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Examining the Effectiveness of an Online Community of Practice: The New Tactics Program

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The New Tactics Program

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A Master's Practitioner's Paper

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And accepted on the recommendation of

Nigel O.M. Brissett, Ed.D, Chief Instructor

ABSTRACT

Examining the Effectiveness of an Online Community of Practice:
The New Tactics Program

Frances Mary Rashmi Boehnlein

The purpose of this Practitioner's paper is to develop a clear understanding of the basic elements needed for a successful online community of practice. I will explore what The Center for Victims of Torture's New Tactics (NT) in Human Rights program is currently doing, distinguish effective-based best practices and offer recommendations to the program as to what they could improve to support the vision of a thriving online community of practice. This paper draws on both literature focusing on communities of practice, as well as my experience working with the NT program. I conclude that for as many participants who consider the NT program a community of practice, the same amount of participants disagreed or had a neutral opinion due to their definition or a lack of knowledge of communities of practice.

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Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, May 2015

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my Master's Practitioner's paper to my parents who have instilled in me

a beautiful sense of community that exemplifies equality, diversity and service. I

admire you and thank you for sharing the world with me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The New Tactics in Human Rights (NT) program supports human rights defenders work more effectively to achieve their goals and better address human rights violations around the world through a global online community of practitioners. The NT program, a program within The Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) organization headquartered in Minnesota, began because CVT recognized how complex the systems are that allow torture and other human rights abuses to continue. In order to address such challenging human rights violations, CVT and others use the NT program as a strategic online platform to communicate and collaborate with a multitude of local and international partners. They also use the NT program as a tool to share tactics and resources from the field. CVT also works directly with torture survivors in Minnesota, Jordan and Kenya to promote healing and rehabilitation in their families and communities (Center for Victims of Torture, "New Tactics in Human Rights").

I was made aware of the internship opportunity with CVT during my first semester of graduate school. A close friend of my family introduced me to Ruth Barrett-Rendler, the Deputy Director at CVT's headquarters in my home state of Minnesota. Shortly thereafter, I conducted a phone interview with Beth Wickum, the Director of Volunteer Services who talked me through current and summer

internship opportunities at CVT. After speaking with Ms. Wickum and researching CVT, I was extremely drawn to the organization's mission and the work they do, both on a local and international level and decided to pursue the opportunity. It was then that she introduced me to Kristin Antin who worked for CVT as the Online Community Builder for the New Tactics in Human Rights program located in upstate New York. After speaking with Kristin about my background, my interests, expectations and my thoughts concerning my research, she agreed I would be a good fit for the position.

Within my Practitioner's paper it was my goal to develop a clear understanding of the basic elements needed for a successful online community of practice and to make recommendations to the NT program on how to advance their implementation. My main task was to use field work, and a detailed systematic comparative analysis of research through my experiences to contribute to the development and advancement of the organization's operations as an advocate of their mission, vision and current programmatic initiatives.

 I used the following three key objectives as I undertook my assignment of supporting the improvement of the NT program's online community, as well as providing recommendations for long-term developmental opportunities:

- **Define** the broader concept of a community of practice and to **identify** the essential elements, which create and foster a successful online community of practice.

- **Distinguish** the level of effective-based best practices in the literature on online communities of practice and **evaluate** them against my experience, the experience of the NT program's supervisor and participants.

- **Suggest strategies** to the NT program on how to further improve their active online community of practice.

To aid an organic development of responses to my fundamental objectives, I developed a system of inquiry, informed by the Grounded Theory methodological approach that lead to a context-specific set of findings that support the advancement of the program. The Grounded Theory approach allowed me to immerse myself in a hands-on learning experience and analysis and in turn, emerged a set of ideas for best practices in the form of recommendations that captured the basic elements needed for effective online communities of practice.

It is my hope this paper will be used as a resource for the NT program and CVT's community moving forward, as well as a valuable case study to those currently a part of or interested in participating in an online community of practice.

CVT's Target Demographic & the Relationship to Technology

During my internship with CVT's NT program, the audience of practitioners whom I worked closely with were Human Rights Defenders (HRDs), defined as those working in the human rights field against human rights violations. "Human Rights Defenders are often the only force standing between ordinary people and the unbridled power of the state. They are vital to the development of democratic processes and institutions, ending impunity and the promotion and protections of human rights" (Vitaliev, 2007, p. III). My sample of practitioners provided to me through data from the NT program all work for their respective organizations, however participate in the NT program representing a variety of different sectors, such as government institutions, NGOs, international development, policy and law, humanitarian aid and response, academia and digital security. Each of the practitioners work in complex environments which differ and range from working with direct service actors in the international field to working at a high profile institution or NGOs, indirectly managing operations from afar. Some of the organizations they represent include: Amnesty International USA, WITNESS, Benetech, HURIDOCS, Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project.

The use of technology and the role it plays in online communities of practice strongly correlates with the work of human rights practitioners in the field. Human

rights practitioners often rely on technology for a variety of functions including, information management, information storage, sharing of information etc. The use of technology through mobile devices, computers, external hard drives, tape recorders and such are often used in the field and have benefited HRDs by advancing communication, promoted new research opportunities and enabled HRDs to expand their networks. "Human rights defenders (HRDs) are increasingly empowered by, and dependent upon, digital technologies. These technologies have opened up new potentials, enabling HRDs to extend their capacity to document and analyse human rights abuses, to amplify them, and to more effectively organize locally and internationally" (Hankey & Clunaigh, 2013, p.1). Digital technologies also give HRDs and their organizations a voice and a platform to promote their cause and important issues facing the demographic they represent. "The work of human rights defenders and organisations is intertwined with technology. It facilitates communications and allows us to store and process large amounts of information cheaply and within minimal space. Technology enables even a small and remote organisation to acquire a global voice" (Vitaliev, 2007, p. 1).

Having the opportunity to work with an organization that has a preexisting online portal designed to share resources and best practices allowed me to contribute to the discipline by shedding light on many human rights issues and the work that is being done around the world by HRDs.

Case Study & Objectives

Before my internship began I had two introductions to CVT and the NT program. As my first introduction, CVT asked me to act as the official scribe for New Tactics program's Theory of Change Workshop at their headquarters in St. Paul, MN. I saw the opportunity as a nice icebreaker to my internship, a chance to meet my internship supervisor, Kristin Antin and network with other CVT employees. I returned to CVT's headquarters for my second introduction soon after to listen to a lecture from a fieldworker stationed in Uganda. Having the opportunity to witness both the theoretical and practical work CVT does prior to my internship provided me with a solid foundation and understanding of the organization.

My position as the New Tactics in Human Rights Online Community Intern involved a variety of different tasks and responsibilities of which I have organized into five categories: (1) research & recruitment (2) documentation (3) interviews & online surveys (4) open online forums and (5) advocacy work. All categories were interconnected, therefore I worked on them simultaneously throughout my internship. The following is a breakdown of tasks completed within each category.

Tasks involving **research and recruitment** included researching and soliciting participants to interview and complete NT's online survey, research tactics participants' use in the field, research potential contacts at new organizations to

join the monthly online conversations and to research preexisting participants and their organizations. Research was an important component of my internship. Having little prior knowledge of the field, research was essential to understanding the responsibilities of human rights defenders and what an online community of practice would be, based on the CVT's NT program.

Documentation: My charge was to read, synthesize and write a summary based on the information given in May and June's monthly online conversations and the comments made by participants. The NT program provided me with an evaluation template to use when writing the summary, as well as a customized coding system and a tagging procedure to use when highlighting important comments from participants. I documented the main ideas listed in the conversations, tactics used, case studies from the field and resources suggested by practitioners. After writing the online monthly summaries both Kristin and the lead facilitator(s) of the month review and publish the document online for participants to view and refer back to moving forward.

Another major responsibility during my time with CVT and the NT program was to **solicit and conduct informal interviews** as well as distribute an online survey for existing participants. I was interested in learning more about the impact the NT program had on their human rights work and if active participants considered the

NT program an online community of practice. Even though this task was very time consuming, it was the most interesting part of the process, by far. The process for conducting the informal interviews included researching and recruiting interviewees from three main contact lists of participants provided by Kristin, confirming participants to speak to about their experience with the NT program, scheduling the informal interviews and lastly, gathering and organizing the data. To be fair to those participants who did not have time to talk, Kristin and I created an online survey through Google Forms using the same questions as the informal interview. When creating the interview questions and online survey I used a combination of questions from a previous survey given by the NT program prior to my internship, questions Kristin and I had for the participants and questions related to my research focusing on online communities of practice.

The **live online** aspect of my internship included engaging with NT's global online community of human rights defenders in monthly discussions held for one week each month on the NT's website and multiple live Google Hangout discussions centered around the monthly theme. The Google Hangout discussions typically happened 3-5 times during the week of an open online conversation and were open to all online participants. During the Google Hangout discussions I took detailed notes of which I incorporated into the monthly conversation summary. All

Google Hangout discussions were recorded and uploaded to the website for participants to view at any time.

My last task a part of my internship with CVT and the NT program focused on **advocacy work**. When my supervisor, Kristin was out of town for two weeks I was responsible for managing the NT program's social media profiles specifically Facebook and Twitter. Before her departure, Kristin and I drafted a social media plan to help guide my work. My job included writing a total of 5 Facebook statuses and 40 Tweets highlighting tactics and resources from human rights defenders in the field. More in-depth descriptions of these tactics and resources can currently be found on the NT website. Since NT's participants live all over the world, I used the website, Buffer to schedule each social media upload so information would constantly be posted throughout the day. I also retweeted and replied to social media comments associated with my posts.

Mode of Inquiry

My reflections and analysis of my internship with CVT and the NT program are largely influenced by the logic of Grounded Theory, rooted in the social sciences. According to Patton (2002), "grounded theory focuses on the process of generating theory rather than a particular theoretical content. It emphasizes steps

and procedures for connecting induction and deduction through the constant comparative methods, comparing research sites, doing theoretical sampling, and testing emergent concepts with additional fieldwork" (p.125). It's from the generation of theory, comparative methods and the testing of emergent concepts from systematic research that I've formed the findings and recommendations of my Practitioner's paper. Throughout the analytical process, the majority of the time I used the qualitative grounded theory framework beginning with developing the logic, identifying the research objectives and affirming the purpose statement. Further strategies included theoretical sampling of online survey candidates, the utilization of open-ended questions during informal interviews, collecting and gathering of data, initial coding etc. (Charmaz, 2006, p.11). The analytical design and framework used not only followed academic standards, but also complemented the strategic model the NT program uses focusing on comparative methods and the natural sharing of information.

My main charge throughout my Practitioner's paper process was to use my experience to do applied research to support and further advance the NT program's vision of a thriving online community of practice.

Data Collection & Recording Methods

Since my internship with CVT's NT program was an online internship, the processes and methods used for data collection and recording were also done online through various resources. I used the following seven mediums for data collection: (1) Google Forms to collect data from the online survey and my supervisor's survey, (2) coded links to record important points and/or resources from the monthly conversation (3) archives from the NT website (4) Excel documents used to record data from the online surveys, my supervisor's survey and participant contact and activity information (5) Microsoft Word to document information and my daily tasks recorded in my CVT Log, NT's social media plan, interview questions and meeting notes with Kristin (6) Google Docs to share information with Kristin and lastly, (7) Dropbox to store and back up all my research information.

Since I worked remotely, I created a specific structure for myself when recording the data I collected throughout my internship. A central hub for my data was kept in my CVT Log where I recorded the date, hours worked, tasks achieved, my observations, personal reactions and action. When keeping track of my social media posts, I used Buffer to upload Facebook statuses and Tweets. Lastly, I saved all my internship information on my computer and backed it up using

Dropbox and an additional USB Drive. The majority of my tasks happened simultaneously therefore there was no set schedule.

What Defines a Community of Practice: What the Literature States

Throughout my research a number of questions on communities of practice emerged. Have you ever been a member of a group whose function was to share information? Have you ever wished you had a support system of like-minded individuals who shared the same interests as you and your field? The term for this type of group is called a *community of practice*. Communities of practice are quite common and operate as a resource for people in a variety of different fields. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger developed and coined the phrase a part of the social theory of learning (Eckert, 2006, p.1), however there is evidence of communities of practice dating as far back ancient Greece and the Middle Ages when groups of artisans, craftsmen etc. gathered together to discuss and share information on their craft, as well as using the group for social purposes (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p.1). Today, communities of practice are still relevant and very much thriving groups found in both personal and professional settings, for example, formally in the workplace and informally in recreational activities, for example dance classes and language circles.

How do you define communities of practice? According to Wenger and Synder (2000), communities of practice are "groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise" (p.1). However, each community of practice differs based on the demographic and the needs of its members. "Because membership is based on participation rather than on official status, these communities are not bound by organizational affiliations; they can span institutional structures and hierarchies" (Wenger, 1998, p.3). Communities of practice are typically diverse and are not limited to one geographical location, "…communities of practice can exist solely within an organizational unit; they can cross divisional and geographical boundaries…they can be made up of a handful of participants or many dozen." (Burk, 2000, p.1). Communities of practice can also be found across sectors from government institutions, educational establishments to associations and non-profit organizations (Wenger, 2011, p. 4-6).

Consultant and author, Etienne Wenger established the four main roles of a community of practice within an organizational context in her article "Communities of Practice: A Brief Introduction" (2011). These roles of a community of practice include the following:

- "Communities of practice enable practitioners to take collective responsibility for managing the knowledge they need

- Communities among practitioners create a direct link between learning and performance

- Practitioners can address the tacit and dynamic aspects of knowledge creation and sharing and

- Communities are not limited to formal structures: they create connections among people across organizational and geographic boundaries" (p.4).

Even though the extent of a traditional community of practice is limitless, there are communities of practice that are confined to more specific restrictions and parameters.

An example of a more refined type of a community of practice, the same type associated with my internship with CVT is defined as an online community of practice. Another name for an online community of practice is an "electronic communication network," defined as "self-organizing, open activity system focused on a shared practice that exists primarily through computer-mediated communication" (Wasko & Faraj, 2005, p.37). Two qualities related to electronic communication networks include, "First, the network is generally self-organizing in that it is made up of individuals who voluntarily choose to participate. Second, the

term open activity denotes that participation is open to individuals interested in the shared practice, and who are willing to mutually engage with others to help solve problems common to the practice" (Wasko & Faraj, 2005, p.37). Because this type of a community of practice is located online, its reach can extend to include many more participants through popular mediums like email, listservs, social media, blog posts and electronic bulletin boards (Wasko & Faraj, 2005, p.37).

There are many benefits to engaging in an online community of practice. Wenger (1998) highlights a number of functions of a community of practice that support its participants. These useful functions for a community of practice are that they (1) "are nodes for the exchange and interpretation of information, (2) retain knowledge in 'living' ways, unlike a database or a manual (3) steward competencies to keep the organization at the cutting edge and (4) provide home for identities" (p.6). Since communities of practice rely on its participants, their engagement and the knowledge they share, examining motivators for participation is a crucial aspect to finding ways to improve its purpose and support its various functions.

There are many motivators highlighting the reason participants engage in communities of practice ranging from reasons of self-interest, moral obligation, as an economic benefit, etc. Based on current literature and research, two main motivating forces explaining why participants contribute to communities of

practice, specifically online communities of practice is for the advancement of social capital and to spread knowledge as a public good for the interest of the community. The first motivator is building social capital, which is defined as "resources embedded in a social structure that are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive action" (Wasko & Faraj, 2005, p.38). Because social capital is specific to social groups and social interactions it emphasizes individual participation around collective action and community building. "…Social capital resides in the fabrics of relationships between individuals and in individuals' connections with their communities" (Wasko & Faraj, 2005, p.38). When used efficiently, online communities of practice do this by offering a space for individuals to be a part of collective efforts that promote knowledge sharing and management. "We propose that electronic networks of practice are sources of learning and innovation because mutual engagement and interaction in the network creates relationships between individuals and the collective as a whole. These individual relationships are a primary source of the generation of social capital, which influences how individuals behave in relation to others and promote knowledge creation and contribution within the network" (Wasko & Faraj, 2005, p.39).

The second common motivator is spreading knowledge as a public good for the interest of the community. Spreading knowledge as a public good strategically correlates with two of the functions of defining a community of practice that

supports its participants, especially in regards to retaining knowledge and stewarding competencies (Wenger, 1998, p.6). To support the overall community and/or mutual cause requires the participants of communities of practice to go beyond their own self-serving motivators and instead focus on how to better support and improve the educational efforts of the community of practice itself. "The motivation to maximize self-interest does not adequately explain why people contribute to public goods when it is not rational to do so. Therefore, the motivation to exchange knowledge as a public good goes beyond the maximization of self-interest and personal gain" (Wasko & Faraj, 2000, p.161). Research shows that online communities of practice who have members who participate for the good of the community believe it's just and promotes growth and advancement for all involved stating, "People in these communities feel that sharing knowledge and helping others is 'the right thing to do,' and people also have a desire to advance the community as a whole" (Wasko & Faraj, 2000, p.169).

As identified, there is much evidence around how communities of practice are beneficial and why participants actively participate however, there are many risks associated with both traditional and online communities of practice ranging from illegitimate sources of information, unorganized communication methods to a lack of active members. In a traditional form of a community of practice within an

organization, common issues that are barriers are usually related to staff onboarding and/or turnover amongst staff. "New staff or staff facing new problems are unaware of the ad-hoc communities and are unable to tap into their expertise. Lessons learned from experience are lost from retirement. Staff turnover and restructuring break down the informal networks to the point where even long-time staff do not know who to call" (Burk, 2000, p.1). Online communities of practice also face risks and barriers to participation involving not only its participants, but also complications with the Internet, for example the risk of stolen or lost information. One of the main risks linked to online communities of practice is the lack of control on how a comment is perceived, the comment's of others and who has access to the information provided. "…Because participation is open and voluntary, participants are typically strangers. Knowledge seekers have no control over who responds to their questions or the quality of the responses. Knowledge contributors have no assurances that those they are helping will ever return the favor, and lurkers may draw upon the knowledge of others without contributing anything in return" " (Wasko & Faraj, 2005, p.37). In many examples, the benefits related to communities of practice outweigh the risks and threats; however understanding the downside leaves the practitioner room to improve and grow pre-established communities to make them more successful and effective.

As seen through the literature, the following four core categories when followed are **best practices** for a thriving, sustainable and successful online community of practice: **(1)** solid institutional framework and support **(2)** a reliable communication medium and the fluidity within an online social space **(3)** commitment to knowledge contribution and a shared interest of the topic of study and **(4)** the promotion and possibility of advancement of social capital for the means of fostering purposeful action. The question arises: to what extent are these categories of best practices represented in practice and participation within the NT online community? To answer this question, I used these four identified categories as analytical lenses to examine the responses received through informal interviews, the supervisor interview and the online surveys I conducted.

Data & Findings: The New Tactics Program

Based on the informal interviews, the supervisor interview and the online surveys I conducted, I followed a methodological process based on the Grounded Theory approach.

As a result, there were a variety of responses to consider with the hopes of learning from and improving the NT program. In total, I solicited 63 individuals over a 3-month period to complete the online survey. Out of 63 individuals, 16 of them confirmed their participation verbally or through email. Of those only a total of 10 individuals completed the online survey. Within the same period of time I

conducted 4 informal interviews via conference call or Skype using the questions from the online survey. After completing the informal interviews, two of the participants also chose to submit the online survey.

The following is a list of my findings and the topics associated, which have been directly taken from questions used both for the online survey and my informal interviews. These questions were the most commonly answered by NT program participants:

A. **Question:** How did you become aware of and/or get involved with NT?

   Findings: Participants became aware or got involved in the NT program through a variety of different mediums. The main medium was through word of mouth and/or an invitation to participate from a friend, colleague or a NT staff member. Other examples, which lead practitioners to the NT program, were through social media and access to the NT's online database.

B. **Question:** How has your interaction with the NT community benefitted your work?

   Findings: Participants expressed a variety of ways the NT program has benefitted their work in the field ranging from using it as a resource to connect people in the same field who are located internationally, helping to build relationships, which strengthens ties to participation, connecting

participants to resources, using it as a source of sharing information and a tool to help the practitioner reflect on the importance of their work.

C. **Question:** If you have learned something new from a NT discussion, tell us what you learned and how you have applied that knowledge to your work.

Findings: Overall, the respondents said they learned something new from the NT program's monthly conversations. Examples of what stood out include: Shared tactics, resources, data security practices, commonly used tools, media management exercises, regional mechanisms, human rights archiving, tactical mapping, mediums by which to connect with other practitioners.

D. **Question:** How do you use the website as a resource?

Findings: For those practitioners who use the NT program specifically as a resource, the following are ways by which it is used as a tool: Video sharing, links to websites and articles, as a guide to topics, as a reference to others, for training materials, as well as information on how to support HRDs and self-care. However, an estimated 38% of the participants who responded admitted to rarely using the website.

E. **Question:** Those who participate in the NT online community support me by sharing advice, experiences and knowledge. (Please give a numerical answer based on an agreement scale where #5 is *strongly agree* and #1 is *strongly disagree*).

Findings: There was a high percentage of those practitioners who responded who have networked or met other practitioners as a result of the NT program. Data shows a high percentage of practitioners felt supported by NT online community by sharing advice, experiences and knowledge.

F. **Questions:** I follow NT on social media AND I receive NT emails (Please give a numerical answer based on an agreement scale where #5 is *strongly agree* and #1 is *strongly disagree*).

Findings: Results show half the respondents follow the NT program on social media and half do not. The majority of those who responded receive NT email alerts and would recommend NT website to other practitioners working in the Human Rights field.

One of my last major findings highlighted the reasons why the NT program was not helpful or why I received neutral feedback. Results consisted of practitioners admitting not to have participated in the online monthly conversations or do not currently following the NT program through the website or social media profiles. A more in-depth analysis of my findings will be elaborated upon in the following section.

Summary of Analysis

The data received illustrated that for as many people who consider the NT program a community of practice, the same number of people disagreed or had a neutral opinion due to their definition of a community practice or lack of overall knowledge on communities of practice.   Expanding upon the previously mentioned best practices based on the literature and my experience with the NT program, the following section is a summary of analysis from the results taking into consideration (1) evidence as to how the NT program is or is not an example of a thriving, sustainable and successful online community of practice (2) how the literature agrees or disagrees with mine and the participants responses and (3) limitations facing the NT program.

The first component and best practice mentioned to ensure a thriving and sustainable community of practice is a **solid institutional framework and support** given by the host organization. Having a leading organization guide and manage a community of practice is essential to maintaining an organized structure, environment of support and a strategic plan promoting the community's future endeavors. However, because the concept of a community of practice is so new, a common weakness is the lack of research and information available on how to improve communities of practice. Without progress reports, professional development opportunities and the implementation of monitoring and evaluating

tools, it would be hard to improve a community of practice. Without receiving and

taking into consideration the feedback from participating practitioners, the NT

program is not allowing themselves to grow or evolve. The feedback provided to

me in this short amount of time from active participants, made sense and naturally

filled in gaps as seen by those a part of the program. In contrast, the number of

participants who completed my survey or informal interview versus those I

solicited was extremely small. Over a 3-month period, it was a challenge to

secure practitioners to participate. Solutions include time, experience and also

the importance of public recording and communicating best practices associated

with communities of practice so that practitioners can continue to learn and grow

within an online platform.

The second best practice highlighted in the literature is the importance of a

reliable communication medium and the fluidity within an online social

space. Benefits to an online community of practice are consistent between the

literature and my experience with the NT program. The NT program successfully

provides tactics, resources and solutions to its main audience, Human Rights

Defenders (HRDs) through a welcoming and open online forum. The tactics used

around information sharing and networking, the online resources used like Google

Hangout, Skype and BufferApp and the topics addressed all support the work

HRDs are doing in the field. The examination of the technical online experience of

participants may be a significant indicator to the way the NT program is viewed and used or may affect a participant's decision to commit to the program.

Through my observations and experiences, I noticed both obvious benefits and weaknesses to implementing a community of practice, online. Overall, the website was very organized. Posting resources, website links, articles and videos was made easy, as well as archiving the monthly online conversations. Online supplemental resources, such as BufferApp, Google Survey, Google Docs and Dropbox greatly supported the NT staff and administrators through social media management, interview implementation and the organizing and storing of information. Practitioners agree the NT program is a practical skilled-based program focused on the sharing of tools and themes centered on human rights work and activism. The most recognized strength is that the program brings practitioners together from related fields around similar topics. An anonymous respondent echoes that the NT is a successful communication platform that brings practitioners together stating, "it [the NT program] brings [people] together on a consistent basis, human rights practitioners around topics and in different permutations" (Online Survey, 18, July, 2014).

In contrast, weaknesses I observed or experienced when implementing the NT program online all include the failure of the online supplemental resources

mentioned above and others including Google Hangout and Skype. On more than one occasion all of the resources have created barriers to communication, been confusing, were hard to utilize and ineffective. Data entry was at times complicated, as the BufferApp didn't consistently load the NT program's Facebook posts. Although communication tools like Skype and Google Hangout have proven to be extremely useful for reaching participants around the world, they too at times presented barriers to information sharing, i.e.: video failure. Despite the weaknesses, the majority of the time the resources used were successful and helped advance the NT program and their efforts. Continuously using the resources throughout time helped me to improve my understanding of their capabilities and allowed me to learn new ways to overcome online obstacles.

As touched on in previous sections, another limitation to an online medium is the limited availability of the Internet for HRDs. Since many of the practitioners involved participate from a host of locations around the world, access to the Internet is not always guaranteed or available preventing participation. Also, depending on the participant's professional positions and the topics discussed, the Internet is not always the safest medium of communication for fear of private or sensitive information being leaked, stolen or compromised. Having a secure and solid institution as a host and a reliable online medium would better help to ensure a successful and gratifying experience.

The third best practice emphasized relates to the role of the participant and their **commitment to knowledge contribution, as well as a shared interest of the topic of study**. Without committed practitioners the online community of practice would not be able to achieve its goals of supporting human rights defenders (HRDs) and addressing global human right violations. Because of the focused target audience of HRDs, time and availability are barriers and limitations to the NT online program. There are many career positions and titles within the human rights demographic, which means the availability of the participants is constantly changing. Feedback from the online survey shows that practitioners are not as involved in the NT program because of their busy schedules, because the act of engaging can be too tiring and participating in the NT website takes time and can be difficult to balance amongst their other day-to-day responsibilities. In response, Kristin expressed challenges she experienced during her time working with the NT program. "The community is too broad, which is the strength and weakness of it. The wide range of practitioners allows for some interesting cross pollination, but it's so hard to keep people engaged when their topic (say, geo-mapping) will only come up every few years" (Online Survey, 22, August, 2014).

The last and final best practice outlined for a successful and thriving online community of practice is the **promotion and possibility of advancement of social capital for the means of fostering purposeful action**. Similar to the

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literature, the data I collected showed those practitioners a part of the NT program participate mainly out of community interest and also enjoy helping their fellow colleagues. Wasko and Faraj (2000) express similar results stating, "Our findings suggest that successful communities of practice have members that act out of community interest rather than self-interest, and that self-interest denigrates that value of the community…Finally, we find that people in these communities enjoy helping others and consider sharing the right thing to do" (p.171). Also, satisfaction from the program can be shown through both tangible and intangible results (Wasko & Faraj, 2000, p.166). Depending on the situation or conversation, participants felt content with the program when they received either verbal support or resources that have lead to social change. A limitation associated with this related back to the limitations of best practice #3, lack of time and availability.

In summary, my supervisor, Kristin Antin, the Online Community Builder for the New Tactics in Human Rights program described the original vision for the NT program and how it has naturally evolved into its current role:

> Its initial role was to disseminate new tactics to human rights activists via workshops and publications, and to inspire new ideas for action. But now there are many groups who do this. Our role has since changed to

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developing tools for strategic thinking for human rights defenders, and

facilitating a community of practice" (Online Survey, 22, August, 2014).

Since the completion of my internship Kristin has accepted another position at an

organization with a similar mission where she is currently working with another

online community. When asked if she considered the NT program a community of

practice she responded, "Oh, I want it to be!! Yes, I think it is, in that we encourage

the community to share and learn from the experiences of each other. It's not

about one person speaking to a room full of trainees. It's about peer-to-peer

exchange. That's at the heart of the community efforts" (Online Survey, 22,

August, 2014). Like other respondents, Kristin agrees with the NT program's

vision and acknowledges its huge potential.

In contrast, an anonymous respondent states, "It's hard to create a community of

practice throughout time. They sometimes dissipate. It's not just a dialogue for

dialogues sake, but the question is: What are we doing this for?" (Online Survey,

11, July, 2014). A long-time participant of the NT program who supports its

mission and vision reiterates the need for the NT program to decide to move

forward to become a more active and thriving community of practice. She states,

"I really like NT. I think they've been doing a lot of great work and are building

towards something. I think they are at a crossroads. If they harvest their vision

there would be incredible potential. It is often unclear where they fit in the HR

[Human Rights] world, as a player. I want to see them continue to make a

difference… They need to decide where they are going in the future, but if they do

they need to analyze how they implement practitioner dialogue to move forward

and build towards a community of practice. There's a choice to be made there"

(Informal Interview, 10, July, 2014).

Suggested Strategies Moving Forward

Based on an accumulation of information I've collected through my experiences

working with the NT program illustrated in my internship log, NT internship

materials, online survey results and informal interview results, I wish to make the

following suggestions as to how the NT program can support their vision of a

thriving online community of practice.

> **(1) Public Recognition of Active Participants:** Currently, the NT program
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> does not highlight or recognize their participants through mediums that
>
> promote or build up their professional reputation. An existing participant
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> mentioned this as a suggestion to the program in the online survey I circulated
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> during my internship. She expressed how meaningful it would be if the NT
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> program acknowledged her participation to both her and her employer in the
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> form of a certificate, an email to her supervisor, or having her name on the NT

website. She did not state that recognition would boost her participation, however previous research shows that building up one's reputation is a motivator for continuous and/or active participation (Wasko & Faraj, 2005, p.39). My data also shows that majority of the preexisting participants have formed relationships with other participants and have had the experience of participants taking the extra step to contact them through the monthly online discussions and/or via email, offering additional resources or information relating to their focus. One participant recalls a similar experience, stating an outside conversation with another participant was "helpful" furthering the belief that NT's platform is an environment that promotes networking, relationship building and beneficial knowledge sharing. Creating an additional platform that highlights the voluntary work of active participants may help to increase the social capital of active members, therefore benefitting the overall online community. Acknowledging participation to their employer may help to create a culture of appreciation, community and possibly increase in the willingness of practitioners to participate in the program.

 (2) Expansion of the NT Program: Another suggestion is for the NT program to expand its outreach and recruitment strategies to include representation from colleges and universities, inclusive to both students and professors. An active participant touched on this claiming there is "a gap between academia

and the practitioner," saying, "It would be good if you carry out campaigns to universities, especially in Africa so they could be contributing more and you would get more results" (Interview Transcript, 23, July, 2014). As a student, I believe my demographic holds a great deal of both theoretical and practical knowledge that could enhance the program and benefit NT's online culture of knowledge sharing. In addition, the NT program could also develop and continue its recruitment efforts to include organizations outside the United States. Expanding their geographical reach would also allow for a potential increase in members and as a result, more knowledge shared. Involving both members from academia, as well as representation from other international organizations may allow for a potential increase in members, as well as the opportunity to share more knowledge and resources.

(3) Supplementary Career Development Efforts: Lastly, the opportunity for more career development efforts, specifically for the NT staff may help to increase their knowledge of ways to improve the NT website and create an environment more in line with a community of practice. Opportunities could include trainings, international conferences, networking outlets and advocacy initiatives around topics like the role and importance of HRDs, digital security, safe documentation strategies and social media management.

The process of researching and writing my M.A. Practitioner paper has truly been a journey. As a M.A. candidate the opportunity to build and work through an entire research model has created credibility for me as a researcher and a development practitioner. The process has also expanded my understanding of the Human Rights field by defining broader concepts of an online community of practice and identifying the essential elements needed to foster its success. The experience allowed me to network with both individuals and organizational representatives of non-profits whose mission and vision directly correlate with my beliefs and ethics. Through this exposure and research I was able to distinguish effective-based best practices, which further supported my suggested strategies to the NT program on how to improve their active online community of practice.

Lastly, this journey has made me more aware of communities of practice in my own life and given me the skill-based tools, such as the knowledge to design digital communication strategies as a way to bring people together. I've learned, no matter how much an organization is thriving, there is always room to grow and improve. The world of technology has become a valuable medium for mobilization and activism. Investing in programs that support this is what development is moving towards in the future.

In summary, the NT program has the capacity and potential to become a thriving online community of practice. Feedback from NT's practitioners shows their eagerness and willingness to continue to participate if there is a clear shift towards a more concrete structure or system reflecting a community of practice. Active practitioners agree the program benefits their work in various ways and are grateful for a safe space and a knowledge-sharing environment.

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