

With Power Comes Responsibility: Technology Firms Face Increasing Expectations to Respect Human Rights

LONDON, Feb. 28 /CSRwire/ - Today Business & Human Rights Resource Centre launched a briefing highlighting the human rights responsibilities of information and communications technology (ICT) companies around the world. The briefing is launched in advance of [RightsCon](#), a major gathering of human rights experts, business people and government representatives in Silicon Valley from 3-5 March, organized by Access.

Technology is a powerful tool for human rights. The [10-page briefing](#) calls on ICT firms everywhere to maximize their positive contribution to human rights, and to avoid abuses. With the ever-increasing scrutiny of ICT companies' conduct – much of this enabled by the internet itself – and the growing availability of practical guidance on how to do the right thing, there is little excuse for inaction.

Since 2005, the non-profit Business & Human Rights Resource Centre has invited companies to respond publicly to human rights concerns raised by civil society. Over 220 of these approaches have been to ICT firms, which have a response rate of 70% ([full details here](#)). In 2005-6, only four percent of all the companies we invited to respond to concerns were from the ICT sector – by 2012-13, this figure increased to thirteen percent, demonstrating the increasing attention on the sector.

[“Information technology: The Power and Responsibility of Business”](#) features ways in which some ICT firms have shown disregard for human rights – for example the Canadian firm Netsweeper which was found to be assisting censorship efforts by the government in Pakistan.

It demonstrates how others have been on a learning curve, to now take a leadership stance. These include Yahoo! which, following criticism for handing user details of the journalist Shi Tao to the Chinese authorities that led to his arrest, then became a founding member (along with Google and Microsoft) of the Global Network Initiative, a multi-stakeholder initiative to address privacy and freedom of expression.

Over three quarters of the Resource Centre's approaches to ICT companies for responses have related to concerns in four countries/regions:

- **China** (32% of the invitations to respond, many in relation to working conditions in ICT firms' supply chains);
- **Middle East & North Africa** (23%, largely relating to surveillance, censorship and internet shut-downs);
- **South Asia** (12%, regarding working conditions and censorship issues) and;
- **USA** (10%, which includes approaches to ICT companies regarding lobbying by US business associations against the implementation of the “Dodd Frank” Act rules on the sourcing of conflict minerals – some firms distanced themselves from the business associations on this).

The many companies responding include Apple's supplier Foxconn over allegations of harmful working conditions in its factories, South African telecoms firm MTN regarding an internet shut-down during protests in Sudan, and Qatari firm Ooredoo regarding steps it will take to ensure human rights are respected through its new telecoms license in Myanmar.

This response process ensures the company headquarters is aware of the concerns; encourages companies to publicly address them; provides fair coverage; and enables comparison of the substance of

the company responses. While the quality of responses varies, a response on the part of the company demonstrates a willingness to engage publicly with civil society on human rights issues.

The scale of the recent Facebook acquisition of WhatsApp is just one illustration of the global reach and influence of ICT companies: a firm with over 1.2 billion monthly users acquires for US\$19 billion another that is aiming to also have one billion users worldwide. With technology's influence comes enormous potential to help realize human rights: by enabling the free flow of information and enhancing transparency, empowering marginalized groups, and strengthening links between activists for example.

At the same time, ICT companies run the risk of committing human rights abuses on a large scale, from violation of privacy to facilitating censorship and repression. They might do this directly, or by being involved in abuses by governments and others.

Phil Bloomer, Executive Director of Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, said: "As this briefing shows, all around the world human rights activists are calling for greater responsibility from the ICT sector. From the exposure of misconduct, to online petitions, to street protests, to collaboration and engagement with firms that are committed to human rights – the common purpose is to maximize the potential of technology to bring about a freer and fairer world."

The briefing illustrates the human rights dimensions of ICT in six areas:

- **Combating censorship**
- **Curbing surveillance and repression**
- **Protecting privacy**
- **Broadening access**
- **Engaging the supply chain**
- **Respecting children's rights**

It concludes with recommendations to companies and also to governments – given that action by both is needed for change.

The Resource Centre's Program Director Annabel Short said: "For ICT companies that want to do the right thing, there is [no shortage of practical guidance](#) on human rights. Technology changes by the day, and reaches across national boundaries with conflicting laws: ensuring respect for human rights throughout a company's operations is challenging, but it is a goal that all companies can and should be aiming for."

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1. Contact Annabel Short, Program Director, Business & Human Rights Resource Centre: +1 212 564 9160 / +1 646 246 0359
2. Access the full briefing: www.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/information-technology-briefing-feb-2014.pdf
3. About the Resource Centre: Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, an independent non-profit organization, provides the leading information hub on business & human rights: www.business-humanrights.org.

The website tracks reports about the human rights impacts (positive & negative) of over 5000 companies in over 180 countries, and provides guidance tools and resources for all those working in this field. Its researchers are based in Brazil, Colombia, Hong Kong, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Myanmar, Senegal, South Africa, UK, Ukraine and USA.

Mary Robinson, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and President of Ireland, is Chair of the Centre's International Advisory Network. The Centre does not accept funding from companies or company foundations, in order to maintain its independence and to prevent any possible perception of a conflict of interest.

Mission: To encourage companies to respect and promote human rights, and avoid harm to people. The Resource Centre does this by advancing:

- **Transparency** – pursuing, collecting and disseminating to a global audience information about company conduct, positive and negative;
- **Public accountability** – helping civil society get companies to address concerns; seeking responses and drawing attention to each company's response or failure to respond; and
- **Informed decision-making** – providing the leading business & human rights resource and guidance hub, to assist civil society, companies and others.

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πηγή: CSRwire

28/02/2014