

# WATCHDOG NETWORKS

Revealing Problems and  
Issuing Calls to Action

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**Watchdog networks drive public debate, boost transparency and ignite movements for change. In a**

world where major problems are increasingly understood as global, and where governments are slow to respond, watchdog networks are on the leading edge of using new technology to take action with credible data. Across every major global issue, from human rights to the environment, watchdog networks are leveraging the power of technology, online communication and social media to sort through layers of information, to create a better society.



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## Idea in Brief

The Global Solution Networks taxonomy identifies ten types of problem-solving networks that have emerged as a result of the digital revolution. These non-state networks, which include governments, civil society, businesses and individuals, are demonstrating a shift towards new models for confronting urgent issues. The taxonomy provides categories for comparison and study, but they are not mutually exclusive. An organization can exhibit attributes that are characteristic of one or more of the network types. The evolving scope of activities of watchdog networks points to an intersection with other network types. The case examples discussed in this paper are highlighted as watchdogs because they demonstrate a capacity to uncover problems, identify them as emblematic of broader global issues and lend a sense of urgency to their resolution.<sup>1</sup>

Watchdog networks are responsible for revealing problems and issuing calls to action. Without them, our collective awareness of the pressing issues facing humanity—from climate change and child poverty to famine and violations of international law—would be greatly diminished. In a world where major problems are increasingly understood as global, and where governments are slow to respond, watchdog networks are on the leading edge of capitalizing on the potential of new technology to collect granular data, develop new knowledge and inform action with credible information. Twenty-first century watchdogs engage in a wide range of activities, from fact-finding and standard building, to advocacy and public engagement, to building new tools that aid their oversight work. When trusted watchdog networks uncover problems, they galvanize public attention and call for a response. At the same time other types of global solution networks—especially networks involved in advocacy efforts—are spurred into action.

## Watchdog Networks in Action

More than 15 years ago, American political scientists Margaret Keck of Johns Hopkins University and Kathryn Sikkink of the University of Minnesota, observed that NGOs and activist groups around the world were increasingly working together on common causes and forging networks across borders to boost their impact and exposure.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Bruce Bimber, a political communications scholar at University of California at Santa Barbara, predicted that an emerging “condition of information abundance,”<sup>3</sup> in which the costs of accessing and sharing information are very low, would allow for “the possibility of political equality and the achievement of a deliberative public good.”<sup>4</sup> Since then, watchdog networks, and indeed all of the network types in the Global Solution Networks taxonomy, have demonstrated how collaborative, multi-stakeholder networks enabled by technology can not only advocate for change, but actually implement new systems for addressing a broad array of issues on a global basis.

“Any technology that provides us with the ability to better monitor our leaders also provides our leaders with the ability to better monitor us.”

Watchdog networks may not have achieved political equality, as Bimber predicted, but with a shared goal of exposing wrongdoing and holding powerful bodies to account, twenty-first century watchdogs are enabling new models of governance and institutional transformation. Indeed, in global issues ranging from climate change to deforestation to infectious disease prevention, there are unprecedented opportunities for researchers and problem solvers to monitor situations in real-time and extract powerful new insights.

Just a decade ago, such opportunities were exclusively available to sophisticated government agencies and corporations. Today, they are available to just about anyone with an Internet connection. However, with the adoption of new tools come new obstacles and ethical implications. This is particularly daunting as the world grapples with the knowledge that government surveillance of personal activities has reached new heights. Any technology that provides us with the ability to better monitor our leaders also provides our leaders with the ability to better monitor us.

These considerations notwithstanding, this report highlights two key benefits of new technologies for watchdog networks. First, smart technologies allow watchdogs to find, collect and analyze evidence much more quickly. Second, watchdogs are using new media constructs to increase distribution of their findings, reaching a wider audience and demanding a response from the targets of their investigations and the broader international community. Members of the press are key participants in these networks—whether as independent investigative journalists or as media institutions communicating findings of watchdog bodies to the public. By covering particular issues, and synthesizing the information that watchdogs release, members of the news media shape public access and direct attention to the issues that watchdog networks have flagged as critically important.<sup>5</sup>

Watchdog networks are multifaceted, and engage in a wide range of activities that go far beyond whistleblowing and fact-finding missions. We can think of these activities as falling along a spectrum that includes evidence gathering, public outreach and engagement, high-level advocacy and grassroots activism, journalism, standard building and tool creation. The point of entry into the spectrum varies from group to group and individual to individual. Groups engage on many points along the spectrum and interface with the other network types outlined in the Global Solution Networks taxonomy. While some network members restrict their activities to specific parts of the spectrum, others' activities encompass the whole range. And, in a growing number of cases, we see looser, *ad hoc* networks of individuals contributing along the spectrum in a completely self-organized fashion.



“Today, just about any dedicated individual performing a monitoring function can quickly become a vital contributor within a broader human rights network.”

## The Spectrum of Practice



In the past, human rights watchdogs deployed large research teams to the field to carefully gather evidence and report key findings. As the case study on Human Rights Watch suggests (see page 8), this remains true today except that the organizational boundaries of watchdog networks have become more porous. Today, just about any dedicated individual performing a monitoring function can quickly become a vital contributor within a broader human rights network. In a March 2013 article for *The Guardian*, Matthew Weaver described how English blogger Elliott Higgins, known as “Brown Moses,” exposed a secret international mission to arm Syrian rebels. He did this by analyzing hundreds of YouTube videos posted by people immersed in the conflict. Weaver noted that large watchdog groups and journalists credit Higgins with uncovering key pieces of information. They worked with him to break important stories and press governments to respond.<sup>6</sup>

Networks can also “purpose-shift” as issues and needs evolve. A watchdog group that begins as a monitoring body can evolve with the addition of an advocacy role. Charissa Lin and Christopher Keevil, partners in the Wellspring Consulting Group, provide an example of one such group. A+ Schools, a public education watchdog in Pittsburgh was first established to collect data on the quality of public education. The group’s leaders thought that data published in reports would compel schools to meet performance expectations. However, with continued underperformance of schools and with support from the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation the activities of



A+ Schools grew to include advocacy and community outreach. Today, A+ Schools is not only raising awareness, it is undertaking systematic community engagement strategies to foster change within the educational system.<sup>7</sup>

Aggregating and combining disparate sources of information to create new insights is yet another example of the functions watchdog groups perform along the spectrum. Even under-resourced groups of activists living in repressive regimes can partner with NGOs and use technology to force governments to disclose information that they would have preferred stay hidden.<sup>8</sup> George Washington University professor of Media and Public Affairs Steven Livingston and associate professor Sean Aday identified this trend in a study of a partnerships between the dissident group the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) and the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS). NCRI fed information to ISIS in Washington, including geographic details about alleged nuclear operations. ISIS in turn used this to navigate and analyze satellite imagery from DigitalGlobe. In so doing, they proved the existence of two Iranian nuclear facilities. In 2002, ISIS went public with its findings on CNN, forcing the US administration to acknowledge the Iranian nuclear enrichment program, something it had been aware of but kept secret for over a year.<sup>9</sup> In an interview reflecting on the significance of this moment, Livingston observes that “ISIS and NCRI were able to do something quite astounding—they created an independent nuclear proliferation report using the kind of technology that would have been limited to the Soviet Union and the United States just several years before.”<sup>10</sup>

Environmental watchdogs like Global Forest Watch (GFW) demonstrate a wide range of activities along the spectrum including involvement in monitoring, advocacy, stakeholder engagement, tool creation and standard setting. GFW describes itself as a network of partner organizations that contribute data, technical capabilities, funding and expertise to an online forest monitoring and alert system.<sup>11</sup> Using a combination of near real-time satellite monitoring, open data and crowd-sourcing, a network of NGOs, governments and companies is contributing to an evolving evidence base about forests, which in turn contributes to improved forest management. Within minutes, an interested researchers can not only survey detailed changes in the forest canopy of a given country, they can drill down to see the location and duration of a company’s logging concessions, look up local forestry regulations and even check whether the logging companies have paid their taxes. After more than a decade of successful deployment in West Africa, Asia, South America and Canada, GFW illustrates the power of a technology-enabled network to allow interested stakeholders to share information, participate in forest monitoring and hold decision-makers accountable. In fact, the GFW monitoring work has been credited with helping to reduce deforestation rates in Brazil, and in identifying new strategies for fighting forest fires in Indonesia.<sup>12</sup>

In the remainder of this report, we examine three leading watchdog networks, reflect on their contributions to global problem solving and consider the key implications for network leaders. The lighthouse case studies include: HarassMap, a mapping platform and a volunteer network that monitors sexual harassment and violence in Egypt; Human Rights Watch,



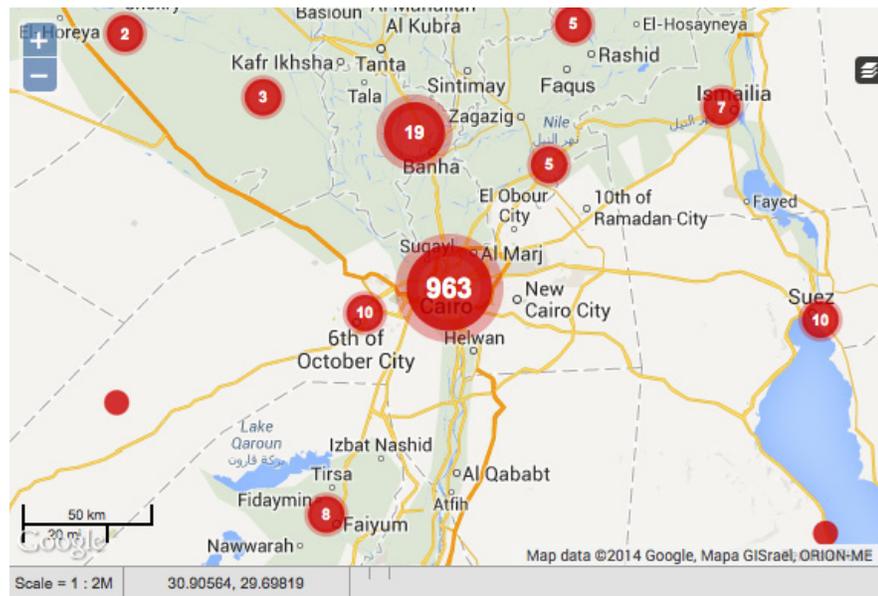
“ HarassMap is a tech-savvy hybrid of a neighborhood watch program and a take-back-the-night rally.”

a veteran watchdog that is incorporating the use of new technologies into its efforts to monitor and expose human rights abuses; and the Sunlight Foundation, a global, multi-stakeholder network on the cutting-edge of using open data to increase transparency in government.

## Lighthouse Examples

### HarassMap—Mapping Sexual Harassment in Egypt Through SMS Reporting

Launched in December 2010, HarassMap is a tech-savvy hybrid of a neighborhood watch program and a take-back-the-night rally. The Cairo-based organization uses crowd-sourced data to generate an online map identifying locations of incidents of sexual harassment and assault in Egypt. Their primary focus is community education and engagement. They seek to empower bystanders and witnesses to harassment so as to challenge harassers' behavior. Using platforms Ushahidi and Frontline SMS, HarassMap collects public reports through social media, text messages and email to feed the map and to generate reports.



HarassMap's online map demonstrates the location and frequency of sexual harassment and assaults in the Cairo area. Accounts of incidents reported to the organization appear when a user clicks on the red circles.<sup>13</sup>



“HarassMap works to end the social acceptability of sexual harassment. We thought that in order for a new law or even old laws to be effective, we first had to make a change in social attitudes,” says HarassMap co-founder Rebecca Chiao. “We use the information that comes from our reporting system and we take it to the streets with 700 volunteers all over Egypt.”<sup>14</sup>

The case of HarassMap illustrates how a small group can enter into the spectrum of watchdog activities, take on additional work and become part of a networked approach to solving a problem.

“When we started we weren’t planning to analyze data. Our primary goal was community outreach. We wanted to mobilize staff and volunteers in key areas, and to educate community members,” explains Chiao. “The map was an added benefit of pinpointing where we should concentrate our engagement efforts, and provided a visual tool to counter the belief that sexual harassment does not take place on the streets of Cairo.”<sup>15</sup>

As HarassMap received more reports with unexpected information—such as men reporting they were sexually harassed, or women reporting that were harassed by children—the group realized it had to adjust its approach. For example, HarassMap could do more than simply aggregate and visualize reports, it could study the data to learn more about the nature and scope of the problem, and it could work with allies to press Egyptian police and lawmakers to act.

Numerous protests in Cairo’s Tahrir Square over the past several years presented another turning point for HarassMap. They joined Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment, a local network of groups that mobilizes and intervenes when mobs attack female protestors. Intervention teams are stationed in strategic locations. Safety teams prepare safe houses, medical supplies and access to transportation. They have doctors on standby. In this capacity HarassMap is not only a watchdog network, but also participates in an operational and delivery network that facilitates the provision of humanitarian relief.

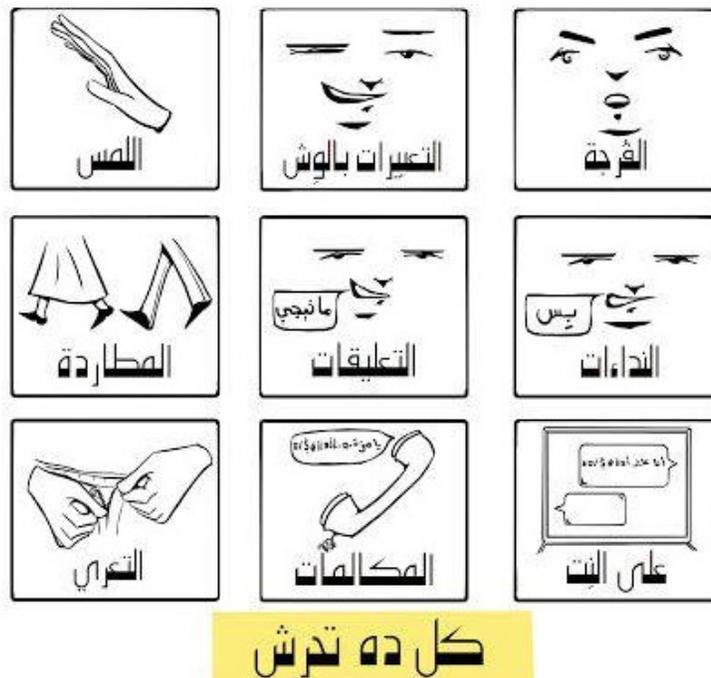
The protests also resulted in a swarm of media attention, which HarassMap did not actively seek. Media coverage drew the attention of groups in other countries that reached out to Chiao for advice. This was a significant challenge for their over-extended team, which found itself pulled away from its work and called upon to give media interviews.

HarassMap has also been called upon to evaluate the potential to use crowd-sourced data to aid police investigations and prosecutions. Chiao notes that their information doesn’t come from a representative sample; it is based on who feels like reporting and has access to a reporting mechanism. But their data can generate important leads. “The police are welcome to use our site any time they want,” says Chiao.<sup>16</sup>

As HarassMap evolves, new functions and roles for the watchdog network are always emerging. For example, a small group of staff and volunteers is



working to build new layers onto its map that will pinpoint “Safe Areas”—shops, cafes and other public spaces where harassed individuals can find haven. HarassMap is building better data collection systems and exploring new ways to make its tools widely available. Its mandate has grown from focusing on community engagement and outreach to include research, data analysis and country comparisons. At the same time, it is developing a marketing and communications presence, including a blog and initiatives like Sala7ha X Dmaghak—a 16-day campaign to challenge misperceptions about sexual violence in Egypt launched in partnership with Nazra for Feminist Studies, Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment and Tahrir Bodyguard.<sup>17</sup>





التحرش الجنسي هو أي فعل أو كلام بطابع جنسي مش مرحب بيه بينتهك جسم أو خصوصية أو مشاعر شخص ويحسسه بعدم الأمان أو الاحترام أو الارتياح.

#صلحها دماغك  
<http://bit.ly/sala7ha>

Material from Sala7ha X Dmaghak, a 2013 campaign challenging misperceptions of sexual violence in Egypt<sup>18</sup>

HarassMap has become an international network that leverages relationships with partners in other countries to expand its range of activities. “We’re growing because we have things we want to do and we don’t have enough time to do it. Our team keeps growing,” says Chiao. In fact, Chiao notes that HarassMap has become a go-to source for similar groups in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, South Africa and the United Kingdom. “Individual activists, NGOs and networks of NGOs from all around the world have asked us to help them start



“Individual activists, NGOs and networks of NGOs from all around the world have asked us to help them start their own HarassMap-inspired initiative in their own country.”

their own HarassMap-inspired initiative in their own country,” says Chiao. “We got a lot of help and support when we were starting up, and we want to do the same for others. That is why we coach everyone who asks for help; thinking through how to plan their program, sharing our experiences and the technical skills and contacts that we have.” Chiao has even been called to be a key resource for UN Women and the World Trade Organization.<sup>19</sup>

HarassMap may not have envisioned being a leader of a watchdog network at the outset, but that is what they have become.

## Human Rights Watch (HRW)— Investigate, Expose, Change

Human Rights Watch is one of the world’s most prominent human rights organizations. HRW’s work begins with fact-finding and evidence collection, but their mission statement makes it clear that public engagement and advocacy are essential to the ability to make an impact:

*We investigate and expose human rights violations and hold abusers accountable. We challenge governments and those who hold power to end abusive practices and respect international human rights law. We enlist the public and the international community to support the cause of human rights for all.*<sup>20</sup>

The organization demonstrates a networked approach to problem solving in several ways. First, HRW constitutes a network in and of itself. With global headquarters in New York, and a total staff of about 400 based in offices across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, the Americas and Europe, HRW operates in teams across geographical boundaries, time zones, and in conflict and crisis situations.

Second, HRW staff interacts with robust local and regional networks outside the organization. Contacts in these networks—including human rights activists, survivors of abuse, local non-profits, partner NGOs, journalists, lawyers, the UN and sometimes government officials—are crucial to building credible cases and to HRW’s reputation as a trustworthy source of information.

Third, HRW has assembled a broad constituency outside of human rights practitioners via the Human Rights Watch Council, which consists of volunteer committees in 18 cities that work to raise the profile of the organization and its efforts. It also enjoys a large social media following.

The research methodology of Human Rights Watch is one of its greatest assets. In-person interviews with witnesses and victims are at the heart of their research practices that strive to “put the human story front and

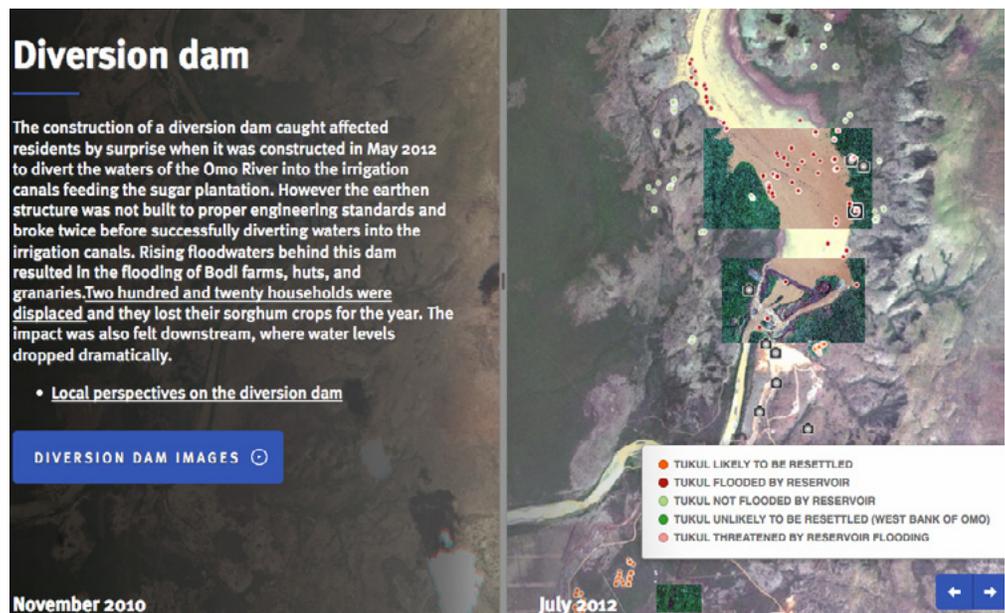


“ Strategic use of web-based media and smart tools for collecting evidence enable HRW to produce a staggering amount of content.”

center.”<sup>21</sup> Face-to-face conversations, which are crucial to building trust with interviewees and understanding context, remain fundamental but are augmented by new technology in several ways. For instance, researchers are often equipped with smart pens that digitize and encrypt testimony as it is gathered. Digital pens make it easier to preserve and share the content, while encryption protects the identities of interviewees should the devices fall into the wrong hands. Researchers have also expanded their documentation to include photography, audio and video in addition to hand-written testimony—much like journalists. Strategic use of web-based media and smart tools for collecting evidence enable HRW to produce a staggering amount of content.

Satellite imagery, available through platforms like DigitalGlobe, is increasingly important for researchers—particularly when investigating conflict situations, neighborhood destruction and, in some cases, environmental degradation linked to human rights abuses. A recent multimedia feature from Human Rights Watch and partner International Rivers combines still photos and satellite imagery to show “extensive clearance of land used by indigenous groups to make way for state-run sugar plantations in Ethiopia’s Lower Omo Valley.”<sup>22</sup>

Felix Horne, an Africa researcher for HRW, sees tremendous value in images available through remote sensing technology. “One of the beautiful things about remote sensing aerial photography and satellite imagery is that it ignores national boundaries. So Ethiopia might not allow us into the country, but we can acquire imagery free of charge.”<sup>23</sup>



Images from a Human Rights Watch interactive multimedia feature demonstrating industrial land clearance in Ethiopia’s Lower Omo Valley, a UNESCO World Heritage site that is home to 200,000 indigenous people<sup>24</sup>



“*Verifying the legitimacy of content and its source is crucial, and there are security implications for researchers and local partners who use the Internet to communicate and coordinate their activities.*”

YouTube video is another important tool. For HRW’s January 2014 report, “Razed to the Ground: Syria’s Unlawful Neighborhood Demolitions in 2012-2013,” researchers used a combination of research tools, including in-person interviews, satellite imagery and YouTube videos to demonstrate that “Syrian authorities deliberately and unlawfully demolished thousands of residential buildings in Damascus and Hama.”<sup>25</sup>

Senior Emergencies Researcher, Ole Solvang, explains:

*We used satellite imagery to establish the extent of the demolitions and the approximate timeframe. The imagery also gave us an idea of the circumstances. For the demolitions in Masha al-Arbeen in Hama, we got imagery of the ongoing demolition. The imagery indicated that there were some, but relatively few, military vehicles present during the demolition. This indicated to us that the military was involved, but that there was no active fighting in the area at the time.*<sup>26</sup>

In-person interviews, fundamental to HRW’s research methodology, corroborated what Solvang and his team observed in the satellite images.

*Witness testimonies established that the areas affected by the demolitions were all opposition strongholds, but that by far most of the houses demolished were civilian. Witnesses and owners also told us that there was little or no warning and that they had not received any compensation. YouTube videos provided us with additional context and indicated how the demolitions had taken place.*<sup>27</sup>

HRW’s Communications Director, Emma Daly, notes that while web-based content has created new opportunities for activists to discover, share and produce content, it also raises new obstacles. Verifying the legitimacy of content and its source is crucial, and there are security implications for researchers and local partners who use the Internet to communicate and coordinate their activities.

“This type of material is an increasingly important source of information,” says Daly. “But, in the same way that activists gather in a social space online to determine how to advance human rights in their countries, it also makes them easier targets for the people who want to stop them.”<sup>28</sup> Horne echoes this view and points to the digital divide in countries like Ethiopia:

*While social media in particular helps watchdog groups gather information from closed countries, the data isn’t representative—you’re getting information from a very select group of people. In Ethiopia, 99 percent of the population doesn’t have access to the Internet at all. Those who do have sporadic access are frightened of repressive laws that control freedom of expression. People begin to self-censor.*<sup>29</sup>



When it comes to getting their message out and amplifying calls for change, the HRW staff is expert at storytelling. They excel in using online media to reach a broader audience—from their website to their YouTube channel to Twitter and Facebook. Content posted by the organization becomes a source for the mass media to generate news stories that might not otherwise be told.

Deputy Executive Director for External Relations, Carroll Bogert, describes what happened when HRW began to release raw audio, video and photos to the press:

*Radio reporters could pull a quote off the site and stitch it into their own stories. TV producers could use video shot by HRW in the field, mix it with a little stock footage or some wire shots, and create a foreign news piece from the field without ever leaving midtown Manhattan... For sure, the price was right: HRW gave its content away for free.<sup>30</sup>*

A news conference launching an HRW report no longer consists of an expert standing in front of a small group of people. Instead, it is a livestreamed event available to anyone with access to hrw.org. Journalists can tweet questions to the report author during the press conference, and the author will respond. The accompanying press release, translated into multiple languages, is distributed to targeted press lists via web-based software, along with the raw video and audio.<sup>31</sup>

HRW also produces its own videos and multimedia features, and has a standalone website to showcase this work, bypassing the traditional news gatekeepers altogether. “Russia: Gay Men Beaten on Camera,” an HRW-produced video containing images posted online by anti-LGBT groups was released ahead of the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games. It received over 3 million views, and was featured on Gawker.com—an online media outlet whose audience reaches beyond those who regularly follow HRW’s work.

It has taken decades to build HRW’s well-respected brand as an authoritative monitor of human rights around the world, and that investment has paid off. When HRW issues a report, decision-makers in government, businesses and multi-lateral institutions pay attention. So, too, do growing numbers of individuals; the network’s number of Twitter followers recently crossed the 1 million mark.<sup>32</sup>

“Our 140 characters matter because of the 140 pages of research behind it,” observes Daly. “Our job is not just to point to the issue of the day, it’s to bring analysis and context to bear. And we are as careful about what we publish on Twitter and Facebook and in video as we are about what we put out in print.”<sup>33</sup>



“*The Sunlight Foundation not only defines and draws attention to the problems of opacity and inefficiency in government, it creates tools and it advocates for new norms to help solve these problems.*”

## Sunlight Foundation—Opening up Government, One Data Set at a Time

The Sunlight Foundation, a Washington DC-based nonpartisan organization, is at the heart of a global network promoting open and transparent access to government data. While government data about party donations, representative voting records and legislation may be publicly available, it is often difficult to retrieve and interpret. Founded in 2006 with a focus on the US Congress, the nonprofit network uses technology to make public data both more accessible and understandable so that citizens can engage more effectively in the democratic process. Its work is a clear example of how technology can make governments more open and accountable.

Communications Director, Gabriela Schneider, explains:

*We want to level the playing field, so groups that are either engaged in journalism or advocacy, especially in the NGO community, can have access to data that will help amplify their efforts. That way they don't have to spend time recreating the wheel or paying for subscription service to get access to information.<sup>34</sup>*

It is no secret that Washington is a closed system with multiple layers of bureaucracy that grants privileged access to powerful interest groups and limits access and influence for ordinary citizens. Antiquated practices for collecting and managing public data (e.g., using non-machine-readable formats and failing to conform to current data standards or post data on the Internet) create another unnecessary obstacle to citizen engagement that limits the ability of watchdogs to scrutinize material of interest to voters and constituents from electoral and legislative processes to the effectiveness of government policies and programs.

Sunlight explains its theory of social change in a YouTube video:

*Equal access to information empowers us all. The more we know about the decisions made and money spent by our government, the better we can hold it accountable and the better it can respond to our needs.<sup>35</sup>*

The Sunlight Foundation not only defines and draws attention to the problems of opacity and inefficiency in government, it creates tools and it advocates for new norms to help solve these problems. Visitors to its website will find a vast array of datasets covering just about every aspect of government. The Sunlight Foundation not only provides access to the raw data, it builds intuitive visual tools that make the information accessible to ordinary citizens and organizations. In other words, you don't need to be a political wonk or a database expert to learn from and participate in Sunlight's work. Some examples of its tools include:



- **Influence Explorer**, a searchable database that provides an overview of campaign finance, lobbying, contractor misconduct and federal spending data.
- **OpenCongress**, a free, nonpartisan source for legislative information that lets anyone track bills, follow lawmakers and monitor the issues they care about.
- **PublicMarkup**, a wiki-based tool that enables users to review and comment on proposed bills before they're introduced—or while they're pending—in Congress.
- **Clearspending**, a scorecard that analyzes how well US government agencies are reporting their spending data on USASpending.gov.
- **Upwardly Mobile**, a web app that helps users find a place to live by comparing factors such as average salaries, living standards and employment data.<sup>36</sup>

The screenshot displays three API cards from the Sunlight Foundation. Each card includes the API name, a status indicator (a green checkmark and 'API is operating normally'), a brief description, a list of applications powered by the API, and buttons for 'Try the API' and 'Read the documentation'.

- Influence Explorer API**: Description: 'The Influence Explorer API gives programmers and journalists the ability to easily create subsets of large data for their own research and development purposes. The API currently offers campaign contributions and lobbying records with more data sets coming soon.' Powers: 'Influence Explorer, Docket Wrench, Poligrant, Call on Congress'.
- Open States API**: Description: 'Information on the legislators and activities of all 50 state legislatures, Washington, D.C. and Puerto Rico.' Powers: 'Openstates.org, Openstates iOS, Scout'.
- Political Party Time API**: Description: 'Provides access to the underlying, raw data that the Sunlight Foundation creates based on fundraising'.

Organizations Using Our APIs



A selection of The Sunlight Foundation's free APIs, alongside a list of organizations using these tools<sup>37</sup>

The Sunlight Foundation has a multi-faceted organizational structure that reflects the breadth of the network's mandate. Its policy team pushes for better disclosure norms and improved transparency at the federal, local and international level. Sunlight Foundation reporters "cover political influence stories both through reporting and through close collaboration with technical staff, leveraging computer-assisted reporting and data visualization techniques."<sup>38</sup> Sunlight also has a "team of technologists and designers" who build "apps and websites to bring information directly to citizens as well



as building and maintaining APIs that power the applications of others.”<sup>39</sup> Users of its free APIs (application programming interfaces) range from Greenpeace to the Tea Party to the Wikimedia Foundation, which in turn highlights another important aspect of the Sunlight Foundation’s structure: a broad network of individuals and groups that benefit from and participate in Sunlight’s watchdog efforts.

Members of the Sunlight team see this multi-pronged approach as an important asset. They attribute their success to diligently sticking to their mandate, and augmenting the work of other groups in their network.

“We’re a unique mix of an innovative start-up, a more traditional advocacy organization and a portal for investigative journalism,” says Julia Keserü, an international policy manager with the Sunlight Foundation. Keserü joined the organization in 2012 when Sunlight expanded its focus beyond the US because international groups began to cite the Sunlight Foundation as their inspiration, and increasingly came to them for expertise.<sup>40</sup>

Keserü describes how Sunlight broadened its reach with a small staff of 45 people: “We chose to expand into this arena not by hiring a whole new team, or opening satellite offices, but by integrating international work almost entirely into our existing staff, so that a global network could take direct advantage of our work.”<sup>41</sup>

The primary focus of Sunlight’s international work is to build norms and standards for open data access.

“By ‘norms for transparency,’ we mean explicit expectations for how information access should function in any country globally, based on the shared values and expectations that practitioners have developed through their work,” says Keserü. “Other civil society groups can benefit from Sunlight’s expertise and eventually spend less time combing through, for example, PDF documents and more time analyzing information and making policy recommendations because governments adopt practices in how it catalogs and shares information with the public.”<sup>42</sup>

One result of this international work is a project called OpeningParliament, a global initiative bringing together more than 80 international organizations to develop best practices for transparency and accountability for national legislatures. Led in part by the Sunlight Foundation, the National Democratic Institute and the Latin American Network for Legislative Transparency, OpeningParliament is also home to the Declaration on Parliamentary Openness, a set of shared principles developed by the emerging parliamentary monitoring community.

Sunlight Foundation has also been a pioneer in harnessing crowd-sourcing and other collaborative techniques to facilitate widespread participation. Gabriela Schneider describes one of Sunlight’s early US initiatives, The Open House Project:



“The US House of Representatives now discloses legislative data in XML format, which makes it easier for groups like the Sunlight Foundation to extract the data and use it in their vast arsenal of online apps.”

*We convened people across the political spectrum to investigate and conduct collaborative research through a Google group, through a Wiki to understand how the House of Representatives used technology at the time and make recommendations about how they could improve their use of technology. By improving their use of technology they would also be improving the transparency of the institution of the US House of Representatives.*<sup>43</sup>

As a result of this work, the US House of Representatives now discloses legislative data in XML format, which makes it easier for groups like the Sunlight Foundation to extract the data and use it in their vast arsenal of online apps.

On the global front, Keserü notes that more national governments are committing to “publishing bills, voting records and other information about the legislative process online, in structured formats and a timely manner.” She points to Brazil’s government databases that track public expenditures; digitized, online information about procurement processes in Georgia; and moves by the United Kingdom and Russia to require publication of all public contracts in a centralized archive.<sup>44</sup>

Sunlight has further built on its status as a global network leader by developing a living document that maps initiatives of like-minded civil society groups around the world.

“We hope this effort will bring clarity to a sometimes unwieldy transparency ecosystem,” says Keserü. “We now have a list of over 500 transparency projects and organizations, and the number is growing.”<sup>45</sup>

Efforts to grow the network and share best practices are augmented through an annual Transparency Camp—described as an “unconference for opengov” at which participants share knowledge and approaches to opening up government to external scrutiny and participation. The conference agenda is itself a product of crowd-sourcing—participants are engaged in building the agenda and workshops as the conference unfolds.<sup>46</sup>





Participants gather at Transparency Camp 2013 in Washington, DC.<sup>47</sup>

Looking to the future, Sunlight is using a user-centric design process to build on its work and identify opportunities for innovation. “We are gathering feedback from users across the United States and around the world,” says Schneider. “It’s very eye-opening and a much different process than having internal staff brainstorm with working program officers at a funding organization. It puts the users’ insights first.”<sup>48</sup>

## How Watchdog Networks are Transforming Global Problem Solving

In the Global Solution Networks taxonomy, the four key networks attributes are: diverse stakeholders; global problem solving; utilization of digital technology; and self organization. Watchdog networks demonstrate these characteristics in several ways.

Whether focused on exposing corruption, making government more accessible, shaming human rights abusers or conserving the environment, members of these networks are working toward a common vision of a better world. They interact with a broad range of stakeholders including governments and international bodies such as the United Nations; corporations whose business interests may be tied to an issue the watchdog is seeking to illuminate; civil society groups who have an interest in accessing data and taking up a cause; and individual citizens whose particular experiences can highlight a problem or whose activism can help promote change.



“*...methodologies are based on traditional investigative approaches to fact-finding, and enhanced by new technologies that add more tools to the investigative toolbox.*”

Watchdogs engage with these stakeholders in several ways: through face-to-face meetings and on-the-ground outreach; through targeted communications to policy-makers and media; and through mass distribution of material through social media channels that help educate others and attract support. They recognize that engagement requires dialogue, and seek input from citizens.

While some watchdogs constitute international networks themselves, others develop tools and methodologies in one country and engage with groups in other countries to build a network and share best practices. To some extent organizations must maintain a degree of internal hierarchy for decision-making and governance, but their leadership actively seeks input from across the organization and the public. State-of-the-art watchdog groups share common attributes and employ similar strategies, including the ability to:

**Deploy rigorous research methods.** Their methodologies are based on traditional investigative approaches to fact-finding, and enhanced by new technologies that add more tools to the investigative toolbox. They verify facts using multiple sources. They demonstrate rigorous research methodologies and take care to ensure the accuracy of their findings. They seek outside advice from experts to corroborate their analysis. They see technology as a tool that can help them solve problems, but they are cautious about how and when to use it.

**Employ media-savvy staffers that are plugged into broader networks.** Watchdogs place value not just on issue experts, but on staff who monitor the evolving media and advocacy landscape and know how to draw attention to their findings at key moments and when to consider the long-game. Their role using online and traditional media to inform and help activate broader networks of actors is particularly crucial, as multilateral institutions such as the United Nations prove insufficient for thwarting atrocities, preventing conflict or stopping environmental damage. When watchdogs sound the alarm, other networks swing into action.

**Define clear mandates and participate in collaborative networks.** A watchdog's ability to make an impact is tied to its ability to define a clear mandate and focus on what it does best. Many choose to work within collaborative communities to support and share information, and thereby avoid duplication of efforts. Before beginning a new project, they consider what others are already doing and look for entry points where their unique expertise and perspective can help, instead of crowding an already overwhelmed public sphere. They facilitate collaboration, sometimes with shared resources and platforms. They look to other members of their network who might be better placed to perform a function their group is not designed to undertake. And, like HarassMap, they grow when there is a clear need. Increasingly, members of watchdog networks also put the desire to find solutions ahead of their desire to compete with their cohorts. They convene and share insights that benefit the larger group. Sunlight Foundation's Transparency Camp and APIs are a strong illustration of the benefits of this approach.



**Measure impact by assessing their influence over outcomes.** Leading watchdogs measure impact both by counting media hits or website clicks to demonstrate their reach, and with individual stories and examples of how policy was influenced or a network leveraged to push for new international laws. Human Rights Watch, for example, worked to press the International Labour Organization to adopt a new Domestic Workers Convention, and they acknowledge the key role that members of the broader human rights network played in bringing about this change.

**Maintain strong commitments to ethical behavior.** Successful watchdog networks take responsibility for their projects and consider the ethical implications. The Sunlight Foundation actively trains people to use their tools and works to improve them. At Human Rights Watch, the identity of witnesses and victims who give testimony remains confidential. The organization takes steps to protect identity and holds the line under public pressure from government leaders. When, for example, the Prime Minister of Canada demanded HRW hand over the names of women and girls who alleged they were assaulted by members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, HRW responded that revealing the identities could put their sources in further danger and make them targets for retaliation. Instead they maintained that it was the government's responsibility to consider the broader systemic issues raised by their research.<sup>49</sup>

As watchdog networks grow and adapt, they face significant challenges for legitimacy, accountability, transparency, representation and efficacy—key metrics outlined for organizational viability in the Global Solution Networks taxonomy. These include grappling with methods for verifying information and evidence gathered from online sources; restricted access to information—whether because its classified or presented in a format that is difficult to analyze; and balancing the need to collaborate with competition for public attention, access to decision-makers and donor dollars. They also have very limited resources as non-profit organizations and the push to adopt tech solutions and grow their reach requires funding and staff that networks cannot afford.

They may have access to tech tools, but not have reliable access to the Internet in regions where they operate. Or participants in networks may not have the digital literacy skills to protect themselves from surveillance by unsympathetic authorities. Groups who oppose the efforts of watchdog networks may be adept at using technology and could disrupt the work on a large scale. However, one key attribute that successful watchdogs networks demonstrate is the level of trust the public has for the validity of their methods and the integrity of their data.



“Media exposure is still essential to any group trying to get a problem on the public agenda or propose a solution.”

## Implications for Network Leaders

**Collaboration trumps competition.** Ultimately, watchdogs operating in a networked model will need to consider the advantages of collaboration and push their constituencies and donors to do the same.

In a 2014 commentary in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Jane Wei-Skillern argues, “Networks are successful when they are led by visionary leaders who think beyond their own organizations... [and] see their organizations as part of a larger system, rather than a carefully guarded fortress.”<sup>50</sup> The watchdog networks profiled in this report are exemplars of this approach.

By partnering with other organizations to produce and disseminate reports of human rights abuses, HRW demonstrates that allies who share a common goal can join forces to uncover misconduct, draw greater attention to an issue and demand action. In seeking to share hosting costs between groups who use their platform, HarassMap demonstrates a cooperative spirit, rather than engaging in the competition for funding that characterizes the NGO environment. Collaboration can also happen organically when open-source tools and resources are available to all. By equipping civil society with the means to track a variety of government activities, the Sunlight Foundation acts as a catalyst for countless initiatives led by others.

**Media matters.** Media exposure is still essential to any group trying to attract public attention to or propose a solution for a global problem. Both Human Rights Watch and Sunlight Foundation are making the most of so-called “earned media,” or word-of-mouth, and working with journalists. Although HarassMap did not seek out press attention for its work, extensive coverage not only put it in the spotlight, it catapulted the network into a position of leadership on gender violence issues.

A spirit of collaboration and trust applies here too. Working with other network organizations to amplify media attention can be very effective—as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International demonstrated in October 2013 when they chose to simultaneously release reports on US drone attacks in Yemen and Pakistan that had resulted in civilian casualties.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, the closure of many foreign news bureaus as a result of cost cutting by media outlets has resulted in more media organizations picking up content produced by NGOs, or partnering directly with NGOs to produce investigative pieces.

Kimberly Abbott, a veteran broadcast journalist and Communications Director for North America at the International Crisis Group, knows firsthand the obstacles that these kinds of partnerships can create, but ultimately sees great benefit. “Unofficial partnerships between media and NGOs have always existed but in recent years have become much more widely accepted,



“*Watchdogs that uncover corruption, violence and injustice increasingly should be prepared to defend themselves against such attacks by perpetrators who will seek to avoid scrutiny at all costs.*”

and transparent,” says Abbott. “And this evolution is not without concern: NGOs must protect their staff, beneficiaries and mission, and journalists must protect objectivity as best they can. To work well, partnerships must be built on mutual trust.”<sup>52</sup>

**With new tools come new responsibilities.** Verifying information found online while still protecting your sources is a real challenge for network leaders. Abbott recommends *The Verification Handbook* written by a group of journalists and digital media specialists, as a valuable guide for how to verify evidence from online sources and user-generated content.<sup>53</sup>

Another challenge is to protect the identities of sources that could be vulnerable to retaliatory attacks. Benetech, a non-profit technology developer, builds open-source software that helps human rights investigators collect and organize data in a secure way, with end-to-end encryption. The software protects identities and information in the event that hackers or other unauthorized parties manage to steal or intercept the data. Enriques Piraces, of Benetech, urges watchdogs to “think about protecting data at the point of collection and encrypting it in a sophisticated way,” and notes that watchdog networks have new ethical responsibilities to ensure that digital records of testimony don’t put witnesses at risk.<sup>54</sup>

Watchdog networks have also been targeted by malicious cyber-attacks aimed at taking down websites, stealing data records and generally disrupting digital infrastructure. Watchdogs that uncover corruption, violence and injustice increasingly should be prepared to defend themselves against such attacks by perpetrators who will seek to avoid scrutiny at all costs.

In sum, watchdog networks should proceed with caution when adopting new tools and technologies. As much as technology arms watchdogs with unprecedented capabilities, this progress also creates new problems for networks to cope with.

**Technology and human capital are complements, not substitutes.** Thanks to the advances in remote sensors and satellite monitoring, obtaining granular information about the status of natural systems or even the behaviors of entire populations of people will be cost-effective and increasingly accurate and timely. At the same, parallel advances in social networks, online communications and data visualization tools make it possible to disseminate this data on a mass scale and turn information that was once inaccessible and hard to understand into rich, virtual models of real-world systems.

Pervasive computing and online communications, however, cannot replace the value of human talent, especially when technology leaves networks open to potential attacks and disruption. Equipping an organization with new tools is one thing. Adding the human resources required to manage these tools and educate staff in proper use is quite another. As Enrique Piraces, Vice President of the Human Rights Program at Benetech.org, observes, “Any investment in technology needs to be accompanied by an investment in human and social capital.”<sup>55</sup>



Most effective watchdog networks recognize the importance of adopting technology and building human potential. HarassMap, for example, attributes its impact to on-the-ground community work, supported by a combination of tech tools. HRW researchers use digital pens to capture information, but also work hard to gain the trust of the victims of abuses, who may put their personal safety at risk in providing testimony.

**Watchdogs must be positioned as allies, not adversaries.** Governments and business are often the targets of scrutiny, and as such, may be wary of engaging in open dialogue with watchdogs. But, in certain circumstances, governments and business should consider working with watchdog networks to leverage their unique expertise, and to develop effective solutions to global problems.

A mining company, for example, might consider approaching a watchdog for advice before commencing operations in a country in which human rights violations occur. Businesses that are leaders in environmental sustainability might consider collaborating with watchdog networks to put pressure on less environmentally sensitive competitors whose actions tarnish the reputation of the entire industry.

Governments can look to watchdogs to help develop policy or bolster regulatory oversight capacity in areas such as labor standards and the environment. Not all watchdog networks will be open to collaboration with business and government for fear that such partnerships could undermine their reputation for objective research. But where partnerships are deemed appropriate, building trusted relationships with watchdog networks could produce real results.



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## About the Author



Kathryn Semogas is a public affairs strategist specializing in communications, advocacy and public engagement. She has extensive experience working with international NGOs including the International Crisis Group and Human Rights Watch, and in the Canadian public sector. She currently advises public institutions and nonprofit groups on outreach and awareness campaigns, and mentors post-secondary students interested in achieving social change through storytelling. A member of HRW's Canada Advocacy Committee, Ms Semogas also sits on the Canadian Board of the Stahili Foundation. She holds a Master's Degree from the School of Media and Public Affairs at The George Washington University in Washington, DC.



## About Global Solution Networks

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Ten Types of Global Solution Networks