

**Human Rights and Technological Change:  
Conflicts and Convergences since the  
1950s**

**Veranstalter:** Dr. Michael Homberg (ZZF Potsdam), Dr. Benjamin Möckel (Universität zu Köln), Dr. Daniel Stahl (Universität Jena)  
**Datum, Ort:** 19.09.2019 - 20.09.2019, Köln  
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The past years have seen a number of controversies on technological change and its impact on national and global societies, politics and economy. Military and civil drones, government and corporate surveillance or the promises and fears of Big Data have triggered discussions in which many have argued that these technologies pose a threat to human rights or call for a new way of thinking on technology regulation.<sup>1</sup> For decades, development aid, new media and reproductive technologies, too, have been discussed in close proximity to human rights and humanitarian discourses, both as helpful tools for the human rights movements and as challenges. However, this connection has largely been missing in historical scholarship on both subjects. The conference at the Fritz-Thyssen-Foundation brought together international historians to follow up on this dynamic entanglement.

In their introduction, conveners BENJAMIN MÖCKEL (Cologne) und MICHAEL HOMBERG (Potsdam) proposed different perspectives a history of technology and human rights could take. They outlined broad definitions of both concepts and traced back their rise to global relevance to the decades after the Second World War. Thus, they argued for a „double origin of technopolitics and human rights“ after 1945, which could be used as a framework to expand on the relation of technology and morality. Followed by a brief overview of the transnational institutions that dealt with technological change, of technocritical discourses and calls for intervention since the 1960s, five exemplary approaches and recent trends in historiography were discussed and brought up in the following panels: a) the cultural history of politics, b) the history of knowledge, c) new international history, d)

environmental history, and finally, e) methods and concepts from science and technology studies.

The first panel on Social Engineering had to be condensed from the announced panels on infrastructures and reproductive technologies due to short-term cancellations. The decision turned out to be very productive, as both talks shared common themes of analysis. BRADLEY SIMPSON (Connecticut) discussed the Indonesian transmigration program that resettled five million people between 1969 and the 1980s within Indonesia. He identified a history of colonial and post-colonial resettlement of farmers and militias and the emergence of notions of empty provinces and cultural diffusion in prior decades. Aided by international investors like the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and Western nations, the authoritarian state under Suharto began relocating families and soldiers to spread Javanese culture, take tribal lands and militarize the country's periphery. The program did not only signify the transnational dimensions of Indonesian authoritarianism, as Simpson pointed out, but also drew sharp criticism from human rights organizations abroad, which rallied around both environmental and indigenous issues.

ROMAN BIRKE (Jena) provided insights into the history of population control and contraceptive technologies. Identifying the adoption of human rights language in population control discourses since the late 1960s, he focused on UN commissions and two state programs in India and Ireland. Well-funded American NGOs like the Population Council had a lasting impact on global policies by framing individual choices like family planning as collective moral matters. The US, Birke argued, was successful in using the UN as a proxy to disseminate population control policies around the world, especially in South-East Asia. By 1970, more than twenty states of that region had initiated a population control regime. He showed for India and Ireland, how the discourse on contraceptive and sterilization technologies was shaped

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: Ben Wagner et al. (eds.), *Research Handbook on Human Rights and Digital Technologies: Global Politics, Law and International Relations*, Cheltenham 2019.

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by moral arguments. He and the following commentators emphasized the close connection between human rights and modernization efforts and the intersections of race, class and gender in these contexts. The language of human rights was interpreted as a strategic discourse, while certain conflicting rights (e.g. the right to self-determination and intergenerational justice) were discussed as evidence of the contradictory nature of human rights.

The second panel addressed the deep connection between economy and human rights. MICHEL CHRISTIAN (Geneva) focused on discussions about „industrial redeployment“ in the United Nations Industrial Development Organization during the 1970s. The concept was meant to redistribute industrial capacity to „underdeveloped nations“ to establish an international (i.e. Western) division of labor. However, the USSR was quick to criticize that a right to development was only a means to enable a worldwide market economy under US leadership. While the short-lived discussions were more progressive in nature than former development aid programs, little thought was given to social issues, human rights or democratization.

KNUD ANDRESEN (Hamburg) dealt with labour rights at the Volkswagen plant in apartheid South Africa. Pointing out the „paradox international isolation“ of South Africa, being an internationally condemned racist regime, while at the same time functioning as a Western outpost against communism, Andresen connected perspectives from the multinational companies' business leaders, the (White) South African subsidiaries, the black labor force and global activists that demanded disinvestment. With the Apartheid and industrialization regime proving to be dysfunctional for market capitalism, Volkswagen slowly softened its segregation policies to acquire cheaper labor.

In the discussion, it was again stressed how important global contexts like the 1973 energy crises and the Cold War in general were to human rights activism on technological issues. Further, it seemed that both technology as an empowering tool and the development dictatorships of the Cold War Era deserve more critical attention with regard to human rights activism. The first day came to a close with

a public screening of „The Cleaners“, a documentary about the „content moderation“ industry in the Philippines, where young workers delete millions of social media posts for the tech giants, and a thought-provoking talk with the director.

The third panel of the conference dealt with the many ways in which media cultures have intersected with human rights activism. ANDREAS KAHRS (Berlin) addressed the anti-apartheid protests from a different angle, focusing on the South African programs to refute apartheid-criticism. Since 1971, the government sponsored ad buys, luxury travels and acquired international newspapers to influence the global reporting on Apartheid. To counter the increasingly critical media coverage and to confuse the anti-apartheid narrative, think tanks and information agencies published brochures that reframed segregation as being in line with human rights, since it served black peoples' „special needs.“ New communication technology played a critical role, since photography and televised pictures, the printing press and activist media heavily mediated the image of South Africa.

BARBARA KEYS (Melbourne) related technological change to the human rights organizations themselves. She discussed the use and professionalization of computer work and information and communication technology (ICT) in NGOs. While the centrality of ICTs could be explained by the inherent need of activists for information that was believed to be a prerequisite for further action, in practice it meant the establishment of vast paper databases to store data on human rights violations that were then digitized in the 1990s. The quantification of human rights data, Keys argued, followed the assumption that the mere numbers represented facts, while images were attached as a matter of evidence. She convincingly pointed out, that IT knowledge and raw data perpetuated hierarchies, and the professionalization marginalized female human rights workers that had previously been active in NGO bureaucracies.

LIA BÖRSCH (Florence) presented internal discussions and practices within Amnesty International concerning the use and production of human rights images. Arguing for a closer look on the visual culture(s) of hu-

manitarianism, she traced the development of image strategies and field recommendations and brought the „agents of images“ (Annette Vowinckel), the photographers in the field, to attention. Commissions inside Amnesty reflected on the power of the visual as a means of „shock“ and „evidence“, and as a universal language, but their use of atrocity images also drew heavy criticism. Since the 1980s, Börsch suggested, Amnesty has become an image agency whose broad media impact deserves further interest. Commentators subsequently brought up the ambivalent relation of data and images that were present in all papers. It was also stressed that databases could be understood as visual media themselves, and the tendency to systematize atrocities seemed to be another field of human rights and technology that has yet to be further scrutinized. The (re-)negotiation of ethical uses of imagery could be studied more closely in relation to the different reflections of activists towards their technological tools. In addition, the three cases signify power relations. Who controls media narratives and has the power to disseminate human rights knowledge or propaganda?

The fourth panel brought computerization into focus, which was already touched upon in earlier papers. BENEDIKT NEUROTH (Berlin) offered a brief look into privacy law debates in the United States. Computerization became a concern when it was revealed that law enforcement and national security agencies were storing data on dissidents and exchanging information. Following court cases on government surveillance activities, Neuroth identified the American Civil Liberties Union as the primary advocacy group for privacy. Both advocates and courts referred to national and international legal texts (like the US Constitution, OECD reports and the Human Rights Declaration) to balance a „right to privacy“ and free speech with conflicting „rights to security“ or „national interests.“

In the final talk, LARRY FROHMAN (Stony Brooks, NY) reflected on the introduction of a data protection law in West Germany. Privacy rights, he convincingly argued, had to be reconceptualized as information rights in the 1970s, when the definitions of privacy in ear-

lier legal texts proved to be insufficient to deal with the issues of the emerging information society. However, West German approaches to data protection were informed by legal and liberal traditions as well as interpretations of human dignity that enforced the notion that a human right for the digital age was needed. Data protection, the limitation of data dissemination, was thus envisioned as a right to informational self-determination. In his closing remarks, Frohman pointed out how „surveillance capitalism“ (Shoshana Zuboff) and Big Data are posing a fundamental threat to the regulatory frameworks of the 1970s. Comments raised the question if and how privacy is connected to property (e.g. the right to one's own data), postulated a tension between civil liberties, business laws and human rights frames and again asked for different perspectives on computerization issues from non-Western, socialist or authoritarian societies. Surveillance, data and control dispositifs were agreed to be major points of interest in the different papers.

In his conclusion, third convener DANIEL STAHL (Jena) dispelled three myths about technology and human rights. Human rights are neither ahistorical, nor is technology only a force for development and progress. Both are also connected to narratives of Western exceptionalism that still inform debates. The conference, he summarized, has again shown the ambiguity of human rights and the conflicts involved. Technology as well is ambivalent and not neutral. It can aid human rights activism or be a tool for atrocities.

The very productive atmosphere led to fruitful discussions. Most papers dealt with their subject in a multi-perspective way, which enabled critical reflection. However, most of them focused on discourses instead of the actual technologies themselves and their concrete use. Especially in the field of humanitarian work, a closer look at the actual usage of technology has proven productive. Still, the conference offered a great vantage point for future studies into the subject, which will hopefully elaborate on the history of this complex relationship that is sure to remain a pressing matter in the future.

**Conference overview:**

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Dr. Michael Homberg (Potsdam) and Dr. Benjamin Möckel (Cologne): Welcome and Introductory Remarks

### *I. Social Engineering*

Chairs: Dr. Volker Barth (Cologne) and Dr. Verena Limper (Münster)

Dr. Bradley Simpson (Connecticut): Development through Armaments in Authoritarian Indonesia

Roman Birke (Jena): Individual Freedom or Responsibility to the Community? Human Rights, Contraceptive Technologies, and Fertility Control in the 1960s and 1970s

### *II. Production*

Chair: Peter Ridder (Munich)

Michel Christian (Geneva): The UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the Program of „Industrial Redeployment“ in the 1970s

Dr. Knud Andresen (Hamburg): Human Rights and Labor Rights at the Volkswagen Plant in South Africa

### *III. Media Cultures*

Chair: Prof. Dr. Anke Ortlepp (Cologne)

Andreas Kahrs (Berlin): Human Rights as a Topic in South African Propaganda during Apartheid

Prof. Dr. Barbara Keys (Melbourne): „Tools for Truth“: Human Rights NGOs and Typewriters, Telephones, and Computers

Lia Börsch (Heidelberg): Searching for a Universal Language: Discourse and the Organisation of Images at Amnesty International in the 1980s

Public screening of the movie „The Cleaners“ (Germany, 2018) and discussion with one of the directors Moritz Riesewieck (Chair: Prof. Dr. Habbo Knoch)

### *IV. Computerization*

Chair: Prof. em. Dr. Jost Dülffer (Cologne)

Benedikt Neuroth (Berlin): Big Data and Privacy in the USA during the 1960s and 1970s

Prof. Dr. Larry Frohman (Stony Brook): Human Rights and Digital Wrongs: Computers, Personal Information, and the Evolving Dis-

course of Privacy Rights in West Germany

Dr. Daniel Stahl (Jena): Conclusion

Final discussion

Reference:

<sup>2</sup> See for example: Ben Wagner et al. (eds.), *Research Handbook on Human Rights and Digital Technologies: Global Politics, Law and International Relations*, Cheltenham 2019.

Tagungsbericht *Human Rights and Technological Change: Conflicts and Convergences since the 1950s*. 19.09.2019 - 20.09.2019, Köln, in: H-Soz-Kult 28.11.2019.

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