



DATA COLLECTION AND SOCIAL MEDIA

INNOVATION OR CHALLENGE FOR HUMANITARIAN AID?

EVENT REPORT

Rue de la Loi 42, Brussels, Belgium

15 May 2017 – 18:00-21:00

SUMMARY

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On 15 May 2017, as a precursor to the annual General Assembly, VOICE hosted an event entitled “Data collection and social media - innovation or challenge for humanitarian aid?”.

The event brought together VOICE members, leading practitioners, and academics. The three panellists were Massimo Marelli, Head of the Data Protection Office at the International Committee of the Red Cross, Kristin Bergtora Sandvik, a Research Professor in Humanitarian Studies at the Peace Research Institute Oslo, and Tanya Penny, Communications Director in Disaster Management at World Vision. The panel was chaired by Mags Bird, Strategy Advisor for VOICE member Mission East.

The subject of the debate – data and the use of new technologies and social media in humanitarian action – is extremely topical. The panel discussion and the Q&A with the audience that followed it demonstrated that data, social media, and new technologies undoubtedly present many opportunities for data collection and innovation in the humanitarian sector. However, the event also highlighted the many challenges and questions presented by the rise of new technologies that need to be addressed. Challenges/questions arising include potentially upsetting donors or putting communities and staff in danger through misuse of information available through social media tools, issues surrounding data privacy, and the risks communities may put themselves at when using social media. This event was followed by a networking reception.



CHAIR: MAGS BIRD

STRATEGY ADVISOR FOR MISSION EAST

Following introductory remarks from VOICE President Nicolas Borsinger, Ms Bird introduced the panellists and the topic of the event. Then, the panellists presented their thoughts on the topic in turn.



TANYA PENNY,

COMMUNICATION DIRECTOR, DISASTER MANAGEMENT, WORLD VISION

Ms Penny began her presentation by outlining that innovation is not just about technology, but about processes, systems, and first and foremost, people. In line with this, in deciding which social media and communications tools to use, she stated that it is important to ensure people are the focus by determining how exactly people want to be communicated with and why, and what they would like to communicate back to you.

It is particularly important for NGOs and humanitarian actors to embrace social media because targeted groups, such as Syrian refugees, are using these tools for their own ends, by, for example, forming Facebook groups.

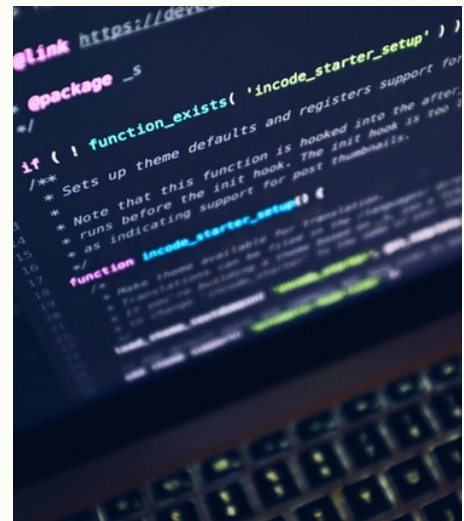


The sector can use these tools to inform and shape global conversations, and to create a transparent and reflective narrative during times of change and upheaval.

In order to ensure success in using these tools, NGOs for example, can explore potential partnerships with technology agencies. This has happened in Jordan where UNHCR partnered with Facebook to provide free data access to refugees.

Ms Penny recognised the potential risks concerning upsetting donors or putting communities and staff in danger through misuse of social media tools, but argued that this cannot make us inactive as we have a duty to support communities and that this fear can make us more diligent, driving us to debate the ethics of the process.

She finished by outlining the importance of using multiple tools and channels in order to leave no one behind, and of tailoring your communication strategy to the community with which you are engaging, concluding that no single tool will solve all communication problems.



KRISTIN BERGTORA SANDVIK

RESEARCH PROFESSOR IN HUMANITARIAN STUDIES, PRIO

Ms Sandvik centred her talk around cybersecurity and risk awareness. Giving the example of cyber technology, she noted that although technology and innovation are nothing new, the “force” of these entities is unprecedented in scale.

Drawing attention to how technology affects Humanitarian Principles, (such as threatening neutrality through increasing reliance on third party actors, particularly private sector companies, to provide basic data and infrastructure), she argued that technology will never be neutral and pointed to the threat to humanitarian work posed by cyberspace.



The humanitarian sector is not rigorous enough in developing policies regarding social media and data protection, with personal and professional online profiles overlapping.

Such information insecurity is a threat to humanitarian workers and affected communities alike and Ms Sandvik argued that subsequently one should be stricter regarding the use of technology in our professional setting.

Communication over social media platforms about work should be strongly limited.

She questioned how far humanitarian actors can go in defending their own operations considering the values of neutrality and impartiality that underpin their work, and argued that they risk being used as a “surfboard” for hostile actors to, for example, spy on government contractors and in-need communities.

MASSIMO MARELLI

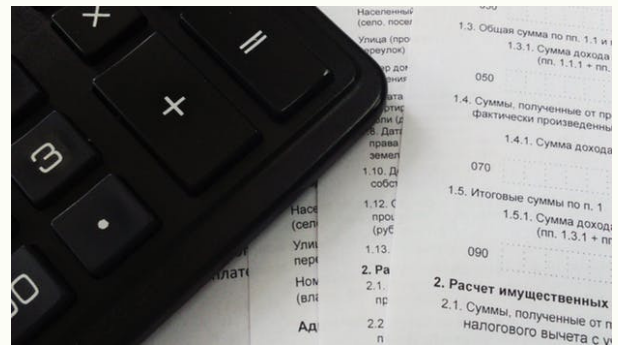
HEAD OF DATA PROTECTION OFFICE, INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS

Mr Marelli began his presentation by noting the developments in technology, particularly over the past three years, which have facilitated the storage and analysis of massive amounts of data. Such data risks exploitations by governments and other actors in ways which are detrimental to the wider public. There is an increased awareness on cyber-risk and the need for regulation. However, there are risks on both sides. On the one hand we risk sleep-walking into developing new technologies without first appreciating the potentially harmful consequences, while on the other hand we risk not developing or fully utilising these technologies at all.



We face complex and unfamiliar data flows; accountability is required. Mr Marelli mentioned cash programmes where data are transmitted and may generate surveillance. Data protection instruments serve to protect human dignity – and therefore are particularly relevant to humanitarian aid. He pointed to the General Data Protection Regulation, a significant recent development through which governments can be fined up to 4% of annual turnover for misuse, and argued that such measures exist to preserve human dignity.

He argued that there is an urgent need for commonality of purpose among data protection agencies and humanitarian actors, and outlined the ICRC framework for data protection compliance as a strong example of this. The ICRC has also carried out studies on the use of messaging applications in the humanitarian sector, which highlighted a number of unknowns that require further exploration, such as the exploitation of meta data generated by humanitarian programmes. Over the past year and a half, the ICRC has worked with **Brussels Privacy Hub** in developing a forum of various stakeholders to better understand these issues. He concluded by saying that we need to communicate but with substantial guidance on the use of social media.



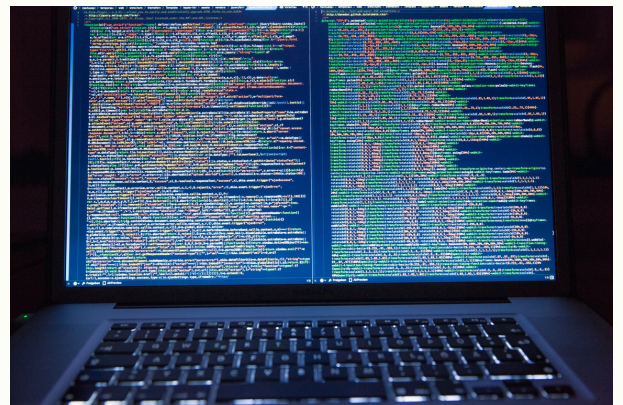
PANEL DISCUSSION

Ms Sandvik asked her fellow panellists how humanitarian actors should engage with profit-driven private actors. Ms Penny responded by stating that any relationship involving a humanitarian actor requires due diligence and substantial understanding of the motivations of the other party, with private actors obviously being driven by corporate goals.

Ms Penny added that the involvement of private actors can be beneficial and their role should be encouraged. However, NGOs must ensure affected communities remain the primary concern and ensure that these people know their own rights in their interactions with private groups.

Ms Sandvik then asked the other panellists how we can avoid humanitarian data becoming a vehicle for attacks on vulnerable groups. Mr Marelli raised the issue of drones, highlighting that the public crowdsourcing of information can potentially result in individuals being targeted by airstrikes.

Ms Penny added that the social media accounts of humanitarian actors should not be closed down, but that security teams should be closely involved in ensuring these actors are trained in the risks before going into the field.



Ms Bird concluded the discussion by underlining that the use of social media is a skill, particularly in a professional setting, and that NGOs need sophisticated communication strategies to be able to deal with any errors.

EXCHANGE WITH THE AUDIENCE

The discussion was then opened up to the floor. An audience member raised the issue of consent, to which Mr Marelli responded that within the data protection community the concept of consent is being discredited, largely due to the lack of a meaningful process for securing it.

Another participant asked how NGOs can best mitigate the risks communities put themselves at when using social media. Ms Penny explained that World Vision educates such communities about the risks involved, and argued that NGOs generally need to focus on this. In particular, educating youths increases their engagement allowing them to become powerful actors within their own communities providing humanitarian solutions.

While many NGOs focus on remote, rural communities, urban, educated people are aware of their rights and demand a high level of service from NGOs and their governments. Mr Marelli added that we need to start questioning whether a protection mandate involves informing people about use of social media.

The next question from the audience centred on big data, asking whether there is potential for humanitarian actors to access it and use it to anticipate complex crises. Mr Marelli answered that there is massive potential for NGOs to use big data, for example in being able to pre-deploy aid where it might be needed.



NGOs have the option of accessing it themselves or recruiting a third-party to access and analyse it for them. The latter option has risks as some handling of the data can be illegal. He added that the corporate sector lacks trust in sharing data with humanitarian organisations, fearing they will be blamed and fined for any mistakes made in handling the data.

Another audience member asked how NGOs can mitigate against the fact that groups can use social media as a complaint mechanism creating public pressure where needs-based principled assistance might require a different response. Ms Penny argued that NGOs need strong information management and capacity in order to respond to such criticism, but do not invest enough in communication staff, seeing communications first-and-foremost as a fundraising tool rather than a strategic operational service.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In their concluding statements, Mr Marelli noted that we are all subject to the ongoing wave of “digital disruption”, and that it demands innovative ways of doing our jobs. Ms Penny reinforced the idea that communications should not be skimmed on. It is not simply about media engagement, journalism, photography, nor is it an area for saving money, but a crucial tool for policy and community engagement which should not be misused. Ms Sandvik pointed out that handling social media is not optional and has to fit in the basic protection obligation of humanitarians.



VOICE (*Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies*) is a network representing 85 European NGOs active in humanitarian aid worldwide. VOICE is the main NGO interlocutor with the EU on emergency aid and disaster risk reduction.