

RENTAS: From Local Action to Networked National Impact

An Innovations in Technology and Governance Case Study

Since its origins in 1999 in the provincial Brazilian city of Três Rios, RENTAS, the Brazilian National Network to Fight the Trafficking of Wild Animals, has tapped the Internet to engage citizens throughout the country as a means to change public perception and government policy and practice regarding illegal animal trafficking in Brazil and around the world. Animal trafficking is the third largest illegal trade in the world after drugs and arms. However, the problem and its harmful economic and social impact on Brazil was completely unknown before RENTAS began gathering citizen tips of trafficking online and using this information at the local, national, and international levels to spur enforcement activities and stimulate media coverage. RENTAS is now headquartered in Brasilia and has built a national and international reputation and network of collaborators. The organization is currently exploring several options for how it can revamp its back-end capacity to keep up with the scope and scale of online interactions and demands for its knowledge and expertise.

Often visitors to the offices of RENTAS in Brasilia are amazed to find a small house in a residential area holding only a handful of full-time staff. “I expected a ten-story building full of people,” was one visitor’s response. Indeed, the scope and scale of the organization’s reach and impact both in Brazil and abroad has been immense relative to its size. From its origins in 1999 as a local environmental organization based in Três Rios, a small city in the State of Rio de Janeiro, RENTAS, the Portuguese acronym for National Network to Fight the Trafficking of Wild Animals, has become the leading force combating illegal animal trafficking in Brazil and perhaps in the world. RENTAS accomplished this level of impact by using the Internet to engage citizens to create public awareness and pressure government policy and implementation.

A Big Business Operating Under the Radar

Animal Trafficking is the third largest illegal trade in the world after drugs and arms. According to RENTAS, global wild animal trafficking reaps US \$20 billion annually. In Brazil, approximately 38 million animals are removed from wilderness every year, posing a deep threat to the region's biodiversity. Only one out of every ten animals survives to reach its final destination. Nine die while being captured or transported, often in torturous circumstances.

Biopiracy causes Brazil to lose billions of dollars, at a time when legal exports that bring in dollars need to grow substantially. For example, the market for hypertension drugs is about US \$500 million - and the active ingredient is extracted from snakes. Frogs from the Amazon,

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spiders, and other species are frequently smuggled from Brazil to be researched and used by chemical and pharmaceutical industries.

As with the drug trade, animal trafficking capitalizes on an asymmetric economic relationship between the source, usually developing countries with fragile and under-funded enforcement capacity many of whose citizens desperately need income, and the demand, wealthy countries with purchasing power. A second asymmetric relationship exploited by animal traffickers is the inability of any given enforcement agency – local, national, or international—to take on the traffickers’ complex networks used to get animals from their point of capture or breeding to the final purchaser.

Despite these parallels to the drug trade, one area where animal trafficking differed notably was in the degree of public awareness of the scope and scale of the problem. In Brazil in the late nineties, the animal trade was unknown. The business operated almost entirely under the radar.

Alarm and Online Action

As Environmental Secretary to the municipality of Três Rios in the mid-nineties, Dener Giovannini¹ was startled by the growing number of incidents involving captured wild animals in his jurisdiction. Sensing the magnitude of the problem, he founded RENCTAS, together with Raulff Lima and Sergio Peixoto, in early 1999 to combat the problem at the local level.

From the outset, the founders of RENCTAS chose the Internet as the primary venue for its work. In fact, its first year of operation was entirely virtual. The original core model consisted of a website that allowed ordinary citizens to report tips –instances of animal capture, sale, transport, or illegal breeding. RENCTAS investigated the tips and passed their findings on to local law enforcement for action.

Using the Internet to Turn the Tables on Traffickers

In addition to individual leads, RENCTAS investigators use the Internet to scour auction sites, chat rooms, and pet and collector bulletin boards for clues to illegal animal trafficking. RENCTAS also employs old-school investigative tools like the telephone and even a CB radio to speak with truckers. The Internet, however, is the fastest and most rewarding font of information. As those who live by the sword die by it, those who trade on the Internet can also get caught in it. The Internet also provided a higher degree of anonymity to those choosing to report animal trafficking crimes without being detected as they might be by walking into a local police station in their small town. Given the risks inherent with digitally storing personal information, all tips are immediately taken off computers and stored separately in safe locations to protect the individuals informers.

¹ Dener Giovannini was awarded an Ashoka Fellowship for his work with RENCTAS.

By the late nineties, e-activism was nothing new. What was novel, however, was the RENCTAS approach to it. Many NGO's were active online through chain-letter petitions, letter-writing campaigns, and general list-serv-based forums for discussion. These activities tended to be one-directional, directed at its already-mobilized constituents, and rarely linked the common citizen to tangible results. RENCTAS, on the other hand, internally mandated that each tip receive a personalized response and gave priority to updating its tipsters of the results of their contributions. Dener and his colleagues realized early on that virtual, even anonymous, online interactions required heavy personalization to be effective in building a community base.

From this model of heavily personalized online information brokerage, a number of challenges began to emerge. First, although RENCTAS could investigate and further qualify many of the local cases, enforcement spanned many local, sub-national, and national government levels in Brazil, a huge country. A second growing challenge was the sheer volume of tips, which were coming into the system at an average of 30 per day.

The problem of bettering their coordination with government enforcement agencies was partially addressed by the organization's move from the state of Rio de Janeiro to Brasilia, the country's capital, in January 2000. This gave RENCTAS proximity to the federal government's federal police and environmental agencies such as IBAMA (Brazilian Institute for Natural and Renewable Resources) and the Ministry of Environment.

Tapping the Strategic Link between Virtual Interactions and Media Dissemination

The move to Brasilia also coincided with a shift in the balance between virtual and traditional interactions. While RENCTAS maintained its Website for tip-gathering and for nationwide reach, its leaders began to leverage the value of that capacity in novel and powerful ways.

First, this "capacity" extended well beyond their ability to broker information between citizens and law enforcement. They were, in fact, picking up information along all points on the supply chain, from source to final buyer, and translating that into a clear understanding of the bigger picture. In sum, by aggregating the bits and pieces they were gathering through the Internet, RENCTAS leapfrogged into a level of expertise on the subject not held by anybody else in the world, except, perhaps by the traffickers themselves.

RENCTAS used this aggregated information to tell a compelling, and tragic story. In late January, 2000, at the same time as their move to Brasilia, Brazil's largest television network, Rede Globo, broadcast a five-part series on animal trafficking called "Life for Sale"² based on the work of RENCTAS. In addition to dramatically boosting awareness of the problem, the Globo series generated an explosion of 28,000 new tips, queries, and other information through the RENCTAS site from throughout the country. In the Brazilian printed press, levels of coverage on animal trafficking in the country's four leading dailies has multiplied fourfold between 1999, the year of RENCTAS' inception and 2002. RENCTAS and the problem it combats has been featured in the leading international press as well, including *The Economist*, The BBC, National Geographic, the Christian Science Monitor, among others.

² "Vida a Venda" in Portuguese

Increasingly, RENCTAS learned to manage the interplay between their Internet work and driving press coverage on the problem. For example, each time a story appeared in a local newspaper, RENCTAS sent e-mails with the link to the article to its subscribers, now 36,000, encouraging people to write the newspaper to thank them for covering the issue. This positive reinforcement motivated more coverage that, in turn, would drive even more traffic to RENCTAS.

The dynamic between Internet and media managed by RENCTAS ultimately served the organization's goal of creating awareness of an invisible issue. The next question, however, was how to translate this awareness into changes in policy and practice.

RENCTAS and the Government

Concurrent with its increasingly savvy management of the Brazilian (and international) media, RENCTAS was building relationships with local, national, and international government organizations. RENCTAS found that government attitudes about the problem encompassed everything from inertia to outright obstruction by officials who were probably compromised by the trafficking trade. Faced with this challenge, RENCTAS developed a "two-pronged" approach toward the government:

First, RENCTAS discovered pockets of enthusiasm among lower-level government technical staff many of which were committed to saving the environment. This strategy was underpinned by a tactic to be, in contrast to many more combative Brazilian activist NGO's at the time, cooperative with the Government, while never accepting government grants or program support so as to ensure their complete autonomy. According to Dener Giovannini, the spurning of government funding played a key role in building trust and respect with government officials, who realized that RENCTAS was not after their money.

This collaborative yet autonomous government strategy allowed them to build support from the bottom up in ministries and police agencies. They combined this with top-down political pressure generated by the increasingly visible cycle of media publicity flowing out of the media channels and the growing volume of tips and other forms of citizen involvement flowing into RENCTAS through the Internet. RENCTAS, and the animal trafficking problem in Brazil, could no longer be ignored. As a result of their efforts, Brazilian Parliament has created an Inquiry Commission to investigate the problem and the Federal Police have launched and implemented a national campaign against animal trafficking. Interpol, the Brazilian Federal Police, IBAMA (the Brazilian national environmental agency), the U.S. Department of Justice, CITES (Switzerland), WEG (New Zealand) have all grown to depend on RENCTAS for information and collaboration.

As time progressed, RENCTAS increasingly diversified its operations. In the past two years, the organization has taken on training programs for police, hosted international conferences, and published a book detailing the levels and patterns of animal trafficking³.

³ "First National Report on Fauna Traffic in Brazil."

Today's Challenge

RENCTAS was successful in riding the Internet wave and, where many others had failed, integrating it with media outreach and face-to-face relationship building with the very organizations it attempted to change. Ironically, however, by being “first-to-market,” the organization’s capacity to satisfy a pent-up demand, which they themselves created, has become overwhelmed. As Dener Giovannini points out, “a private company would have received a line of credit or venture capital; we didn’t have this option.” Given the organization’s fierce independence—one of their chief assets—they have not gone to governments to help. As a consequence, back-end operations for managing the burgeoning volume of web traffic and demands for information by the press increasingly compete with requests for police training and curriculum guides for schools.

The RENCTAS leadership now faces a critical set of strategic decisions. Do they aggressively seek financial support to develop the infrastructure and human resources to manage a continuously growing information brokerage role? Or, should they scale back and specialize while spinning off some responsibilities to other partners for activities such as education or media relations? Finally, should they diversify even further, this time into revenue-generating activities? Regarding this option, Giovannini and his colleagues are exploring creating an online store and an eco-tourism service for global markets as a means to generate revenue for scaling up capacity while retaining autonomy.