

**Summary of Proceedings**  
**IM4HR: Instant Messaging for Human Rights Workshop**  
**Friday, May 6, 2005**  
**American University Washington College of Law**

Co-sponsored by  
*Citizens for Global Solutions*  
and  
*The Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law*

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**Background and Purpose of Workshop**

This workshop was an outgrowth of a series of meetings and discussions held over the past few months that have identified the need for those of us concerned with human rights, international law and the US engagement in the world community to be able to get our message out in a more effective and efficient way than we have been doing. There is a sense that the concepts of human rights and international law have been co-opted by individuals and institutions who do not actually promote a human rights agenda and who do not advocate for real global engagement. Yet they have been controlling the “frames” in which we think about human rights, and have been extremely effective in creating messages which have ultimately undercut our work and created an atmosphere suspicious to human rights and reluctant to understand the possibilities for the US’s constructive role in the world.

Following discussions on this topic held at the recent Shock and Law meetings organized by EarthRights International, the Bringing Human Rights Home Network meetings in New York, and in discussions by the US Human Rights Network, this workshop was a first step to try to address some of the concerns listed above by first acknowledging the problems with the current ‘frames’ used to address human rights issues, second, by attempting to identify effective ‘frames’ and better ways in which advocates and activists in the human rights field communicate their messages, and third, by attempting to find different ways in which to connect the discourses on civil rights (mainly US oriented) and human rights (mainly internationally oriented) in order to promote similar goals.

The workshop purposefully followed a very interactive format, bringing together advocates from over 15 different organizations with interests as diverse as immigration policy, environmental protection, penal reform, religious action, policy studies, homelessness, issues related to the Holocaust, and human rights issues in general. The basic framework of the workshop was created by Citizens for Global Solutions in collaboration

with the Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law, using as a centerpiece the “US in the World” guide developed by the Aspen Institute and Rockefeller Brothers Fund. The guide is based on extensive research conducted over two years by a task force of about 50 individuals representing different areas of foreign policy and communications expertise which sought to identify some of the key elements of a shared, nonpartisan vision of how best to communicate with Americans about the U.S. role in the world.

The framework of the workshop thus centered around addressing a series of main questions:

- 1) What are some of main frames/assumptions with which we are working?
- 2) What are some of the major concerns that the US public has when addressing international/global issues?
- 3) How do we, as advocates, currently respond to those concerns?
- 4) How can we ‘bring global issues home’ and explain them in light of bigger ideas that concern us all: questions of justice, equality, well-being, security?
- 5) How can we, as advocates on different issues, come together to create a similar language/discourse that will have a stronger appeal to a larger audience?
- 6) What are some specific recommendations, helpful arguments and facts that we could use in our communications?

Using a pre-registration online survey asking questions about main interests and communication strategies, the facilitators were able to better focus the conversation on cross-cutting interests as well as develop specific tasks that would help create the basis of a new communication strategy for the organizations present at the workshop. The results of the survey showed that over half of the participants use public outreach and campaigning and fact finding and documentation as primary work methods. 92% of the organizations represented do television interviews, 88% engage in debates, 85% have newsletters, 77% write articles and use websites to communicate and 79% make speeches and presentations. The results also pointed to similar interests across the board in issues related to civil, environmental and human rights.

With these results in mind, the workshop was constructed around four key tasks. The first task asked participants to share with the whole group any and all questions which they hear about three specific topics: the use of torture, the International Criminal Court (ICC), and homelessness. These three topics were chosen to illustrate the intersection of issues which are traditionally perceived as primarily domestic (homelessness), primarily international (ICC) and both (torture.) The second and third tasks sought to get participants to find linkages among the various questions on the three topics and to identify 5 “meta-questions” that would encompass the main concerns expressed in the questions. The last task asked participants to develop effective answers (messages) to the meta-questions. It sought to get participants to start thinking about how they could use these meta-questions in order to create new and better frames for their messages. This particular format was also used in order to give participants an example of how they could start addressing some of these issues within their own organizations as well as within networks of similar interests.

## **Conclusions**

As a first step in the larger process of creating a common frame and language for effectively talking about human rights issues, this workshop managed to draw attention to the need to start thinking about better communication strategies. It pointed to some of the current weaknesses in our present strategies, and attempted to use the ‘US in the World’ guide to give some clear, specific recommendations, helpful arguments and facts that we can use to shape new communications strategies. The IM4HR workshop allowed a diverse group to use this specific interaction as an example of how they could continue to work together as a group or within their

specific organizations, in order to better communicate with their public. We hope that this workshop will become a stepping stone for further workshops and seminars that will be able to develop more concrete strategies across a larger network of groups.

Some of the suggestions and next step ideas that came out of the evaluation process included:

- 1) spending more time on actually crafting effective messages
- 2) identifying the core concepts that the human rights community is working with in order to craft messages around these concepts
- 3) giving more concrete examples of what effective messages are
- 4) conducting more research and developing “hard data” (including polling data and tested messages)
- 5) meeting in smaller groups that work on similar issues
- 6) using effective messages of the ‘other side’ as a tool to understand what makes them successful
- 7) develop specific tools/clear directions and suggestions on how effective messages are crafted

## MEETING NOTES

Below, we have transcribed the questions, meta-questions and sample messages that the participants came up with during the 4 task process of this specific workshop.

### TASK 1: Brainstorming Common Questions

Participants were asked to generate every question they hear about on the following three issues:

- 1) Torture
- 2) International Criminal Court (ICC)
- 3) Homelessness

### Questions Generated<sup>1</sup>

- Won't the US be unfairly targeted if it joins the ICC?
- Why can't “those people” just get jobs?
- Why worry about how terrorists are treated when Americans get blown up?
- They are coming after us so why can't we go after them?
- Don't certain interrogation methods bring about important info?
- Why should Governments be in the business of providing housing?
- Why should we let unelected international prosecutors have power over us?
- Isn't the ICC an example of world government?
- Aren't US values different because ours are God-based?
- If someone has information about impending attacks, shouldn't we use all means necessary?
- Don't some people choose to be homeless?

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<sup>1</sup> Participants shouted out questions on all three topics simultaneously, so the topics are mixed together.

- How can a right to a home be justifiable?
- Are social and economics rights really rights?
- How could the US possibly benefit from ICC ratification?
- Isn't the ICC a liberal conspiracy to undermine US sovereignty?
- Haven't the US and Israel successfully fought terrorism with torture?
- Why should we care about what other governments think?
- Is stripping and humiliating a prisoner the same as pulling out fingernails?
- Won't giving away housing ruin our economy because they should be working?
- Don't we need to protect our troops from the ICC?
- Would you rather have affordable housing or textbooks/armor?
- What can we really do to end homelessness anyway?
- Didn't Jesus say the poor are always with you?
- Aren't our homeless better off than poor in other countries?
- Why do you care more about the bad guys than the good guys?
- Why don't you say anything when they do it to us?
- Why talk about rights, can't we just be nice to the homeless?
- Isn't the best way to fight homelessness by making the economy stronger (through supporting corporations)?
- What is the ICC?
- Aren't our laws enough to protect us?
- Don't we already have an ICC?
- How much will it cost?
- Don't we already have welfare/laws against torture?
- What is the difference between torture and abuse?
- Can I really make a difference?
- Why should government help homeless when private charities do a good job?
- Isn't torture just part of war?
- How can homelessness exist in the nation's capital?
- Do prisoners have rights and what are they?
- Aren't they just criminals?
- What is rendition?
- What's wrong with sending someone back to their country?

- Isn't it better to send them back than to have them here?
- Where is Guantanamo?
- They torture us, why can't we do it?
- Doesn't the military have its own courts?
- Why reward lazy people?
- Can't we get around torture laws by sending them to Egypt?
- It's always been this way, why change now?
- Don't we already give half our budget to foreign aid and welfare?
- How can we change things under this administration?
- The problem is so big – where to start?
- Can the ICC stop violence in Darfur?
- Don't homeless people have other problems?
- Who will oversee the ICC?
- Doesn't the US pay for and run all those big global institutions already?
- How can we trust the ICC?
- Aren't international organizations horribly inefficient?
- Aren't those really European ideas?
- How can I help a homeless person when I have my own problems?
- Don't we want African justice for African problems?
- Torture the French!
- Why are we so concerned with issues abroad when we have problems at home?
- What's the big deal? Torture doesn't happen here.
- Who are we to say what's right for other cultures?
- Aren't they better off in our prisons than under Saddam and the Taliban?
- Who defines torture?
- What other methods are there to get intelligence?
- How do you help someone who doesn't want help?
- Don't they know how to resist usual interrogation methods?
- Wasn't Abu Ghraib a couple of bad apples?
- Don't some beggars make good money?
- Why do we need an ICC – shouldn't countries deal with their own?

- Is the War on Terror a different war that requires different tactics?
- Who is to say what “adequate housing” is?
- Aren’t all homeless drug addicts/criminals/mentally ill?
- Isn’t it a right that I shouldn’t have to walk past these people everyday?
- Isn’t claiming you were tortured in Al Qaeda’s training manuals?
- Can’t we just put them in abandoned buildings?
- If you give them money doesn’t it only encourage them to stay on streets?
- Aren’t there plenty of shelters? Subsidized housing?
- Hasn’t public housing failed?
- Don’t HR violations only happen abroad?
- Who defines HR anyway?
- Why give my hard earned money to others?
- Aren’t homeless people all men/undereducated?
- Are there really families on the street?
- Why does Bush oppose the ICC?
- Aren’t all homeless people unemployed?
- If they can’t afford housing, why are they having kids?
- Don’t homeless people benefit from programs even though they don’t pay taxes?
- Isn’t the ICC about controlling the US?

## TASK 2: Looking for “Meta-Questions”

Participants were divided into three groups and asked to look for similarities across the long list of questions and come up with 4-5 “meta-questions” that would reflect those similarities and that, if answered, would provide answers to most of the questions asked.

Group 1 Meta-Questions:

- 1) Do ‘these people’ deserve rights? If so, why?
- 2) What do I lose or gain if these rights are granted?
- 3) Shouldn’t everyone be responsible for their own actions and for themselves?
- 4) Isn’t the US system the best model we have?
- 5) How can I trust that internationalism and right-based systems are going to work and reflect my own values?

Group 2 Meta-Questions:

- 1) Isn't the US different/better?
- 2) Isn't giving rights to others costly/ not worth the tradeoff?
- 3) There are such huge problems. What can we do?
- 4) What is all this? (what are human rights, international systems etc)
- 5) Don't we have to take care of our own first?

Group 3 Meta-Questions:

- 1) How do we promote human rights without infringing on security?
- 2) Why should I care?
- 3) Why should the US subordinate itself to international norms?
- 4) What is the role of government?
- 5) Who should be held accountable for these problems?
- 6) What are our options? Can we make a difference?

TASK 3: Synthesizing "Meta-Questions"

The 3 groups were asked to come back together and with the help of the moderator to look for similarities within their meta-questions and come up with a condensed list of 4-5 questions that everyone could agree upon.

Condensed list of meta-questions:

- 1) Is the US different/better? (exceptionalism/best model)
- 2) Does everyone deserve the same rights? (equality, dignity, universal rights, justice)
- 3) Who is responsible/accountable? (personal, government, enforcement, individual, who defines rights?)
- 4) What is the impact on me? (tradeoffs, security, zero-sum game, gain, cost)
- 5) This is so big – how can we solve the problem? (effectiveness, capacity to make difference, alternatives – or lack of, feasibility)

TASK 4: Answering "Meta-Questions"

After a powerpoint presentation which explored how to create effective messages, participants were divided into five groups and were asked to create messages/answers that best reflect/respond to a few of the meta-

questions. At the end, each group's 'answers' were posted on the walls and all participants were encouraged to respond in writing to the other group's suggestions.

*Group A:*

Meta-Questions:

- 1) Is the US different/better?
- 2) Does everyone deserve the same rights?
- 3) Who is responsible/accountable?

Message:

"The US has historically been a leader in protecting peoples' rights, and must continue to take the lead. The constitution guarantees equal rights, making human rights fundamental American values. America should play a role in protecting rights around the world."

Comments:

- 1) Didn't the US condone slavery? Isn't it one of the few democracies left that defends the death penalty?
- 2) I like this but it doesn't make the case for rights that aren't in the Constitution.
- 3) I think this could better address whys and hows.
- 4) Addresses questions well but doesn't answer 'what can I do?'
- 5) Why should American play a role? American people at large or the government?

*Group B:*

Meta-Questions:

- 1) What is the impact on me?
- 2) This is so big – how can we solve the problem?
- 3) Is the US different/better?

Message:

"All people deserve to live a dignified life. The US has played a positive role in defining and advancing human rights. Dynamic international systems are in place that benefit from the voices of individuals and communities. A commitment to the protection of human rights will result in a more peaceful, just and secure world."

Comments:

- 1) Wanted to see collectively added.
- 2) Dynamic? What's that about?
- 3) But what is the impact on me?

- 4) Very internationally focused. Loses the domestic side.
- 5) A bit too academic. Where's the emotional connection?

*Group C:*

Meta-Questions:

- 1) Does everyone deserve the same rights?
- 2) Who is accountable/responsible?
- 3) What is the impact on me?

Message:

“Our nation was founded on principles of fairness and equality for all. Americans are committed to these principles at home and abroad. Respecting the rights of others is the only way to ensure your rights are respected at home. We are all responsible for upholding human rights. Shared impact, shared responsibility, shared solutions. You and your children will live in a safer world when everyone’s rights are protected.”

Comments:

- 1) Good appeal to typical patriotism.
- 2) Very good messaging but sounds oddly threatening.
- 3) Good connection between global and domestic.
- 4) Like phrasing – easy to remember. But no specific reference to Human Rights.
- 5) Excellent connection with lots of core ideas. Resonates emotionally.
- 6) I like this concept a lot but not sure if people will get the connection.

*Group D:*

Meta-Questions:

- 1) This is so big – how can we solve the problem?
- 2) Is the US different/better?
- 3) Does everyone deserve the same rights?

Message:

“By working together and harnessing our best ideas, we can build effective solutions. We must do this for the sake of our children’s future; it’s simply the right thing to do. The common dignity of humankind calls us to treat others as we would want to be treated.”

Comments:

- 1) Still seems too big – but answers other 2 questions.
- 2) No mention of human rights. Is that on purpose?
- 3) Good song lyrics or church sermon.
- 4) Good positive call to action, collaborative, evokes a sense of common goals.
- 5) Awesome, very clear, common principles.
- 6) Resonates as an emotional proof.

*Group E:*

Meta-Questions:

- 1) Who is responsible/accountable?
- 2) What is the impact on me?
- 3) This is so big – how can we solve the problem?

Message:

“Rights begin close to home. (quote from Eleanor Roosevelt.) Global standards protect our rights as well as others. We can be vulnerable if rights are not protected around the world. Message to Americans: This is not about ‘good enough’ but about ‘we can do better.’ Rights are universal and not dependent on who and where you are (what you did.)”

Comments:

- 1) Does this reinforce of break down the us/them?