

Jerry Mechling

# Tools for Compliance in a Networked World

*Innovations Case Discussion: RENCTAS*

Dener Giovanni's story of RENCTAS (the Portuguese acronym for National Network to Fight the Trafficking of Wild Animals) is compelling and inspiring. Using modern communications skillfully and with great personal courage, the leaders of RENCTAS have shown that a few good people can virtually move mountains, even against the money and guns of the third biggest illegal trade in the world (after illegal arms and drugs).

But what are the more specific lessons from RENCTAS? What explains what happened? Where will the lessons from animal trafficking in Brazil lead next?

This paper argues that key lessons from RENCTAS are about the power of the Internet to:

- a) make access to services and participation in the counter-trafficking effort significantly easier and safer than it otherwise would be;
- b) improve the transparency of trafficking activities, both for individual cases and the larger system; and
- c) communicate the emotions of the story, supporting adroit use of video and pictures to mobilize Brazilian pride and their desire to protect their amazing native animals.

Those three capabilities—for access, transparency, and emotional communications—explain much of what RENCTAS has been able to accomplish. They will continue to be important for controlling animal trafficking and—more broadly—for other efforts to gain compliance with social norms and laws. At the same time, easy access combined with transparency and emotional communications carries risks as well as rewards, especially for minority rights and privacy. Good gover-

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nance will require that we learn how to use these relatively new capabilities both wisely and well.

In that context, let's look at the RENCTAS case, what explains it, and how we might use its lessons in other settings.

#### RENCTAS—SUBSTANTIAL AND EFFICIENT PROGRESS

With 38 million animals worth US\$3 billion poached in Brazil every year, the illegal trade in animals was a major and growing problem in 1999 when Dener Giovanni, Raulff Lima, and Sergio Priexoto formed RENCTAS in the relatively small municipality of Três Rios. How could three people with little authority hope to put a dent in a large illicit industry willing to protect its turf, if necessary, with guns?

A more detailed examination shows an even more discouraging situation. Despite the size of the problem, there was little public awareness or support in Brazil for aggressive enforcement of the anti-trafficking laws. Given the money available, along with the poverty of many of the Brazilians needed as suppliers or middlemen, recruitment into trafficking was easy. Members of the bus, trucking, and law enforcement communities had been significantly corrupted, especially at ports where many of the animals were shipped out of the country. Foreign consumers—typically quite rich in comparison to their Brazilian suppliers—wanted entire animals as show-pieces or pets, or simply needed animal parts to feed various fashions or for the exotic chemicals used for medicines or research. Law enforcement personnel were fragmented into small jurisdictions and didn't share information nearly as well as the criminals they were supposed to stop.

In the past seven years, however, much has changed.

Awareness of the problem has been greatly increased, helped considerably by a five-part series on animal trafficking ("Life for Sale") by Rede Globo, Brazil's largest television network. Print coverage is up by a factor of four, including international coverage in the *Economist*, *National Geographic*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*.

Previous to much of this coverage, public participation in enforcement increased dramatically, with individuals reporting suspected cases of poaching and some 60,000 Brazilians signed up to receive blog postings and other information on the battle. From this group, individuals are being readily recruited to write letters to newspapers and legislators and to support events such as public hearings, etc. Participation and awareness have created a positive feedback cycle, with each leading to an increase in the other.

Beyond the general public, others are now being recruited to improve enforcement and compliance with Brazil's anti-trafficking laws. Bus drivers are being trained about the trade and how to thwart it, supported by a partnership by RENCTAS with the Itapemirim Group, one of Brazil's largest passenger transportation companies. Similar efforts are proceeding with the Martins Group, one of Latin America's largest trucking firms. Efforts are also reaching outside Brazil to

put heat on consumers in Switzerland, the U.S., and elsewhere. Working from the ground up, RENCTAS has produced credible analysis making the trafficking industry more accessible to an aroused public. Giovanni was awarded prestigious prizes by Ashoka and by the United Nations Environment Program.

Despite the progress, the trafficking problem remains. Some 600 animals in Brazil remain on the endangered species list. The animal trafficking industry seems to be merging with drug trafficking, which may make it more vicious and difficult to control.

Still, given that so much activity has been generated so quickly and by so few in the core organization, RENCTAS must be judged incredibly efficient and effective. What has made them so successful?

### EXPLAINING WHAT HAPPENED

Through insight, skill, and courage, Giovanni and RENCTAS have mobilized a large and dispersed group of supporters to stand up to criminals and make it harder and more costly to carry out illicit trades. Many factors may be needed to properly understand the varied elements of the story. However, three that seem particularly important—for RENCTAS and for other cases where people have been mobilized to support a new activity—are accessible, transparent, and emotional Internet-enabled communications.

#### **Accessibility**

The Internet globally is on the road to becoming pervasively accessible. In Brazil that doesn't mean "anytime/anywhere" availability (compared to the extreme penetration of broadband in South Korea, for example), but it does mean that Internet-based services are often more accessible than those offered only on paper or face-to-face. Internet communications can also be anonymous and speedy at great distances compared to other forms for recruiting and involving people in anti-trafficking activities.

Note that, when they began, RENCTAS worked largely through speeches and public seminars, where they urged people to report suspected traffickers directly to the police.

While initially effective—at least at gaining the attention of the traffickers—the public meetings generated counter-threats from traffickers. Turning to recruitment via the Internet made it much easier for potential supporters to contribute safely and with relatively little effort. They didn't need to report to possibly corrupt police, or travel to a special location. They merely needed to report suspicious incidents to the RENCTAS web site, and the rest was handled on their behalf. RENCTAS protected anonymity while passing cases to the police, reporting back to the informant, and keeping data handy for later analysis.

Web-based and push communications from RENCTAS also made it easier for police, bus drivers, truck drivers, and others to stay connected to the movement.

Accessibility has been the prime benefit of global e-government for the past

decade and more. Net-delivered services are available 24/7 "online, not in line." People have learned to both appreciate and expect the convenience.

More recently, people are learning that some kinds of group participation can be fit into small blocks of time. You can get email on your Blackberry at the supermarket. That lets you keep up with some of the things that used to require a trip and a meeting. For RENCTAS, this has allowed them to keep involved supporters who, absent the Internet, would have found it too risky or time-consuming to be of help.

A web site in Idaho offers another case that seems to be a frontrunner at mobilizing the public by making demands for time and energy modest and digestible. The site seeks to engage a balanced sample of individuals willing to vote in the state primary elections and also devote one hour per year to issues coming before the legislature. Keith Allred, the site's founder, meets with legislative staff and leaders to scope out 20 or so issues likely to be decided in the upcoming session. He summarizes each issue along with the most prominent positions taken (roughly a page per issue). He tries to ensure that those taking the various positions accept the validity of his summary. He then asks participants to use their promised hour to study the issues and tell him what they want the legislature to do. He analyzes his results for issues where the public response is clear (70% or more for one position) AND is different from what those at the capitol think will come out of the legislative process. What he wants, in short, is to get the voice of the common interest heard more clearly by the legislature (and by the media and the public). In the past year, several positions he has identified in this way have won out over positions supported by the most powerful and successful lobbyists in the state.

Making participation accessible can be powerful.

### **Transparency**

The Internet and computer-based tools can also be used to increase transparency in otherwise complex and confusing situations. Data can be indexed and analyzed so it can be found, and so individual pieces can be aggregated into meaningful bigger pictures.

Both capabilities were important for RENCTAS. The case notes a major motivating event early in Giovanni's work when he couldn't find a file soon enough to meet legal requirements and a poacher therefore had to be released. That got him to computerize all his records for rapid retrieval, updating, and sharing over the net.

RENCTAS used this retrieval, updating, and sharing to maintain records that provided feedback and reinforcement to field informants. While informants remained safely anonymous, they could see what happened to their tips, and could also see how their group in the aggregate was having a major impact.

Beyond simple aggregations, computers were used to collect new data and massage it into a better understanding of the entire trafficking industry. Sleuthing via the web allowed RENCTAS to get clues on the enemy (e.g., via undercover work

in chat rooms where exotic animals were being sold). Adding their own data to what they acquired over the web (and elsewhere), they were soon able to understand more of the trafficking trade than was visible to most of the Brazilian authorities. This made RENTAS a valuable source of research. It also gave them legitimacy with television people and the press. Those people, in turn, wrote stories that fed back to improve RENTAS' legitimacy with the public.

The data that RENTAS was able to assemble and analyze made new things visible, for example, to senior managers within the Itapemirim and Martins groups. These people could suddenly see the extent to which their buses or trucks were implicated in illegal activities. Perhaps more important, RENTAS analysis could communicate the vulnerability that firms would face with an aroused public that was also beginning to see and understand the data. Transparency led, as it typically does, to heightened accountability.

Movement from analysis to transparency to accountability and responsiveness was precisely what happened years earlier in the U.S. when the Toxics Release Inventory data was made public in 1987. The law required firms to report their toxics emissions to EPA. It then required EPA to make all the data available to the public in computer-readable form. This reporting allowed a variety of groups inside and outside of government to make it easy for individuals and community groups to find out about emissions from plants near where they lived or worked. It also allowed senior managers in those firms to find out about plants that were bad polluters in comparison to other plants. The increased transparency led in many cases to a quick assumption of accountability and "voluntary" corrective actions that had not been possible before. Because of the transparency, the public paid more attention, and because of the public's attention, the firms abated their pollution.

Making the system transparent can be powerful.

(A number of the factors mentioned about the RENTAS story are summarized in Figure 1.)

### **Emotional Communications**

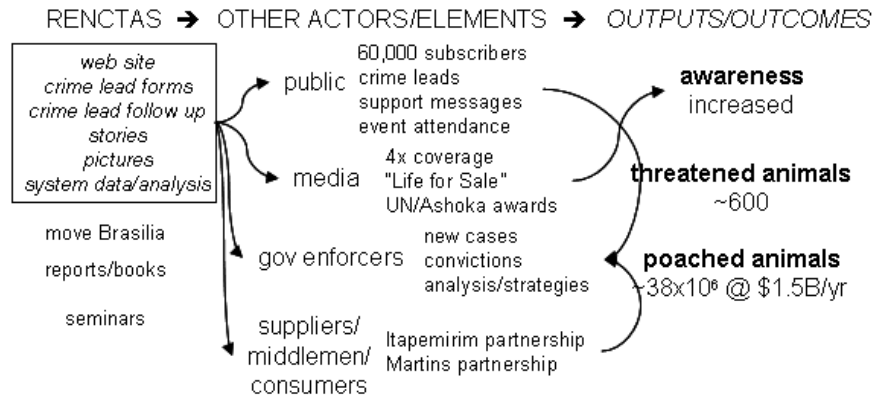
While we typically use logic to rationalize decisions, we actually make those decisions emotionally. Emotion drives our wants and desires, thus structuring and motivating our decisions.

Text is efficient and effective for conveying concepts. While text can also be powerful emotionally, much of our brain is wired for other signals. Visual inputs get much attention, as do sounds and smells and taste and touch.

RENTAS has long understood—at least implicitly—that the story of animal trafficking and why it must be stopped needs to be carried by more than the data. The RENTAS site has accordingly used the Internet to tell stories and illustrate with pictures. More recently, as the Internet increasingly supports broadband, full-motion video and sound are frequently used for engaging story-telling.

Such communications carry emotional connections. They help explain how

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**Figure 1. Elements of the Animal Trafficking System in Brazil.**

RENTAS has engaged and motivated its supporters to proudly protect Brazil's animals.

RENTAS was particularly wise after their move to Brasilia to reach out to the government-oriented television media located there. Much as RENTAS had earlier made reporting easy for the public they had wanted to recruit as informants and supporters, in Brasilia they also made it easy for television reporters to develop stories and visual materials. The television in turn had a huge impact on public awareness.

Stories and other emotional material have been central to human communications since the post-hunt campfires organized before writing was even invented. We interpret body language, voice, and facial expressions and are moved. As the internet supports video more pervasively, it is becoming increasingly important as an organizing tool.

For example, the Internet's ability to carry emotion to a dispersed audience was recently used to stop a proposed water desalination plant in Monterrey Bay, Mexico. The construction proposed by Toyota in Japan would have become the world's largest desalination facility and created more than a thousand long-term jobs. The issues raised were largely environmental, focused on effluents in the Bay.

The environmental community used the Internet effectively to mobilize support against the plant. They brought activists including Hollywood actors down to the bay and took video of the humpback whales who calved in the waters there. They used these videos effectively along with a letter-writing campaign to thousands of mid-level managers at Toyota back in Japan.

What is interesting for this analysis is that the emotional campaign—carried largely by pictures, video, voice, and humpback whale sounds—was promoted primarily by people outside of Mexico rather than locals, yet was effective politically within Mexico. The plant was scuttled.

Communicating emotional connections can be powerful.

LESSONS AND ISSUES

The RENTAS story primarily illustrates the power of Internet-enabled accessibility, transparency, and emotional connections.

So, where might we apply this power in the future?

One place would be the additional opportunities to fight animal trafficking in Brazil. Legislators and staff are a target that has not been given much attention in the RENTAS case so far. There are also other parts of the animal trafficking system not reached. Not much has been reported, for example, about efforts to engage suppliers. While middlemen like bus and truck drivers are probably more cost-effective targets (better organized and depending less on kick-backs from the trafficking industry), it might also be possible to influence suppliers, perhaps through a divide-and-conquer strategy of recruiting some as paid informants.

Beyond Brazil, but still on the trafficking problem, it might be possible to use Internet communications to further attack consumer markets for exotic animals in Europe, North America, and Asia. Giovanni established a number of partnerships apparently for that purpose, and these relationships might be deepened and made more active.

For what other locations and what other issues might we make progress using Internet-based tools to mobilize and coordinate supporters?

Much is already being done with "Neighborhood-Watch" programs of various sorts that could be expanded with Internet and other information technologies. The RENTAS approach of calling for reports of suspicious activity, protecting informants with anonymity, and feeding case developments back to the informants could obviously apply elsewhere. So could aggregating data into the bigger analysis and developing stories to make the work emotionally engaging and "sticky."

As a variant, it may soon be possible to acquire technology cheap enough for non-governmental groups to deploy digital sensors of various sorts. We might expect a Neighborhood Watch group to use video cameras to record everything that happens in specified places. It is now being done in shopping malls, and may well move outside.

As activities become more visible and transparent, individuals can be expected to feel more pressure to comply with the dominant culture and the law. This may increase compliance but may also encourage illegal surveillance and a tyranny of the majority. It may be good in some cases and bad in others. Figuring out which is which, and how we can govern these fundamental issues of social organization, will be a major challenge for the not-so-distant future.

We'll need respectful and effective dialog and decisions on how we want to proceed.

CONCLUSION: BALANCING COMPLIANCE AND DIVERSITY

The RENCTAS case offers a compelling story of how the Internet can be used to mobilize supporters. RENCTAS supporters greatly expanded the impact of the work that RENCTAS did on its own. Much was accomplished in a short period of 7 years.

Generalized just a bit, the problem that RENCTAS addresses is a quite general one: How can we mobilize and sustain support from those at a distance who have little time to give? The problem of dispersed support and concentrated opposition is a classic leadership challenge. Fortunately, we have recently developed Internet tools that can help. Using the Internet, we can make it easier for supporters to participate, even from a distance and even part time. We can make the system transparent and understandable from the small local incident to the large system and trends. We can include sights and sounds that carry emotions as a critical tool for keeping supporters engaged. Easy access, improved transparency, and emotional communications make it easier to mobilize support and, among other things, to enforce compliance with laws and norms. We need that.

At the same time, we don't want the rigidity and even tyranny that can come with a too-zealous focus on compliance. We also need diversity of opinion and behavior and the continued innovation that diversity supports. In an increasingly networked and changing world, we will need to continually construct and reconstruct a proper governing balance between compliance with norms and respect for diversity and innovation. RENCTAS has used its new tools for compliance in order to support a diversity of wildlife in Brazil. Those of us learning from RENCTAS will also need to keep the balance between compliance and diversity in mind. As we get better using technology to mobilize dispersed supporters, we will also need safeguards against improper and illegal use of these systems.

*We invite reader comments. Email <editors@innovationsjournal.net>.*

1. See <<http://thecommoninterest.org>> to explore this application.
2. See <<http://www.epa.gov/tri/>>; the early experience is described in "The Toxic Release Inventory: Sharing Government Information with the Public". (KSG case no: 1154.0)
3. This experience was discussed at an unpublished workshop at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. A paper based on ideas from the conference, but not specifically the case described here, is Levitt, James and Charles H.W. Foster. "Reawakening the Beginner's Mind: Innovation in Environmental Practice." Discussion Paper 2001-7, Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Kennedy School of Government, June 2001.