 1 to become knowledge. One could infer from wide variation in discourse among human rights NGOs that the analysis and organizing/recording practices of these agencies might, in fact, be very different after the initial fact-finding phases—in fact, it seems altogether likely that the middle steps can account in large part for the discrepancy in outcomes. It is to these middle steps that I now turn.

The HURIDOCS organization has attempted to develop Events Standard Formats, or ESFs (Dueck et al., 2001; Dueck et al., 2002), for human rights violations so that NGOs can standardize their data during the organizing and recording phase. In this section, I examine whether these formats account for the transformations in human rights information found between the input and output ends of the model, or indeed, whether the formats could support such diversity of outcomes at all. Does the very concept of a data standard for human rights imply a rigidity of interpretation that would impede the
rhetorical work that these organizations seem so eager to carry out?

The ESFs are more or less an enormous entity-relationship diagram that can be used to design databases to capture information about victims, perpetrators, events, and their relationships. The authors explain:

This […] is a tool for the **quest of truth**. With it, it is possible to compile comprehensive data that tell in the most minute detail what became of a single victim. It is equally possible to compile comprehensive data that tell what happened to a whole country. [emphasis mine] (Dueck et al., 2001, p. v)

A typical format for a typical event, for example, has an entity representing “person in the role of perpetrator” (a person who is not wholly or indefinitely identified as the perpetrator, but who, in the case of this specific event, filled that role).

The ESF authors openly acknowledge that there are a great many difficulties in any effort to standardize such sensitive information on such a grand scale (Luey, 2001). These difficulties include variation in the organizations themselves, in the data they collect, and in their practices; some of these are outlined here, and most of them have been discussed above.

- Organisations have different mandates and orientations
- The level of expertise varies between human rights organisations
- Organisations have a variety of confidentiality requirements
- The types of violations vary
- The reliability of information varies
- The “truth” of an event is relative
- Language and concepts vary

HURIDOCS is attempting to develop a system that splits the difference, something that most organizations can use with some training, but little drastic modification.

The ESFs contain 114 unique data elements.² See Table 2 for a summary of their
characteristics. Of these, 35 are qualitative and 79 quantitative. Qualitative elements included several kinds of data. The most common were narrative descriptions, in which users can enter a large amount of text freely. (The capacity of these elements was tested up to 6000 characters in the Microsoft Access version of the ESFs; the manual states that the capacity is unlimited.) Short descriptions are used to house data about things like individuals’ job titles or user-generated titles for events. Associated work fields contain pointers to external records that have some bearing on an event, such as medical records or court documents (presumably, a user would use these to enter a citation). Finally, name fields were used for records about people involved in events, as well as people responsible for maintaining the records.

The 79 quantitative fields were largely driven by a number of controlled vocabularies, also developed by HURIDOCS. They are quantitative in the sense that they could potentially yield categorical statistical data, of the type “X number of torture acts were committed in 2002, but there were Y in 2003.” The vocabulary elements are nearly evenly split between elements allowing multifaceted input (e.g., a person’s ethnic background) and those allowing only a single choice (e.g., the current status of the organization’s intervention for an event). Several of the vocabularies driving these elements were arranged hierarchically, so that a user must drill down through the taxonomy to find the appropriate term for “Type of Act”. Interestingly, eleven of the elements that used controlled vocabularies appeared blank upon first use, because the fields were available for local customization (e.g., local geographic regions or dialects). A few of the controlled vocabularies were actually ordinal data in disguise, such as rating the “Reliability of Source” from unreliable to highly reliable. The remainder of the
quantitative data consisted of dates and integers, although the integer fields (e.g., “Number of Dependents”) were free text and not restricted to numeric data entry.

Table 2.

Classification of Events Standard Formats elements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>ELEMENT DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>35 qualitative elements</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>narrative description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>short description</td>
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<td>name</td>
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<td>79 quantitative elements</td>
<td>32</td>
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<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>controlled vocabulary, single</td>
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<td>(2 locally defined)</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>binary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOTAL 114

Notwithstanding my characterizations of the Events Standard Formats elements as “qualitative” or “quantitative,” the vast majority of the data in these records are textual. Further, some of it is free-textual: users are able to enter narrative data of any length to describe elements like an overview of what happened during the entire act, the psychological effects of an act for the victim, and the conditions during detention—things that must really be told, rather than summarized, to be understood. Even the quantitative elements allow for a great deal of interpretive flexibility, because so many of them are multifaceted. Additionally, nearly every controlled vocabulary element is linked to a clarifying note that can be used to explain which terms were chosen and why. It would be entirely possible to select two completely contradictory choices from a vocabulary menu,
with a note to explain that the different interpretations were offered by different sources.

The ESFs have many characteristics that most human rights NGOs would find highly desirable, even essential, in a data standard. For example, the same person can play different roles (victim or perpetrator) in different acts. Acts and events may be linked in chains or sets, and the relationship among them can be characterized in numerous ways: they can precede, cause, or respond to each other. The standards account in some part for varying levels of reliability, availability, and confidentiality of data, but only in quantitative ways. Reliability is measured on a one-to-five scale, and data is either confidential or not, known or unknown: shades of grey are not allowed here. The ability to leave clarification notes on so many specific elements is a definite plus; however, there is no indication to show when a note has been left (the user must simply click as if to leave a new note in order to view previous notes).

Even with these successes, the standard has its drawbacks. Many of the controlled vocabularies are arranged hierarchically and are extremely difficult to navigate. It would be virtually impossible for a user to categorize an act as “torture” without knowing the names of the three categories above it. Also, the flexibility, taken to an extreme, can yield nonsensical records: a person can legally be both the victim and the perpetrator for the same act. Also, although there is room for recording narrative data, there are few or no ways to exploit it efficiently, short of regurgitating a copy of it in a report.

These elements, when it comes down to it, are standardized only in part: they offer a common vocabulary for the common information elements that may need to be included about different kinds of entities (people, acts, or otherwise). They do not, however, pigeonhole one’s view of an act or event, so that organizations are forced to
create a “standard,” non-revisable, Westernized view of that act, to be propagated globally to other human rights NGOs as “the way it really happened.” The ESFs can contain all the nuance of interpretation, varying sense of purpose, and rhetoric that is evidenced in the later pieces of communication that NGOs produce from the data recorded in the system. HURIDOCS meant for its ESF structures to be flexible and universally adoptable. It appears, in fact, that they may have been largely successful at it.
LOOKING AHEAD: A PORTRAIT OF A STANDARD

In applying the theoretical framework just described to the case of human rights information, it appears that the discourse of human rights NGOs shows clear attempts to keep “wet” information about events in specific locales as wet as possible. Whether through the use of storytelling, stockpiling, or mixed techniques, the three organizations in this paper use very idiosyncratic and contextual perspectives to make their interpretations. The “wetness” varies among organizations; some, like Amnesty International, go so far as to maintain a view into the context of individual events, even in annual reports, the most thoroughly analyzed and generalized works published by these NGOs. But even in the Freedom House reports, the least “wet” of the set that I studied, the organization works hard to place events within a historical, political, and especially local context.

The HURIDOCS Events Standard Formats make wet information about individual events a little bit drier. (After all, what good is a standard that has not been formalized?) These standards force organizations to do two things: to characterize the local data they have gathered in terms that their colleagues around the (English-speaking) world could understand, through the use of controlled vocabularies; and to include the same kinds of information about the same kinds of entities in their reporting. Within this framework, though, the ESF creators attempt to accommodate local knowledge and the messiness of real life.

In this case, the transformation between data input (steps 1 and 3) and
communicative output (steps 5 and 6) seems not to lie—at least not wholly—at the organizing and recording phase. Once recorded, the “black box” transformation has probably already taken place. The main difference between the beginning and end of the information management cycle in Figure 1 probably stems from differences in interpretation and analysis that occur between data gathering and data recording. The critical choices happen at step 3. Once the data is fit for input into the ESFs, several decisions have already been made about how events will ultimately be characterized to the viewing, listening, and reading public. The tension between maintaining data that supports local interpretive work, on the one hand, and sharing data that is both universally understandable and still meaningful, on the other, is one that the ESFs have only partially solved.

In fact, perhaps HURIDOCS has worked too hard to allow for local perspective, depth, and nuance in its events standards. If the ESFs allow for nearly unlimited flexibility—if what is put into the system already carries the noticeable stamp of a single organization’s interpretation—how useful is it to share that data with other organizations? Would an organization even be able to perceive when it imported data about an act already in its records from another source? Would data from one organization be of a quality or nature sufficient for reconstruction to suit the rhetorical purposes of another?

The problem, I think, lies in HURIDOCS’ attempt to mix stockpiling and storytelling within its data standards. The fence sitting approach currently used by HURIDOCS is a remarkable and promising start, but it does not fully account for the local interpretations and practices of individual organizations, nor does it adequately prepare data to be usable for numerous organizations simultaneously. Too many of its
elements are, in fact, too wet to be of use outside the context within which the data was gathered. Comments about reliability or confidentiality, to say nothing of narrative descriptions of events, are too variable across organizations to merit their inclusion in a data-sharing standard.

A further danger lies in the creation of hyper-formalized information systems imparted to NGOs from agents outside their organization, however good the intentions of these agents. These systems may, in fact, have little to do with the actual information that is used most frequently by the people in the organization. Instead, systems that are meant to be industry standards may contain data that has little in common with the real work being done; such data may be maintained solely to share with outsiders and, therefore, half-heartedly. Ultimately, poor fit defeats the purpose of standards, which must be used to be useful. From the outside, there appears to be reasonably good fit between the data in the HURIDOCS standards and the information contained in the annual reports of NGOs. But, as mentioned above, I do not know which, if any, NGOs actually use the HURIDOCS standards, or how “fit” would be perceived by the people doing the work.

Of the 114 elements in the ESFs, how many are actually useful to—let alone already used in—every human rights NGO?

Generally, a less intrusive and more universal data standard might use a smaller set of stockpiling-based data. Individual organizations could then decide how to counterweight the shared data with the stories they find to be appropriate. A mini-standard might be created within the ESFs to contain a very few select pieces of the driest information by which a particular act could be accurately and uniquely identified: names of people involved, type of alleged act, approximate dates. This would be a purer form of
stockpiling, but one that need not necessarily prey to the standard criticisms of stockpiling and formalization. The anti-utopian danger here would be in letting the data speak for itself as gospel truth, e.g., as in a report that tallied up the faceless numbers and decried the fact that violations jumped ten percent in one year. Rather, the point of a barebones data standard would be to share this driest of information for use as a jumping-off point for unique local investigations and interpretations. It would allow organizations to share the burden of gathering information without inflicting too much of their internal analysis on each other. In this view, only the least contestable data would be shared, with an eye toward organizations themselves being responsible for the subsequent layering of understanding—a layering that they willingly perform already.
NOTES

1 All reports were accessed online in November 2002; thus, page numbers are not available for direct quotes. Please see the bibliography entry under each NGO’s entire annual report for specific country section URLs.

2 The official count in the manual is higher. However, the manual counts each instance of an element as a separate element: e.g., “Remarks” in the person record and “Remarks” on the act record are counted separately. Additionally, the “Person Name” element generated a controlled vocabulary for other “X Name” elements. For purposes of my analysis, both these kinds of element groupings were counted as a single element.
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