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# The Paris ODR Conference – When Law Meets Tech

The 17th annual [ODR Conference](#), which took place in Paris last month, was not your average law event. Entitled *Equal Access to Information and Justice Online Dispute Resolution*, the conference spanned across two days filled with intense discussions, ideas, exciting projects and most importantly – excellent food. Especially unique, was the combination of tech experts and lawyers from all over the world, and of course those who fit into both categories.

There were a number of factors that set this conference apart from any other I have attended, the most notable being diversity. Women made up at least half of all attendees, both in the legal and tech industries this is, I dare say, unusual. Perhaps not so surprising from an event organised by **Mireze Philippe**, Special

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justice for homeless people in [Latin America](#). There was a distinct atmosphere, unusual for a legal conference, perhaps because of the international and cross disciplinary nature. With access to justice as a central theme, human rights, ethics were key topics of discussion.

## ODR in human rights and peace building

The first keynote speaker, **François Zimeray**, France's Ambassador to Denmark and former Ambassador for Human Rights, spoke about forgiveness a future in digital era. Zimeray identified the correlation between conflict and globalisation/consumerism, emphasising the key role of education in [peace building](#) and creating less conflictual societies. He also asked important questions in regards to how we prepare [future generations](#) to deal with conflict effectively – noting that it is not only important to think about what earth we will leave to our children, but that “we must also ask ourselves what children should we leave to our earth?”.

The second keynote speaker, **Sanjana Hattotuwa**, Special Advisor at the [ICT4Peace Foundation](#) an organisation that aims to facilitate effective communication for those involved in peace building, joined via **Skype** from Sri Lanka. He spoke about the connection between business and human rights, highlighting the impact of technology on the way people access information and engage politically, stating that data is key to the transformation of dispute resolution – especially when looking at factors such as gender in political conflict resolution, which can play a huge role. Like Zimeray, he believes [education is key](#), noting the correlation between literacy rates and effective governance and maintaining peaceful societies.

## Access to justice

There was a wide representation of non-profit groups which are using and advocating for effective online tools in dispute resolution. One project that particularly struck me was, a smartphone app that seeks to solve disputes between refugees, as well as those with host communities and camp administrations. The project, which is currently being put forward to European institutions, and is being developed by **Petros Zourdoumis** the founder of [ODR Europe](#) and General Director **ADR point** in Greece. The app primarily focuses on prevention, as many asylum seekers and refugees fear the legal system because of the potential impact on their status, as well as seeking to provide access to justice in a simple, wide reaching and cost-effective way in an area that is in so many ways defined by conflict.

There were also a number of interesting discussions on innovations and new technology being used in court systems e.g. in the USA and the Netherlands, and plans to create an [online court system](#) in the UK. It is worth noting, that the public sector is not always acting alone in pushing these programmes, with an increase in public and private sector partnerships, such as the [Cyberjustice Laboratory](#) based in Montreal.

## Data

**Professor Catherine Rogers** of Penn State Law and CEO and co-founder of **Arbitrator Intelligence** spoke about the difficulties of choosing an arbitrator and the increasing transparency, fairness and accountability in the selection of international arbitrators, as well as facilitating diversity. She outlined [Arbitrator Intelligence](#), an extensive project covering important questions and topics and seeking to provide quality assurance. She pointed out that there is a need for better education and awareness on the need for diversity. The [Arbitrator Intelligence Questionnaire](#) seeks to break the “bottleneck” of information available to enable a more effective meritocracy.

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## Ethics

**Leah Wing**, Co-Director, [National Center for Technology](#) discussed [ethics and ODR](#), and legal accountability of the harms caused by artificial intelligence. She stated that despite the potential for greater access to justice through technology, power imbalances remain, which will remain an important factor during system design. It is also important to consider the different needs of ODR in comparison to ADR, and it's virtual and global dimension.

It is important to note that it is not technology itself, but rather the way technology is developed that can create an ethical issues. As **Allan Barsky**, Professor at the School of Social Work, Florida Atlantic University, pointed out – technology does not have to take away power or control over a situation, but that it can be an effective tool if it is applied in the context of ethics. He went on to say that there is “no way to anticipate all the harms that we will face in the future, but the best approach is rather to respond to problems as they arise and to improve transparency”.

## The future of justice?

So much was covered over the course of two days and with 60 speakers, the ideas, inspiring individuals and innovative projects are too much to list in a single article. It is clear that technology will play an increasingly important role in dispute resolution, not only through ODR but also in terms of collecting data and creating valuable mechanisms for the judicial system. However, it is crucial to bear in mind the importance of ethical standards when developing tools, in order to pave the way for processes that have the ability to effectively provide rather than deny justice to those who use them.

**Written by Natasha Mellersh.**



*Natasha Mellersh is the editor of the GPC Blog, she is currently completing an LLM in Public International Law at Leiden University in the Netherlands. Originally from Germany, she studied politics, economics and law in the UK. Natasha has worked in courts, for international law firms, NGOs, international organisations (including UNODC) and start-ups in a number of countries, including Austria, France, New Zealand and the UK. Her experience ranges from international public and private law to journalism, event management and communications. She was previously the online editor of CDR Magazine and African Law & Business Magazine, as well as a senior editor at LexisNexis in London.*

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