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Humanitarian Technologies: Understanding the Role of Digital Media in Disaster Recovery

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On November 8th 2013 Typhoon Haiyan hit the Philippines leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. To date, Haiyan remains the strongest storm ever recorded with over 6,300 casualties and more than 12 million people displaced or otherwise affected. Within minutes after Haiyan's landfall, the web was also flooded with optimism, particularly about the promise of communication technologies in disaster recovery and humanitarian relief.

Such optimism is recent although it predates Haiyan. The 2013 World Disasters Report uses the term 'humanitarian technology' to refer to the empowering nature of digital technologies such as mobile phones and social media for disaster recovery. It is claimed that interactive technologies enable affected communities to participate in their own recovery, respond to their own problems and 'make their voices heard.' Digital technologies are welcomed for their potential to catalyze a 'power-shift' in humanitarianism by building feedback structures that empower local communities to hold humanitarian and government agencies into account.

Despite the enthusiasm regarding the role of digital technologies as tools for disaster recovery there is little evidence to assess their impact. The 'Humanitarian Technologies Project' examines the optimistic account of communication technologies by providing empirical evidence on the uses of communication technologies by affected populations as well as stakeholders involved in the Haiyan recovery. Funded by an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Urgency Grant, our project investigated the consequences of communication technologies for disaster recovery in the following critical areas: 1) information dissemination; 2) collective problem-solving; 3) redistribution of resources; 4) accountability and transparency of humanitarian efforts; 5) voice and empowerment of affected populations.

What research have we done?
Between April 2014 and January 2015 we conducted participant observation and interviews with 102 participants affected by Typhoon Haiyan. We also interviewed 38 experts: representatives from humanitarian organizations, local civil society groups, government agencies, telecommunications companies and digital platform developers. Our 10-month ethnography in two affected areas in the Visayas region was supplemented by online ethnography which allowed us to engage with and follow our participants' online interactions.

What have we found?
One of our main findings is that the assumptions about technology present in humanitarian policies do not translate to actual uses of technology by affected populations. This disconnect was apparent when examining the **participation of affected people in disaster recovery.**

Communication technologies do not give people a 'voice'. Technologies can facilitate voice but only as long as other factors, such as social capital and a strong civil society, are present. Further, we identify a divide among the better-off participants who are most likely to have a 'voice' in post-disaster contexts and the poorer participants for whom finding a voice is more challenging, if not impossible. Middle class participants can exploit some of the potentials of digital technologies to

make their voices heard and bring attention to their problems thus often improving their social positions. Conversely, those who are most in need are less likely to find such opportunities because they lack access to these technologies and the skills needed to use them.

Consequently, our analysis paid attention to the processes that silence voice. We observed practices that actively sought to discourage protest (for example, threats or a generalized fear that affected people may be struck off beneficiary lists). We also found evidence of subtle forms of silencing through lack of self-confidence and feelings of helplessness, where people internalized views that their low socio-economic status diminishes the value of their voice. Crucially, we observed that humanitarian relief is experienced as an extension of the patron-client ties that structure social relationships in the Philippines. Poorer participants refrained from expressing a direct criticism of relief distribution as this could potentially destabilise such relationships of obligation and dependency. Related to this point we observe how humanitarian aid was perceived through cultural idioms of debt of gratitude (*utang na loob*) which create asymmetrical power relationships between the donors and beneficiaries. It is not surprising that expressions of gratitude were visible in public spaces in the affected areas (for example, the building of 'thank you' shrines by beneficiaries).

We found that much of our participants' mediated communication resembles an 'echo chamber' and not a dialogue. Participants are likely to share their views with their peers but not with representatives from aid or government agencies. As much as this mediated voice has value, it is limited in its capacity to correct any power asymmetries in humanitarian action.

One factor that made a difference in empowering people to participate in the recovery process was the presence of a strong civil society, such as community organizers who can empower people to make their voices heard.

Do interactive communication technologies improve the accountability of humanitarian agencies to affected people?
The response to Typhoon Haiyan represents the most systematic implementation of accountability initiatives by humanitarian agencies. Because of the existing technological infrastructure in the Philippines, Haiyan was widely seen as an ideal laboratory to pilot initiatives on accountability to affected communities. Several agencies interpreted accountability as feedback and set up various mechanisms for affected people to offer their views and express their concerns. Interactive digital technologies were often prioritised as feedback collection tools.

The narrow interpretation of accountability as feedback has a number of consequences. Given the relationships of obligation and patronage that govern Philippine social life, affected people were reluctant to offer their views or air their grievances. Examining the feedback databases of several humanitarian agencies we found that a significant number of messages were 'thank you' notes expressing gratitude and indebtedness. Accountability remains a western concept with limited purchase in the local context which explains why only nine of our participants used the agency feedback platforms.

The problems with feedback extend beyond collection as we found that feedback was hardly acted upon. Of our few participants who offered feedback most only received an acknowledgement and clarification to their issues, without leading to satisfactory outcomes. The effects of not closing the feedback loop are potentially very harmful as they can lead to further silencing and demoralization of affected people.

In addition to the gap between the promise and actual use of accountability mechanisms, we also observed a gap between humanitarian workers on the ground and project managers or policymakers

higher in the organizational hierarchy. Workers on the ground – the ones who collect feedback and are in touch with affected people – are often aware of the limitations reported here. Moreover, they are often unsure of what happens to the data they collect once pushed higher in the organizational hierarchy. Our data suggest that the main 'audience' for the feedback data is the donors – and not the affected people. The emphasis on metrics suggests that although in theory accountability is oriented to affected people, in practice it serves the role of satisfying the funders' demands for evidence and impact. Despite the good intentions, the intensification of feedback mechanisms and metrics through digital technologies do not necessarily improve humanitarian action nor do they automatically make humanitarian organisations more accountable to beneficiaries. On the contrary, systematic questioning of beneficiaries without closing the feedback loop can disenfranchise affected people and diminish trust of humanitarian agencies. For accountability to meaningfully work, we need to shift from a culture of audit to a culture of listening and working together with affected communities. We need intelligent and culturally sensitive accountability.

What are the actual uses of communication technologies?
Although communication technologies do not fulfill the expectations of voice and accountability they were firmly embedded in the everyday lives of our participants. Mobile phones and social networking sites such as Facebook were widely used for sociality and entertainment. For example, Facebook was often used in mourning and memorialization rituals. Users quickly returned to the long-established uses of social media such as dating and computer games. We view media's everyday uses in the face of extraordinary events as meaningful coping mechanisms and ways of reintroducing normality in everyday life in the aftermath of disaster. The familiar rhythm of radio conversation, the global gaming community and the ambient co-presence of Facebook friends are used to reclaim ordinariness within the exceptional.

We observe how platforms that were introduced by aid agencies to facilitate information dissemination and feedback were often appropriated for different purposes by affected people. Such is the case of humanitarian radio which used Frontline SMS for feedback but was largely used for song requests and dedications to friends and family members. We recognize this as an important social function of humanitarian radio and interactive media. Such practices represent a need to affirm relationships in the post-disaster context and a way for people to regain control over their social lives after the disruption of disaster. The uses of media for sociality and recreation are vital for our participants' well-being. While not fulfilling the expectations of 'humanitarian technology', such uses also express a more modest politics of reconnecting to the fabric of public life. Yet, we remain aware that the ordinary uses of new as well as old media, despite their social significance, do not achieve the redistribution of resources which is vital in the aftermath of disasters.

What can we learn from Haiyan?

From feedback fetish to cultures of listening
While feedback mechanisms are an important component of accountability practices, a culture of listening involves extending beyond feedback tools. Digital technologies make it easier to collect and catalogue feedback but can only work alongside processes of needs consultation and agencies' immersion on the ground. Cultures of listening cultivate the participation of communities beyond the promotion feedback tools by developing relationships based on respect and trust.

Cultural sensitivity
Understanding the specific cultural and social contexts is vital for interventions aimed at encouraging participation and accountability to affected people. Agencies need to recognize local norms and structural limitations that promote or inhibit people's participation. Community cohesion is also at stake when introducing interventions.

Civil society and local intermediaries
Community organizers with long-term involvement in communities can be important intermediaries for affected people, helping to amplify their voice by involving them in decision-making processes. Identifying, training and involving local people, including leaders, can enhance the delivery of relief programmes.

Digital inequalities and digital literacy
Technologies can have distorting effects (as participation is often limited to those with digital access and skills), thus obscuring the needs of the worst-off in a disaster. Investing in digital literacy (a long-term project) is a vital precondition for the creative and potentially life-enhancing uses of communication technologies. Merely giving people access to technologies will not give them a voice.

Second-order disasters
Rather than creating a 'level playing field' new communication technologies exacerbate social inequalities by heightening the life chances for the better off, whilst leaving poorer participants behind. The deepening of social inequalities can compound the effects of the original calamity creating a 'second order disaster'.

Communication environments
Understanding the role of social and mobile media in disasters requires us to analyse the range of communicative opportunities available to affected people (from face-to-face to mediated) rather than focus on discrete technologies. Communication initiatives in disaster recovery would benefit from a media environment approach.

Slow research in emergency contexts
Ethnography – a method that requires long-term immersion in local communities – is appropriate for understanding the aftermath of disasters. The drawn out process of disaster recovery requires an empathetic and critical understanding which ethnography can reveal.

Organizational obstacles
Within the humanitarian sector, agencies are encouraged to develop ways to address communication obstacles between accountability and programme teams, or within the accountability teams in the organisational hierarchy. Inter-agency coordination is also vital.

Social life of communities
Affected people are creative and active citizens who develop strategies to neutralise the effects of disaster and continue to strive for a better life for themselves and their families. Sociality and recreation through communication need to be recognized as vital for people's well-being.

RESEARCH TEAM

Principal Investigator: Mirca Madianou (Goldsmiths, University of London)
Mirca is Senior Lecturer in Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London. She has published extensively on the social consequences of digital technologies especially in relation to processes of migration, humanitarianism and disasters. She is the author of Mediating the Nation (2005) and Migration and New Media (2012 with D. Miller) and editor of Ethics of Media (2013 with N. Couldry and A. Pinchevski). She currently directs the ESRC programme 'Humanitarian Technologies' which investigates the uses of digital technologies in the context of disasters.

Co-Investigator: Jonathan Ong (University of Leicester)
Jonathan is Lecturer in Media and Communication at the University of Leicester. He writes on media in the Global South and the ethics of mediated suffering and humanitarianism. He is the author of The Poverty of Television (2015). He worked as consultant for a listening project on the Haiyan response for Plan International, World Vision and the International Organization for Migration, published as Who's Listening? (2015 with M. Buchanan-Smith and S. Routley).

Postdoctoral Researcher: Liezel Longboan (Goldsmiths, University of London)
Liezel is the Postdoctoral Research Assistant for the 'Humanitarian Technologies Project: Communications in the Wake of Typhoon Haiyan'. Her research interests focus on community, identity, marginalization, narratives, and disaster.

Co-Investigator: Nicole Curato (University of Canberra)
Nicole is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy & Global Governance at the University of Canberra. Last year, she was awarded a Discovery Early Career Research Award for her research project on participatory governance in a post-Haiyan world. Her work has been published in journals including International Political Science Review, Politics and Policy, Critical Policy Studies, and Television and New Media.

Co-Investigator: Jayeel Cornelio (Ateneo de Manila University)
Jayeel is the Director of the Development Studies Program, Ateneo de Manila University. He was a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen, Germany. He conducts research in the areas of religion, development, youth, and the city. He is co-editor (with Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce) of the forthcoming issue (2015) of the *Asian Journal of Social Science* on religious philanthropy in Asia.