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**Technology and (Human) Rights:
A Review of *Human Rights in the Global Information Society* edited by
Rikke Jørgensen (MIT Press, 2006)**

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On most local economic scales outside of aristocracies and oligarchies, a nagging question is how to provide for and protect minoritarian power, rights, and voice in light of majoritarian control and interests. In the so-called “global information society” (GIS), where gated divides, whether economic or digital, separate minoritarian privilege and wealth from majoritarian opportunity and livelihood, conventional questions of politics hardly apply. Constitutional rights and transnational privileges of a small number of corporations govern many of the policies and default practices of a vast majority of people in the GIS. This is the conundrum confronting Editor Rikke Jørgensen and other authors of *Human Rights in the Global Information Society*, in a context clearly spelled out in the Civil Society Declaration of the 2003 World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS): “geo-political and historical injustices along economic, social, political and cultural lines’ resulting from ‘the inter-linkages of global economic liberalization, cultural globalization, increased militarism, rising fundamentalisms, racism and the suspension and violation of basic human rights’” (p. 282). Of course, another context involves severe environmental degradation, eco-systemic collapse, and global warming, warranting a sustained animal and environmental rights agenda in tandem with human rights for any GIS, a point to which I shall return.

In her chapter on access, Kay Raseroka distinguishes between print-based and oral cultures to sum up the dilemma of activists and scholars of human rights and the GIS: “the principle of freedom of access to information and ideas embodies in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is thus not a reality to the majority of people in the developing world” (p. 93). About 80% of the world’s population of 6.7 billion has no access to digital information; less than .01% of people in Africa and 2.2% of those in the Middle East have access (pp. 65-66). Ran Greenstein and Anriette Esterhuysen, in the final chapter, note that descriptions of the digital divide are plentiful, “but the list of social and political actors responsible for problems such as hunger, poverty, inequalities, and environmental destruction are very short” (p. 290). Indeed, as Heike Jensen reminds us in Chapter 10, “more than 70% of the world’s poor are women [...] the existence of digital divides, and in particular of the gender dimension of these digital divides, has

thrown into stark relief the fact that ICTs on the whole, under the present circumstances, compound human rights violations experienced by many women and girls rather than ameliorate them" (p. 252). It is seductive to position information and communication technology (ICT) as creative tools for resolving human rights crises within the global economy but, for the most part, *Human Rights in the Global Information Society* presents a more sober portrait.

The book succeeds in bringing issues of the WSIS, United Nations (U.N.) Charter and Declaration of Human Rights to bear on questions of the GIS. Students and scholars of human rights and technology will appreciate this exploration of the GIS in light of WSIS, Charter and Declaration provisions. All thirteen essays in the book have something to offer scholars of human rights and technology, and I found chapters 3-5 (access, intellectual property and privacy rights) and chapters 8, 10, and 12 (guarantee, women's and economic rights) especially helpful. Still, I wish there were more empirical case studies throughout the book and more theoretical analyses to complement the constructive legal and policy framework of human rights.

Setting a backdrop for the book in their introduction, William Drake and Rikke Jørgensen begin by defining the GIS as "the wide array of national and global effects and policy issues resulting from the information revolution... the resulting GIS is some respects qualitatively different from antecedent forms of social organization" (p. 1). Acknowledging problems inherent within this neutral definition, Drake and Jørgensen nevertheless set up the GIS as a more or less taken for granted concept and material entity for the remainder of the book. Interconnections among human rights and the GIS are clear in cases of access to information (chapters 2-3), freedom of expression (chapters 1, 6, 11), privacy protection (Chapter 5), and intellectual property (Chapter 4), yet in other cases the connections are less evident. For example, in Chapter 12, one of the best in the book, Greenstein and Esterhuysen draw detailed links between collective economic and development rights and human rights, but connections made between these and ICT seem forced. This is partially due to an undertheorized GIS and to an over-reliance on ICTs as the primary mover of the GIS. Hence, deterministic claims are made, for example: "there is a general recognition that ICTs should be used to advance and implement the U.N. Millennium Development Goals, the indicators to end human poverty by 2015" (p. vii); "ICTs have been the driving force of an increasingly globalized economy, orchestrating the division of labor, the movement of goods, the operation of the financial markets, and knowledge exchange" (p. 239). Jensen volunteers the second of these two statements in an otherwise excellent chapter on women's rights, where she provides a critique of data and information, which could have been used to lend a critical frame of the GIS to the book. Of course, people, economies, and societies are interdependent on a vast array of technologies, many which have little or nothing to do with either information or communication. To get a purchase on any rights at this point in time, including human rights, researchers must necessarily account for this differentiation and pluralism of technologies, where ICTs are merely a subset (Petrina, Volk and Kim, 2005). Similarly, our current human rights crisis is entirely interdependent with the environmental crisis—both make all of us complicit and exclude no one.

The U.N., which for the most part is heavily invested in human rights provisions and protections, has at least since the Stockholm Declaration of 1972 recognized the significance of environmental rights to human rights agendas. Of course, human rights to a clean, healthy environment are different than granting rights to animals and the environment itself. Intricacies of peace in Rwanda and gorillas in their habitat, global warming in the Gulf of Mexico and reconstruction in the lower ninth ward of New Orleans, earthquake and early warning systems in the Indian Ocean and the livelihoods of Indonesian island villagers suggest the fragile interrelationships among animal, environmental, and human rights. Nevertheless, there are few mentions of the environment and non-human animals in *Human Rights in the Global Information Society*, a frustrating oversight in my estimation. Critical race and postcolonial theorizing could have helped the authors weave together forms of majoritarian resistance in various cybercultures across the world, the environment and human rights into a provocative understanding of how power and privilege are maintained by a decidedly few minority populations and corporations of the world and yet seriously threatened by a renewed global movement marked by piracy practices of the dispossessed and labour activism in the sweatshops of China and south Asia. In the interplay of these narratives, we might start with Robin Gross's outstanding chapter and her insight that a consequence of the U.S.'s policy approach to IPRs "overseas" "is a massive transfer of wealth from the countries of the South to those of the North, and a one-way flow of ideas from the North to the South— a form of information age colonialism" (p. 115). These flows of labour and wealth invariably take us through Monsanto's "liquid assets" and colonization of water rights in India, and to Bangalore's digital sweatshops, where many of our ICTs are forged. Here eventually we meet the dispossessed or workers reappropriating their products as what Kavita Philip (2005, p. 205) calls the "subaltern pirate," bringing us face-to-face with human rights in the postcolonial GIS. This, in turn, directs us to the imminent collapse of economic facades of the colonial GIS, and that would be a good thing for a book on human rights to theorize and describe.

References

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