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Humanitarian Technology: Taking the 'Human' out of Humanitarianism?

By Christopher Chen

SYNOPSIS

There has been a rapid turn towards the use of both physical and digital technologies in the humanitarian sector. New forms of humanitarian technology (HUMTECH) encompass both hardware – drones, modular shelters, robots and software, such as data collection systems, biometric identification programs, block chain components. Unfettered and uncritical interactions with technology could bring about certain risks.

COMMENTARY

AS THE international humanitarian community collectively acknowledges the need for sector-wide change, rhetoric has focused mainly on improving the effectiveness of humanitarian action. Humanitarian effectiveness is now seen as an important addendum to the sector's traditional principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. Related to this is the idea that innovation and the use of new technologies can expedite this change.

Even with great interest and investment in HUMTECH, the challenge then is to strike a balance between the need to be effective in humanitarian action and the need to do so in accordance with the humanitarian principles. When lives and livelihoods are at stake, novelty is scant justification for humanitarian actors to adopt technologies without critical thought.

Limits of Digital Humanitarianism

The world has entered a new digital frontier, where digital technologies are penetrating all aspects of daily life. This digital turn is also evident in the humanitarian sector. Digital technologies are used to improve all aspects of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts.

While this is not problematic per se and seemingly bodes well for the sector, it is important for humanitarian actors to be aware of the adverse effects that they could unintentionally inflict on vulnerable populations.

In the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan, short messaging services (SMS) were implemented for affected communities to communicate with aid agencies. As mentioned at a recent HUMTECH [roundtable](#) discussion, a study conducted on this mechanism found that, instead of enabling humanitarian actors to collect constructive feedback on relief efforts, it actually discouraged negative feedback from the disaster-affected people.

Rather than risk being seen as ungrateful, these populations were content to give sanitised accounts of relief efforts. The technology had shaped their belief of what was expected of an ideal victim, that is one who expresses gratitude when aid is given.

Power to the People?

This technological shift also runs the risk of international NGOs and their technical arms monopolising the development and use of HUMTECH. This could result in them excluding local NGOs and innovation agencies from the HUMTECH conversation completely.

Especially in developing countries, unequal access widens the power gap between international aid providers and their local counterparts, as well as the affected populations. This might breed distrust between providers and recipients of aid, while also impairing the response capacities of local humanitarian actors.

In Nepal, as a way to address this power imbalance, local agencies and innovation labs are trying to develop a culture of innovation through their programmes. Even though products such as drones and water filtration devices are already readily available on the international market, these centres are still going ahead with their own Research and Development programmes.

They hope to provide local innovators with the space to develop their ideas, and allow them to cultivate essential skills and technical expertise. This builds local capacity and allows disenfranchised populations to take back some agency, and position themselves as more than just passive recipients of aid. Ideally, this creates a more participatory environment for the development of humanitarian technological solutions.

Penchant for 'Newness'

With the Fourth Industrial Revolution taking centre stage in recent times, the words 'innovation' and 'technology' are frequently being bandied about in various sectors. The humanitarian sector is no exception, where problems surrounding inefficiency and ineffectiveness are often given technological solutions.

HUMTECH is framed as a panacea for all of the sector's issues, but this potentially leads to excessive [technological optimism](#), where 'newness' is seemingly hyped up and prioritised ahead of the interests of vulnerable groups.

The precariousness of such rhetoric is also evident in the seemingly greater willingness of humanitarians to [test new technologies](#) in disaster settings. There is a tendency to view disaster-hit countries as opportunities for change, and as fertile testing grounds for the trialling of new technologies.

While pragmatists might view this as a necessary move to facilitate effective humanitarian action in the future, it does raise some ethical questions. Inordinate techno-centrism runs the risk of taking the 'human' out of humanitarianism, and the use of vulnerable populations as experimental subjects is an overt representation of this.

Re-examining Engagement with Technology

It is important to assess how we understand HUMTECH, and also to remember that, with the 'humanitarian' tag, comes a commitment to 'do no harm'. Technological optimism aside, there is a need to evaluate how HUMTECH fits into the humanitarian landscape, and acknowledge that there might be broader implications arising from its usage.

New technologies and innovation bring with it the promise of furthering humanitarian objectives. However, lofty expectations and good intentions alone are not enough to ensure that vulnerable populations are not marginalised or harmed.

This tension, as in any other attempts to change the status quo, is one that needs to be negotiated carefully. Critical engagement is needed to ensure that technology does not exacerbate existing social problems or perpetuate inequalities.

The testing and use of new technologies in humanitarian settings should be tempered by clear guidelines and regulations, formulated in consultation with industry experts, humanitarian practitioners, government bodies, academia, and members of the community who are most at risk. Local stakeholders should also be included in the conversation and given resources to develop their own innovation programmes.

Finally, while HUMTECH does have the potential to make humanitarian aid more efficient and effective, humanitarians should be wary of the ways they engage with and use them. Technology should be used mainly for the benefit of vulnerable populations and not simply because it is in vogue. The ways in which humanitarian technology are constituted as legitimate and acceptable will have implications on the way humanitarian aid is conducted in the future.

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