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DIGITAL HUMANITARIANISM: MYTHS AND REALITIES

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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 communication 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. In sum, mobile and social media are seen as solutions to some of the longstanding critiques of humanitarianism (de Waal, 1997; Krause, 2014), namely that it perpetuates power inequalities and is largely unaccountable. Indeed a new era of humanitarianism is proclaimed which is driven by digital developments (Meier, 2015; UN OCHA, 2012). Despite the enthusiasm regarding the role of digital technologies as tools for humanitarian relief there is still little evidence to support the above claims. This paper unpacks some of the myths surrounding digital technologies for disaster recovery and humanitarian aid. Rather than assuming the usefulness, inherently progressive or democratizing nature of communication technologies, I will reflect on the affordances of platforms such as social network sites and messaging apps (Baym, 2015; boyd, 2013), their actual uses by disaster affected people and how these contribute to key processes of humanitarian practice such as 'accountability'.

I will do so by drawing on two interconnected projects: the first is a year-long ethnography of the Typhoon Haiyan recovery which included 139 interviews with disaster-affected people as well as humanitarian workers and other stakeholders (Madianou, 2015; Madianou, Longboan & Ong, 2015; Madianou et al, 2015). The second project consists of interviews with humanitarian officers involved in a series of recent emergencies, from the current European refugee crisis to the 2015 Nepal earthquake. The response to Typhoon Haiyan, which hit the Philippines in 2013, represents the most systematic implementation of digital initiatives aimed at facilitating voice and empowering local communities to hold agencies into account. In that sense Haiyan represents the ideal research case study. Still, including interviews from other humanitarian contexts strengthens the development of an overall theoretical argument about digital humanitarianism. I will argue that despite noble intentions, the

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consequences of communication technologies for humanitarian action are more ambiguous than current accounts suggest.

One of the key claims made about interactive communication technologies is that they empower local people to hold humanitarian agencies into account. The paper will observe that agencies interpret accountability rather narrowly as 'feedback' which affected people are asked to provide in response of the relief that they have received. Agencies increasingly prioritize the collection of feedback through digitized platforms such as SMS in combination with open access software such as FrontlineSMS. Although social and mobile media enable the easy collection and cataloguing of feedback, research with humanitarian agencies suggests that feedback is not typically used to propose new relief projects or inform new policy. Instead we observe that feedback data are increasingly used as evidence of impact which donors increasingly demand. The emphasis on metrics suggests that although in theory accountability is oriented to affected people, in practice it serves the purpose of humanitarian governance. I call this apparent disjuncture the 'paradox of accountability'. Despite good intentions, 'humanitarian technologies' become instruments of management and audit, rather than tools for participation and empowerment. As the emphasis shifts from humanitarian communication to humanitarian governance, the 'humanitarian technologies' discourse legitimates relief projects. Moreover, the systematic questioning of disaster-affected people without closing the feedback loop can disenfranchise affected people and diminish trust of humanitarian agencies. Although digital technologies are rendered as solutions to longstanding critiques of humanitarianism, I argue that processes mediation can amplify existing power inequalities between aid workers and disaster-affected people. This is not the result of some inherent technological feature, but the outcome of a particular application of technology in a specific local context and within the wider political economy of humanitarianism. Communication technology can only reveal or amplify the social and political structures already in place. Wider structural changes would need to be made within humanitarian agencies and their relationships with donors in order to facilitate accountability to affected people instead of audit metrics.

At the same time, the paper acknowledges that although new communication technologies do not fulfil the expectations of accountability they are firmly embedded in the everyday lives of our participants. Mobile phones and social networking sites such as Facebook were widely used for sociality, entertainment and coping with the aftermath of disasters. 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. Platforms which 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 employed Frontline SMS for feedback but was largely used for song requests and dedications to friends and family members. Rather than trivializing this observation, I recognise that 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 caused by disasters. The uses of media for sociality and recreation are vital for the well-being of disaster-affected people. The ordinary uses of social and mobile media in the

face of extraordinary events are meaningful coping mechanisms and ways of reintroducing normality in everyday life. The familiarity of everyday routines, the global gaming community and the ambient co-presence of Facebook friends are used to reclaim ordinariness within the exceptional.

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