Peter Hamilton

Keith Suter Comments

RADIO 2GB NEWS COMMENTARY

Computers are now playing a role in monitoring war crimes and helping to apprehend war criminals. No doubt they will eventually be useful in helping to follow up on all the war crimes associated with the Iraq conflict.

The current edition of the "New Scientist" magazine has an article on Dr Patrick Ball of the Science and Human Rights Programme of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He has spent 12 years designing software that collects information on human rights abuses worldwide.

One of his biggest successes was in the Slobodan Milosevic trial. He wrote a report for the international criminal tribunal on former Yugoslavia linking migration of refugees and the Kosovar killings, using the new data he had collected to strengthen the earlier analyses. His report contradicted Milosevic's defence evidence that these deaths were caused by the NATO air strikes.

As the article notes: "The money is bad, the hours are horrible and you may become very unpopular. But you get to nail the bad guy - and use your geek skills".

Patrick Ball grew up with computers. His father worked for IBM, he lived in a house full of computer parts, and his PhD in sociology required the extensive use of computers. He paid for his university education by designing computer software. He decided to use these computer skills for the international protection of human rights.

Ball has taken statistical models from other computer applications, particularly the census and wildlife monitoring. His skill has been to adapt these models to collect data on human rights violations.

This type of work is itself a sign of progress in the international protection of human rights. There are now many organizations monitoring human rights violations. This is different from, say, the 1930s when there were very few organizations monitoring Hitler's mistreatment of the Jews in Germany and elsewhere. Thus, there is now far more data.

Patrick Ball has devised ways of collecting the stories of violations and making sense of them statistically. His models enable patterns to emerge. These patterns then help international or national tribunals punish people who violate human rights.

Patrick Ball's pioneering work has been done at a cost. He is obviously a very talented software writer who could command a large salary in the commercial computer industry but he has foregone that opportunity in order to work for the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Another cost is that he has decided not to put a copyright on his software. It is "open

source", that is, open to anyone who would like to use it for monitoring human rights violations.

If the software were copyrighted, then a government could crack down on human rights organizations using it as part of the government's "obligations" under the World Trade Organization's regulations to outlaw software piracy. Of course, the real reason for such a crackdown would not be so much to honour trade obligations as to find an excuse for further human rights violations. Thus, in order to deny governments the opportunity to use the trade obligations as an excuse for further human rights violations, Ball has not copyrighted his software.

Overall, this is an inspiring story of what a young talented computer expert with a social conscience can do to protect human rights.

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