Chapter 5. Remote Monitoring

A. Collecting Information from Diaspora Communities

Diaspora communities do not simply shut the door to their countries upon resettling in a third country. Families remain behind, and emotional, economic, and political ties are strong. Many living in exile hope one day to return home. Consequently, members of diaspora communities can often be a good source for credible and current information about human rights country conditions.

Many members of diaspora communities have first-hand knowledge of human rights abuses in their country of origin. Personal accounts of refugees and asylum seekers, as well as other immigrants, provide a window into the human rights conditions that forced them to leave their country. These accounts not only establish the basis for protection of individuals but also provide evidence to hold governments accountable for violations of international human rights obligations.

Human Rights Fact-Finding with the Oromo Diaspora

The Advocates for Human Rights used remote monitoring to research the 2009 report Human Rights in Ethiopia: Through the Eyes of the Oromo Diaspora. The Oromo are Ethiopia’s largest ethnic group, but have experienced repression and human rights abuses by successive Ethiopian governments since the late 19th century. With this report, The Advocates sought to give voice to the experiences of the Oromo people in the diaspora, to highlight a history of systematic political repression in Ethiopia, and to support the improvement of human rights conditions in Ethiopia.
The project methodology focused on interviews with members of the Oromo diaspora, as well as service providers, scholars and others working with Oromos. The Advocates assembled a group of ten lawyers, many of whom had worked on behalf of Ethiopians’ asylum claims in the past, and trained them on fact-finding, documentation, and interview techniques, including a review of human rights violations against the Oromo and the current country conditions in Ethiopia. The fact-finders conducted interviews with Oromo people in the diaspora, Oromo scholars and community leaders, the immigration bar, and providers of medical and community services to the Oromo.

The report includes nearly 50 pages of findings on violations of human rights, including torture, extra-judicial execution, arbitrary arrests and incommunicado detention, lack of due process, and inadequate prison conditions. The report also documents the state surveillance apparatus and violations of the rights to freedom of speech, assembly, association and expression, as well as violations of economic, social and cultural rights. Although it is not based on on-the-ground fieldwork in Ethiopia, this carefully researched and credible report has been cited as supporting evidence in immigration court and as a basis for recommendations by UN human rights mechanisms.178

In a world closely connected through electronic communications, members of many diaspora communities maintain close contact with friends and relatives in their home countries. Regular contact via telephone, email, and social media provides an up-to-date picture of emerging human rights situations. Family members are often the first to know about and report on human rights abuses on the ground in their country of origin. Diaspora community members also obtain information from friends, people they went to school or worked with, as well as fellow members of political parties or opposition groups. In addition to information about human rights abuses, contacts in the country of origin may also be able to provide information about existing or proposed local and national law and policy.

Advocates should note that it is important to test the credibility of second-hand information obtained from contacts in the country of origin. As with any human rights monitoring process, advocates should corroborate information through fact-checking with other interviewees and secondary sources whenever possible. (See Chapter 3 Monitoring, Part A, Principle 13: Accuracy and precision; see also Chapter 6 Documentation, Step 5. Maximizing Validity and Reliability.) Even if the information cannot be corroborated with independent sources, it might still be useful. For example, if multiple people make the same observation but the information cannot be corroborated, it might be useful for advocacy purposes to report on the extent of the perception or fear of particular human rights abuses. Alternatively, while an advocate may not be able to definitively corroborate second-hand accounts at a given point in time, the information may be useful as an early warning sign of mass atrocities or in developing plans for more in-depth fact-finding. In making the decision to include uncorroborated information, advocates

should be sure to explain that and clearly state what the information is, where it came from (attribution), and why it is included.

**B. Media Monitoring**

Many diaspora community members also report using a variety of tools to conduct media monitoring in order to obtain information about human rights abuses in their home country. Media monitoring involves the systematic collection, review, and analysis of radio and television broadcasts, print media publications, or online information sources. While objectives of monitoring can differ in scope, advocates can use media monitoring to track patterns and new developments; corroborate and enhance findings from interviews and other fact-finding methods; provide insight into how the media deal with a particular issue or group; identify messages and examine how those messages are framed; and develop an understanding of public perception and misperceptions. Media monitoring can provide human rights advocates with insight into the best way to address and improve coverage of human rights issues, as well as to develop subsequent advocacy around those issues.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>MAINSTREAM MEDIA</th>
<th>COMMUNITY MEDIA</th>
<th>NEW MEDIA</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mainstream or Mass media</td>
<td>Community Media is generally targeted at limited geographical areas and smaller audiences in, for example, neighborhoods, towns, rural areas, and close-knit communities which seek to keep themselves informed on issues of interest. There is usually more room for people within a local community to participate in the governance and editorial operations of this form of media. Many diaspora communities have established language and/or culturally-specific community media outlets.</td>
<td>New media, also known as NICTs (New Information and Communications Technologies), includes web sites, web portals, e-mail news alerts, listserves, and blogs. It is used by mainstream media through web-based editions of their products, but the information technology revolution also has opened space for civil society, diaspora communities, special interest groups, and individuals to create their own sites for disseminating information and viewpoints.</td>
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<td>is often general in its content in order to cater to a diverse audience. Mass media views audiences as both consumers of information and of goods and services. Advertising is essential to the sustainability of the mass media. Mass media can be owned and operated by the government, public or private interests. Mainstream media includes newspapers, magazines and the broadcast mediums of television and radio.</td>
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**Somali Rights: Compiling and Posting News Updates on Website**

Somali Rights is an organization of Somalis living in the diaspora in the United Kingdom and United States. Somali Rights maintains a website with news updates, images, videos and opinion pieces about human rights abuses in Somalia. Somali Rights’ stated goal in carrying out this kind of media monitoring is “to advocate for the victims and influence global public policy on prevention, intervention, and holding perpetrators of atrocities accountable.”

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Media monitoring has undergone a radical transformation in recent years. News sources have multiplied dramatically with the advent of the Internet, and most media outlets now post their content online.

This content, in turn, is indexed by free search engines and made accessible to users around the world. These new search technologies make media monitoring not only more accessible, but more efficient and powerful. While information search tools do not process or analyze information, they do provide a means for quickly and easily obtaining information from media sources. The following descriptions are not an exhaustive list but a starting point to provide an overview of the tools available to conduct media monitoring.

i. **Web Alerts**

Google, Yahoo!, and Bing all provide free news monitoring services. These web alert services send automatic e-mails that provide advocates with the latest news stories related to the interests specified in the user’s subscription. Web alerts enable a media monitor to avoid duplicative search efforts on multiple sites by automatically transmitting specific information. If the search query is broad or will garner a large number of results, advocates may want to open a new email account specifically for these results to prevent overwhelming their regular accounts.

ii. **Newsletters and Listserves**

Newsletters are publications regularly published by organizations and institutions to disseminate information. Newsletters are often available on the internet and provide regular information about an issue. Key organizations or other bodies working on the issue may also publish regular newsletters for subscription.

In an urgent or rapidly evolving human rights situation, some diaspora community organizations have chosen to use email listserves as an effective method of swiftly distributing information.

### Using a Listserve to Distribute Updates on the Crisis in Syria

In 2012, a group of Syrian-born activists and artists in the United States created an email listserv to raise awareness among the diaspora and others in the U.S. about the human rights abuses against civilians taking place during the conflict in Syria. Members of the Syrian diaspora, as well as others, could join the listserv by providing their email addresses. The group compiled and regularly distributed through the listserv news reports, links to amateur videos posted on YouTube, and other information about what was happening on the ground in Syria. They combined the use of the email listserv with public events such as poetry readings and artistic performances to raise awareness and mobilize community members to press the U.S. government to take stronger action to end the violence against civilians in Syria.

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184 Ibid., 19.
While listserves may be an effective way to obtain links to news reports, first-hand accounts and images of a human rights situation, monitors should be aware that the accuracy of the information distributed may not have been verified. Further, the listserv may have been created for a particular audience or subscribership, so the information provided may only present the situation from one point of view. As with other uncorroborated or biased sources, the information may still be useful in showing perceptions and fears caused by incidental policies. When using the information, advocates should cite the source and include the rationale for incorporating the information in their report.

### iii. RSS
Really Simple Syndication (RSS) enables monitors to automatically receive and link information from informational websites. Information from a website feeds into and appears as displays on the individual’s page as “widgets.” Widgets present the first few phrases of information, allowing the reader to grasp what information is available on the source website. A monitor can create a personalized “dashboard” or “reader” of RSS and Atom feeds using tools such as Feedly, NewsBlur, Newsvibe, Feed Demon, The Old Reader, Digg Reader, InoReader, NetVibes, Reedah, CommaFeed and Pulse.

### iv. Blogs
Blogs, short for “weblogs,” are another tool in monitoring information on the web. Blogs can enable the monitor to learn of user-generated content that is not reported as news or an alert, such as Technorati, Ice Rocket Blog Search, Regator, Twingly, as well as Ask.com and Google. They are also used by activists and journalists facing restrictions of their freedoms of communication.185

Monitors should use blogs with some caution, however. While factual content, photography and video in blogs should generally not be regarded as authoritative without secondary support, blogs can provide monitors with the latest commentary on a variety of topics from varying perspectives to gain an understanding of public perception and context. Monitors can sort out comments and opinions of users who do not write full blogs to gauge reactions. BackType provides a search engine function that allows searches to be formed in the database of social media information by keyword or person. Websites and applications like BoardReader enable monitors to search discussions on online forums, message boards, and blogs. Monitors can also follow microblogging on platforms such as Twitter, Tumblr, Plurk, Jaiku and Google Buzz. Monitors can also search for topics by using hashtag searches on microblogs such as Twitter.

### v. Radio
When conducting media monitoring, activists can take advantage of websites and mobile apps like tunein.com to get free access to hundreds of thousands of global radio stations that stream live and provide on-demand content. For a fee, TuneIn also allows listeners to record anything heard through the service to play back at any time. Other sites providing global radio access include: wunderradio.com, liveradio.net, and iHeartRadio.com (in the U.S. only). PublicRadioFan.com is a website that allows the user to search for public radio stations anywhere in the world by location, format and language, as well as searching for programs by name. PublicRadioFan also has an extensive podcast directory.

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185 Ibid., 9.
vi. Chat Rooms
Chat rooms provide another common means of electronic communication via PCs and mobile devices. Chat rooms allow real-time online conversations between one or more people anywhere in the world through instant messaging as well as video or voice communications. Most chat rooms also have the option for users to take part in discussions or public forums in a wide range of categories, enabling users to express opinions, learn, or discuss issues on a variety of topics. Mobile applications such as Skout encourage people to discover and connect with new people based on common interests.\textsuperscript{186} Paltalk\textsuperscript{187} and ooVoo\textsuperscript{188} are examples of chat rooms available for both mobile and PC use; these services let users browse different chat rooms in a variety of topics.

Chat rooms provide both open and private forums of conversation. Some members of diaspora communities choose to use chat rooms to communicate with family and friends in countries with repressive environments because users can choose to be anonymous. This anonymity allows them to speak about issues they may not feel safe to publicly talk about. Anonymity does, however, make it more difficult to verify the credibility of the speaker. As with blogs and other sources, monitors should take care to verify the information with secondary sources.

vii. Reddit
Reddit is one of the largest online communities on the Internet, as well as a social news and entertainment website. Content is generated by registered users who submit links to stories, reports, images, etc. or their own text posts. Users can vote for or against submissions, thus providing a popularity ranking system that determines what is seen on the websites pages and homepage. Reddit users also can comment on submissions on the site, which generates discussion between users.

Content on Reddit is organized by areas of interest called “subreddits.” Any registered user can create a subreddit. Reddit can be a useful tool for following news and current information on a particular topic of interest (subreddit), as well as for connecting with others who share the same interests. Further, given the potential impact of its extensive virtual community, Reddit is increasingly being used to raise funding and publicity for philanthropic, humanitarian and political causes. Monitors should be aware, however, that Reddit has received criticism for the accuracy of information posted by users, most notably in the immediate aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombing when Reddit community members wrongly identified several people as suspects.\textsuperscript{189}

viii. Social Media
As the world has rapidly become more connected, social media tools are creating new possibilities for monitoring human rights. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google+, YouTube, and Pinterest provide opportunities for rapidly communicating information about human rights abuses. The powerful use of social media during the Arab Spring of 2011 showed just how effective social media tools can be. (See Chapter 7 Advocacy, Part C beginning on page 135.)

Social Media Are a Driving Force Behind the Arab Spring

When vegetable merchant Mohammed Bouazizi set fire to himself in protest against the Tunisian government on December 17, 2010, no one would have predicted the extent of the political change throughout North Africa and the Middle East that would follow. Images and video of Bouazizi’s self-immolation were shared through Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, inspiring protests and calls for democracy. It was the first indication of the role that social media would play as a driving force behind the Arab Spring.

Focused mainly on Egypt and Tunisia, researchers at the University of Washington extensively analyzed information collected from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and bloggers and concluded that:

1) Social media played a central role in shaping political debates in the Arab Spring. Young, urban, educated individuals, including many women, used social media before and during the revolutions to put pressure on their governments and to spread credible information to their supporters.

2) A spike in online revolutionary conversations often preceded mass protests.

3) Democracy advocates used social media to connect with people outside their countries, including supporters in the diaspora, Western media outlets, and followers in other countries in the region where similar democratic protests would later erupt.  

More than just a tool for raising awareness about and mobilizing action on human rights issues, social media can be used in human rights monitoring. Social media tools can be used very effectively to provide real time information about emerging human rights situations.

Amnesty International: “What Detention Looks Like on Twitter”

Gaza activist Laila el-Haddad was stopped and detained with her family at the Cairo airport while transiting through Egypt. El-Haddad immediately started tweeting about her detention using her Twitter handle @gazamom. Via Twitter, she was able to describe what she experienced while she was questioned and detained. Other activists and friends also used Twitter to mobilize for her release and call for

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Information and images obtained through social media can also provide more specific details about an incident for an ongoing investigation or be used to cross-reference with other evidence. Increasingly, information and images that first came to light through social media have been used to fuel momentum for independent investigations. Further, social media offers the potential of monitoring information over longer periods of time in order to analyze trends like changes in public sentiment and increases in certain categories of human rights abuses.

Many different tools exist to monitor social media sites. Hootsuite, Google Analytics, Klout, Tweetdeck, Icerocket, Socialmention, and Buffer are just a few of the free tools that exist to monitor and analyze data on social media platforms. (The industry is constantly changing, however, and a search for social media monitoring tools on a search engine like Google may provide the most up-to-date information.) Another important step is to identify the “keywords” that will produce the best information. Most social media monitoring tools can search by keywords that describe locations, persons or groups, activities; etc.

While social media platforms can help monitors discover human rights abuses as they happen, verifying the information can be much more difficult. As with other sources of information, advocates should take care to verify that information received through social media is consistent with secondary reports or other reliable sources of information. If, as stated previously, advocates choose to use information that cannot be verified but nonetheless provides useful illustration, they should be sure to attribute the source of the information and state their purpose for including the information.

#Womenshould Campaign Highlights Negative Stereotypes Behind Google Search Results

A series of ads developed for UN Women used genuine Google searches to reveal the widespread prevalence of sexism and discrimination against women. The ads, based on the autocomplete results of actual searches made on 9 March, 2013, expose negative sentiments ranging from stereotyping to outright denial of women’s rights. The ads display the text of the Google searches over the mouths of portraits of women, as if to silence their voices.

C. Monitoring Legislation in the Country of Origin

Policymakers may draft legislation in response to the recommendations from reports or studies, so legal reform is often a very real and desired outcome of human rights monitoring. When advocating for change in their country of origin, members of diaspora communities may find it useful to review existing laws to identify areas that do not comply with human rights obligations.

Monitoring legislative developments can help advocates track the progress of legislation they oppose or support, and prepare for new opportunities or threats to human rights in their communities. They may also want to monitor proposed legislation in order to take advantage of opportunities to submit comments, as this can be a valuable opportunity to influence policy decisions.

While it can often be challenging to access legislative processes, advocates can stay apprised of legislative developments with adequate planning and the right monitoring tools. Some governments make a lot of legal and legislative information available on websites, while others only have the capacity to make a small number of documents available electronically. Individual contacts and contacts with organizations in the home country may be critical to obtaining materials that are available only in hard copy. Diaspora community members may also be able to obtain copies of laws and other documents on return visits to their home country.

Media monitoring is an excellent, low-cost method of following new legislation and legislative debate. Many media outlets monitor legislative developments as a core component of their news gathering mission. Newspapers, in particular, often send reporters to cover the latest political developments, and their news stories provide a vast, free collection of legislative information which is in turn searchable by free, well-designed search engines (see the “Media Monitoring” section beginning on page 69).

Another option is to maintain working relationships with legislative staff members. By building relationships with sympathetic staff who are involved in the process, advocates can improve their access to news of the latest legislative developments. While staff may not be able to specifically track a particular legislative item in the way that a lobbyist would, they can serve as a valuable source of information on legislative changes.

Web-based research tools may also be used to find primary sources of foreign legislation, case law, and regulations. Legal materials from many countries in the world can be accessed and downloaded for free from the following foreign and international law portals.

**Foreign and International Law Portals**

*Cornell Legal Information Institute: Global Law*
http://www.law.cornell.edu/world/

The Cornell Legal Information Institute provides a collection of world legal materials, including constitutions, statutes, judicial opinions, and related legal material from around the globe.

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Global Legal Information Network
http://www.glin.gov/

The Global Legal Information Network (GLIN) is a database of official texts of statutes, regulations, judicial decisions, and related legal materials contributed by government agencies from countries in the Americas, Europe, Africa and Asia. (The GLIN network is undergoing a transition and the site was unavailable as of January 31, 2014.)

Library of Congress: Guide to Law Online

Provides links to content-based websites of primary and secondary legal and legislative information services from 143 nations.

World Legal Information Institute
http://www.worldlii.org/

The World Legal Information Institute provides free access to case law, legislation, and regulations, as well as secondary legal material such as law review articles, for hundreds of jurisdictions around the world.
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