Social media and inclusion in humanitarian response

Oliver Lough

May 2022

HPG
Humanitarian
Policy Group

ODI

This PDF has been prepared in accordance with good practice on accessibility.

Acknowledgements

About the authors

Oliver Lough is acting Senior Research Fellow with HPG at ODI.

Contents

List of boxes

Acronyms

DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PR	public relations
RLP	Refugee Law Project
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency

Executive summary

Social media has occupied an ambivalent space within narratives of the formal humanitarian sector over the past decade. Techno-optimist approaches have focused on its potential to deliver better outcomes for people affected by crisis: as a way to make responses more 'data-driven'; as a powerful broadcast tool for sharing vital information; as a way to reduce distance and engage more closely with hard-to-reach groups; and as a way to democratise both aid delivery and decision-making (Lüge, 2017; Chernobrov, 2018; OCHA, 2021). Meanwhile, growing realisation of social media's role in the spread of hate speech, rumours and disinformation (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and Minority Rights Group International, 2019; Mercy Corps, 2019; Xu, 2021); questions around how user data can be exploited or misused by different actors (McDonald, 2016; ICRC and Privacy International, 2018); and a steady drip-feed of revelations about the questionable ethics of how platforms are designed and run (The Guardian, 2018; Hao, 2021; WSJ, 2021) have all driven a growing focus on risk: of social media as a potential threat to crisis-affected populations and to humanitarians themselves. Wider critiques have also explored its role in reinforcing unequal and extractive power relations, both between aid actors and affected people, and as part of wider inequalities between the Global North and South (Madianou, 2019; Kaurin, 2020; Shringarpure, 2020). At the same time, social media has – for better or worse – become part of daily life for an increasing number of crisis-affected people worldwide, whether as a 'lifeline' maintaining connections with loved ones or access to information, a way to organise and support – or do harm to – each other, or simply as a means to pass the time (e.g. Latonero and Kift, 2018; Culbertson et al., 2019).

This study forms part of the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG)'s wider research on humanitarian 'digital divides'. Drawing on existing literature, interviews with humanitarian practitioners and research with people affected by crisis in Venezuela and Uganda, it explores how the presence of social media in humanitarian crises intersects with efforts to make humanitarian aid more inclusive. It finds that, despite almost a decade of bold claims regarding the potential for social media to support humanitarian action, practical engagements among humanitarian actors are, for the most part, still on the starting block. Yet, given the steady expansion of internet access and smartphone use worldwide, social media is likely to play an increasingly prominent role for affected people in current and future crises. Consequently, it is not a phenomenon humanitarian actors can continue to side-step. Given the tendency of social media platforms to mirror and amplify existing dynamics of marginalisation, a specific focus on promoting inclusion will need to be at the heart of efforts to engage more deeply as part of fundamental humanitarian commitments to impartiality and to 'do no harm'.

Taking a more systematic approach to avoid exclusion by absence

The comparative lack of humanitarian actors currently seeking to incorporate social media into their work is linked in part to justifiable concerns over risk: whether of reputational damage, of excluding people or of putting them in harm's way. However, this needs to be balanced with a realistic appraisal of the potential risks of not engaging in a space that may be critical to how affected people navigate crises. This will need to involve shifting from risk avoidance to risk mitigation, as well as developing more

contextually grounded understandings of the specific risks and opportunities that different approaches to using social media involve for different people, within different information ecosystems. Including affected people in these processes and discussions will likely be key to making them more effective.

The need for partnerships and collective action

Many of the barriers identified in this study highlight the challenge of organisations attempting to 'go it alone' when trying to operationalise social media in their work. For smaller organisations in particular, the cost of developing and setting up individual approaches may be unsustainable, while even larger organisations are unlikely to have all the technical capacity and ways of thinking siloed entirely in-house. Here, working together offers a way to both defer costs and share expertise. Given that messy and open feedback via social media rarely fits with agency programmes and mandates, collective approaches also offer a way to better share and analyse information between organisations.

Decentring humanitarians

In addition to challenges related to risk and resourcing, the inability to 'let go' (Bennett et al., 2016) appears to be a key barrier to humanitarian organisations' engagement with social media as a part of crisis-affected populations' information ecosystems and support networks in positive and relevant ways. At a basic level, this involves taking seriously how people want to interact with humanitarian actors, which may not be in ways that are most convenient or comfortable to them. This will involve not just 'meeting people where they are', if this happens to be social media platforms, but engaging in ways that reflect how different people actually use those platforms. Conversely, it will also involve asking how far tools or approaches to social media are relevant to the specific needs and priorities of affected people, as opposed to a response to the incentives driving humanitarian agencies (such as pressure from donors or a need to be seen as 'innovative').

From 'yes, but…' to 'yes, and…' approaches to digital inclusion

Humanitarian actors have a potentially critical role to play in mitigating the exclusionary potential of social media. However, this needs to move beyond a starting point of making the potential for exclusion a reason not to engage. Focusing on the most acute needs remains at the core of humanitarian approaches to inclusion, and this will always involve trade-offs around what is feasible with limited time and resources. However, there is a need to ask whether working to communicate offline with the most marginalised people who are cut off from social media by digital divides must come at the expense of engaging in online spaces with those who are not. Given that digital divides exist on a spectrum, part of the answer to this question will involve interrogating assumptions around the risks and patterns of exclusion that people who are able to use social media do or don't face. It will also involve acknowledging that events in online spaces have spillover effects in offline ones – and vice versa.

1   Introduction

Social media (as defined in Box 1) has occupied an ambivalent space within narratives of the formal humanitarian sector over the past decade. Techno-optimist approaches have focused on its potential to deliver better outcomes for people affected by crisis: as a way to make responses more 'data-driven'; as a powerful broadcast tool for sharing vital information; as a way to reduce distance and engage more closely with hard-to-reach groups; and as a way to democratise both aid delivery and decision-making (Lüge, 2017; Chernobrov, 2018; OCHA, 2021). Meanwhile, growing realisation of social media's role in the spread of hate speech, rumours and disinformation (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and Minority Rights Group International, 2019; Mercy Corps, 2019; Xu, 2021); questions around how user data can be exploited or misused by different actors (McDonald, 2016; ICRC and Privacy International, 2018); and a steady drip-feed of revelations about the questionable ethics of how platforms are designed and run (The Guardian, 2018; Hao, 2021; WSJ, 2021) have all driven a growing focus on risk: of social media as a potential threat to crisis-affected populations and to humanitarians themselves. Wider critiques have also explored its role in reinforcing unequal and extractive power relations, both between aid actors and affected people, and as part of wider inequalities between the Global North and South (Madianou, 2019; Kaurin, 2020; Shringarpure, 2020). At the same time, social media has – for better or worse – become part of daily life for an increasing number of crisis-affected people worldwide, whether as a 'lifeline' maintaining connections with loved ones or access to information, a way to organise and support – or do harm to – each other, or simply as a means to pass the time (e.g. Latonero and Kift, 2018; Culbertson et al., 2019).

> ## Box 1   Defining social media
>
> For the purposes of this report, 'social media' is defined following Obar and Wildman (2015) as: (1) any internet-based application; that (2) is grounded in content created or shared by users; (3) allows individuals to create and share profiles; and (4) allows users to connect their profiles with those of other users and hence generate social connections. This includes platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok, as well as messaging applications such as WhatsApp or Signal (in that the latter allow for interaction across groups of users, as well as between individuals).
>
> Social media is relevant as a distinct analytical category in that it offers users specific 'affordances' or possibilities for different types of action that are distinct from (although they may partially overlap with) other media. The specifics of these affordances depend on the features of given applications, how different users engage with them and the wider contexts in which these interactions take place. However, previous studies have highlighted several affordances that are consistent across different situations. These include (but are not restricted to) visibility – giving people the ability to rapidly exchange information with a much wider range of other actors than previously possible; persistence – the ability to engage in and iterate on interactions that are preserved over time and can be referred back to; or association – the ability to connect to multiple actors simultaneously, for example (Treem and Leonardi, 2012).

As part of HPG's wider research on humanitarian 'digital divides', this study explores how the presence of social media in humanitarian crises intersects with efforts to make humanitarian aid more inclusive. 'Inclusion' here is understood to be:

> actions taken to ensure the right to information, protection and assistance for all persons affected by crisis, irrespective of age, sexual and gender identity, disability status, nationality, or ethnic, religious or social origin or identity (Searle et al., 2016, in Barbelet and Wake, 2020: 9).

Realising this goal touches on questions of 'impartiality' – ensuring that people receive support based on need and without discrimination; of 'equity' – ensuring this support is sensitive to the different needs people have and the barriers they face when accessing assistance; and of 'participation' – ensuring people have the space and means to demand their rights, hold providers to account and engage as equal partners in the design and delivery of assistance (Barbelet and Wake, 2020).

Questions of inclusion and exclusion are central to the roles that social media can play in crises. At a basic level, different people have different levels of access to social media, experience differing constraints and opportunities in how they use it and face differing levels of exposure to the risks that doing so involves. While these divides exist in practically all settings, they take on additional significance in an emergency, where people's social relationships, sources of support and information landscapes are often profoundly disrupted. More broadly, social media's role as both a data source and a two-way communication tool can have potentially significant implications for how aid is delivered: both in terms of what assistance gets delivered to which populations, and how responsive and accountable aid actors are to people receiving their services. All these dynamics are grounded and interact in the different types of power relationships that underpin a crisis, whether via social inclusion within affected communities, how these communities relate to aid providers, or through the configuration of different actors within the humanitarian system.

Finally, focusing on inclusion draws attention to more basic issues related to the relevance and scope of humanitarian action. Unlike other technologies recently embraced by parts of the humanitarian sector – such as biometrics (Holloway et al., 2021) or digital mapping (Bryant, 2021) – social media continues to play a relatively marginal role in much humanitarian practice. This is linked to practical challenges in implementation, ethical concerns over whether and how to engage, and institutional norms that centre the heavily siloed priorities and approaches of humanitarian agencies over the 'messier' experiences of the people they serve. Beyond this, questions remain over how far wider issues of connectivity, digital literacy and digital citizenship fall within humanitarian mandates. Yet despite this, social media can have a transformative effect – albeit for some people more than others – on how affected populations experience and navigate crises. This raises important questions about who wins and who loses when many humanitarian actors remain disengaged from what is, increasingly, an important part of the humanitarian space.

1.1   Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach, combining a desk review of existing literature, 29 in-depth interviews with global stakeholders carried out between February and April 2020, and two short country case studies in Venezuela and Uganda carried out in mid-2021. This paper presents overview findings for the overarching study, while detailed findings from the country cases are published separately as parallel briefing notes.

The migration crisis in Venezuela was selected as an example of a context in which social media has been specifically highlighted by affected populations as a prominent communications tool and source of information (R4V, 2019). Yet, the degree of polarisation and politicisation of Venezuela's social media landscape poses significant challenges for humanitarian interventions here. The crisis is also characterised by high levels of mobility, with migrants and refugees travelling long distances to reach neighbouring countries. Many have been forced to make these journeys on foot, as they lack the resources for other means of transportation. These so-called *caminantes* are thus both hard to reach and acutely vulnerable. These factors contribute to substantial challenges around providing effective and inclusive communication and assistance.

Northern Uganda was selected as an example of a refugee context with comparatively low levels of mobile internet penetration among affected people, but with a permissive enabling environment that offers the potential for innovative or emergent use of social media by both affected people and service providers. Key factors were Uganda's comparatively liberal refugee policy regime in general and towards internet access in particular, a young refugee population, stable humanitarian access to communities living predominantly in camp-like settings[1] (Casswell, 2019), and documented examples of community-based organisations and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) seeking to use social media in their work.[2]

The Venezuela study (Torrealba and Acosta, 2022) was designed and led by Medianálisis, an NGO focused on strengthening democratic civil society through training in and study of journalism and the media. Medianálisis spoke to 21 *caminantes* preparing to cross the border to Colombia, as well as 17 staff working at humanitarian organisations on both sides of the border. The Uganda study (Tshimba et al., 2022) was designed and led by the Refugee Law Project (RLP), an organisation working to empower asylum seekers, refugees, deportees, internally displaced people and host communities to enjoy their human rights and lead dignified lives. RLP spoke to 55 refugees and four humanitarian staff in refugee settlements in northern Uganda.

---

1   In Uganda, government policy has avoided establishing traditional 'camps' for refugees in favour of agricultural settlements. While sharing some of the features of camps in terms of formal spatial organisation, refugees in settlements are allocated plots of agricultural land with the expectation that they will eventually attain 'self-reliance'. See Kaiser (2006) for further discussion of the settlement system.

2   Examples include the Community Technology and Empowerment Network (www.facebook.com/ctenuganda/) and Sina Loketa (https://sinaloketa.org/) – two refugee-led organisations working on digital inclusion in northern Uganda.

1.2   Limitations

Despite focusing on two separate circumstances, the primary data was only able to capture a narrow slice of the diversity of contexts and uses of social media in humanitarian emergencies, and was necessarily biased towards places where social media is (or is perceived to be) more relevant to humanitarian action and affected people's experiences. This challenge was also reflected within each context, where the results only provided trends indicative of the specific research locations and populations, rather than being representative of the crisis as a whole. In Venezuela, for example, the role of social media in the displacement experiences of *caminantes* is radically different from the role it plays in the context of a collapsing public health system in the country's urban centres (e.g. Schulman, 2018). As far as possible, the study sought to address these gaps with reference to existing literature and conversations with global stakeholders. In addition, a focus on how social media in general was being used in different contexts meant that this study has little to say on the differing roles of specific platforms or applications.

2   Social media in humanitarian crises

Humanitarian discussions around social media are often framed in utilitarian terms, with social media as a tool that can be used in support of specific objectives. This tends to be couched within the language of 'digital transformations' and 'humanitarian innovation': the idea that the current rapid proliferation of new technologies developed outside the humanitarian sector offers unprecedented opportunities to make the delivery of humanitarian assistance more effective and efficient, often in the context of shrinking budgets and escalating need (Kaspersen and Lindsey-Curtet, 2016; Obrecht and Warner, 2016; Willitts-King et al., 2019a). For example, a recent policy paper by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) lists social media as among several 'new and emerging technologies' supporting a 'paradigm shift from reaction to anticipation by enabling earlier, faster and potentially more effective humanitarian action' (OCHA, 2021: 2). Specifically, it asserts that, when operationalised effectively, mobile apps and social media:

> can lead to better data-driven decision-making across the humanitarian programme cycle. They can quickly capture information about incidents and needs of affected populations to better anticipate, understand and respond to crises. They can communicate with vast numbers of people to crowdsource information and paint a more holistic picture of a crisis as it unfolds. They can expedite the transmission of life-saving messages, even to inaccessible areas. Fundamentally, they can serve as a lifeline for those affected, enhance community engagement and acceptance, and lead to a more people-centred, coordinated, accountable and effective response.

However, while understandable, viewing social media as a means to humanitarian ends risks flattening out the complexity of the different roles it can play. For many affected populations, the variety of functions social media can potentially serve – as well as its role as an integral component of people's information landscapes – mean that social media platforms can represent something more foundational. They serve as a component of 'digital infrastructures' people rely on to navigate both the specific challenges of crises and the wider experience of daily life (Latonero and Kift, 2018). This is especially true in places where social media is many users' main entry point to the internet or primary means of mobile communication. The interactive nature of social media means it is also a space where things – transactions, relationships, discussions, arguments – happen. As such, social media in emergencies arguably constitutes a critical part of the humanitarian space, defined here as the 'complex political, military and legal arena ... in which humanitarian action takes place' (Collinson and Elhawary, 2012: 1). Based on these considerations, this section provides an overview of how social media is used by crisis-affected populations and by humanitarians themselves.

2.1   Use by affected populations

2.1.1   Everyday life

People affected by crises use social media just like anybody else: to read the news, check in with friends, look for jobs, listen to music, watch videos, flirt, argue, play games, troll strangers, share memes, express identities – the list goes on. This highlights an important tension with any focus on using social media 'for' something specific; for many people, it just 'is' – for better or worse. Overlooking the importance of the everyday when thinking about social media in a humanitarian setting is potentially problematic for three reasons. First, it risks side-lining the autonomy of affected people to engage with technologies in ways they see fit. Second, as Arora (2018) argues, it may risk creating an artificial distinction between more and less 'relevant' uses for connectivity that rarely exist in practice – people may develop the skills and motivation to use social media in emergencies as much by using it as an opportunity for socialising and leisure as they do as a tool for education or work. Third, it risks limiting the effectiveness of social media-focused interventions – if an information campaign jars with how people normally use social media, it is unlikely to gain much traction. Beyond the everyday, several broad and interrelated uses of social media by affected populations come to the fore as especially relevant in the context of humanitarian crises. These are outlined here.

2.1.2   Social capital

Social media offers a way for people to maintain and build social capital during crises, performing both a psychosocial role as well as providing access to resources they need to survive. One of the most important benefits afforded by social media is the ability to remain connected to friends and family during periods of crisis and displacement. This may be cheaper and quicker than a phone call or SMS (ICRC et al., 2017), while the asynchronous[3] nature of social media can mitigate the practical and emotional challenges of communicating over long distances (Madianou, 2015b).

Social media also offers a way to plug into wider communities beyond people's immediate circles, mediating their access to new or existing social support networks (including patronage ties) and livelihood opportunities (Madianou et al., 2015; Alencar, 2018; Culbertson et al., 2019). In the context of displacement, social media's ability to eliminate distance can play an important role in helping people circumvent barriers such as movement restrictions, security threats and the dispersal of communities as they (re)build their networks (Göransson, 2018). Social media can also be instrumental in sustaining transnational public spheres, creating spaces for refugees or diaspora populations and communities 'back home' to interact (Godin and Dona, 2016; Latonero and Kift, 2018). For highly marginalised or hidden groups, social media may offer 'safe spaces' for mutual support in ways that might not be possible or safe offline. For example, Dwyer and Woolf (2018) identify the critical role of social media in maintaining informal networks between sexual and gender minorities during times of crisis in Fiji.

---

3   The non-real-time exchange of information, as opposed to the more immediate nature of a phone call or face-to-face interaction.

2.1.3   Information and 'sense-making'

By mediating access to new and existing social connections, social media can serve as a critical forum for people to access and share information as they navigate a crisis. This will always be intertwined with other sources of information such as news media, official sources or word of mouth offline, with people tending to triangulate between different information sources simultaneously in line with their needs (Madianou, 2015b).[4] The relative importance of social media in these ecosystems depends on a range of factors, but is likely to grow in prominence when people are dealing with incomplete or ambiguous information – as in the immediate aftermath of a disaster where other media channels are disrupted (Jung and Moro, 2014), or in cases when information cannot be provided effectively by more formal sources (such as if you want to be smuggled across a border or avoid government checkpoints). Trust is also critical. In contexts where people have had negative experiences with service providers,[5] or trust in institutions is comparatively weak, they may turn to social media for information from horizontal networks of people they perceive to be more like them – even if they've never met – rather than relying on vertical dissemination from disaster management agencies or broadcast media (Mehta et al., 2017).

The networked nature of social media means it is especially important for enabling people to work together in pooling and reviewing information. For example, Iacucci (2019) highlights the role refugee-run Facebook groups have played as crowd-sourced repositories for 'collective knowledge' on safe routes and sources of aid for refugees and migrants moving to Europe from North Africa (see also Latonero and Kift, 2018). 'Collective sense-making' through exchanges on social media can serve an important role in helping people arrive at a common understanding of the events (Jung and Moro, 2014; Stieglitz et al., 2017).

However, while social media can offer access to vital information and spaces for discussion that would not otherwise be available, it also risks exposing people to mis- and disinformation, demonstrated in its role in driving the 'infodemic' of rumours surrounding Covid-19 in the early days of the pandemic. While rumours also spread offline, social media can have a powerful amplifying effect due to the speed at which information disseminates, the distances across which it makes connections, the comparative absence of content policing or moderation, and the ways in which trust networks and algorithmic targeting can combine to create 'echo chambers' and amplify harmful speech (Mercy Corps, 2019).

---

4   Aouragh and Alexander (2011) provide a picture of the functioning of one such ecosystem in the context of the Arab Spring in Egypt, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between activism on Facebook, reporting by the Al-Jazeera news network and neighbourhood mobilisation offline.

5   For example, focusing on disaster response in the Independent State of Samoa, Martin-Shields (2019) demonstrates that communities with negative perceptions of the government's track record in providing aid in previous emergencies were more likely to rely on social media as an information source than official channels.

2.1.4   Collective action and voice

Closely bound up in collective sense-making, social media also facilitates mobilisation around common goals. Here, the Covid-19 pandemic is the latest in a string of recent crises in which social media has played an important role in facilitating grassroots-level first response. These forms of organising are often locally based, horizontally (as opposed to hierarchically) organised and operate explicitly on principles of solidarity and mutual support (Carstensen et al., 2021). Mutual aid long pre-dates the emergence of social media. However, organising via Facebook or WhatsApp offers a way to expand the reach and impact of efforts by linking people and resources far beyond what might be possible offline. Examples include digitally coordinated local self-help groups filling gaps in service provision during Covid-19 lockdowns (Chevée, 2021); 'micro-NGOs' linking people with free or low-cost sources of medical supplies in Venezuela (Schulman, 2018) and Cuba (Delgado et al., 2021); efforts combining locally led relief with crowd-sourced fundraising during Myanmar's Cyclone Komen (Oo Tha, 2020); and mobilisation of volunteer support networks across Europe during the 2015 refugee crisis (Mason and Buchmann, 2016). Currion (2018) characterises these efforts as examples of 'network humanitarianism', in which information, resources and power flow along horizontal lines between different actors or 'nodes' in a distributed network structure, instead of up and down the traditional hierarchies of formal humanitarian action.

Alongside – and often as part of – self-help, social media can facilitate the exercise of 'voice' in terms of people's participation in social or political processes during a crisis. While this may be an individual process – requesting assistance or criticising aid delivery, for example – the networking possibilities of social media mean that there is often a collective dimension. As Godin and Dona (2016) discuss using the example of refugee-led social media campaigns against ongoing violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), such collective mobilisations are often explicitly political. This contrasts with the individualised or acontextual way humanitarian actors tend to engage with the 'voices' of affected people to handle feedback or frame how crises are understood (see also Madianou et al., 2015). However, collective activism on social media can just as readily be used to stigmatise and harass opponents as it can to demand justice or accountability, becoming an important facilitating factor in the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar (Fink, 2018), the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon (Nganji and Cockburn, 2019) and the Ethiopian civil war (Wilmot et al., 2021).

2.2   Use by humanitarian actors

2.2.1   Public relations

As several interviewees for this study highlighted, the earliest use of social media among humanitarian organisations was as a public relations (PR) tool to raise funds, boost organisational profiles, mount advocacy campaigns or educate the public in the global north. As recently as 2015, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) *Emergency Handbook* section on 'social media in emergencies' focuses primarily on how it can be used as a broadcast tool to 'increase media coverage, raise awareness of the situation, and win support for the work UNHCR is doing', with only brief guidance on how staff may use it to engage affected populations themselves (UNHCR, 2015). While thinking and practice on the issue

have evolved substantially in recent years, social media's starting point within the humanitarian sector as a tool for talking 'about' rather than 'with' affected people (ICRC et al., 2017: 2) continues to have implications for its subsequent use (see Section 4.2).

2.2.2   Situational awareness

Since the early 2010s, humanitarians have used information shared by affected populations on social media to gain a better awareness of the environments in which they operate. Given the volume and complexity of the information involved, part of this work has focused on attempts to apply 'big data'[6] approaches to social media, using computational techniques to quickly process large amounts of information. Clustered around a spike of interest in the mid-2010s, examples include efforts to analyse posts on Facebook or Twitter to monitor changing opinions (Lüge, 2015; UN Global Pulse and UNHCR Innovation Service, 2017); 'stakeholder mining' to understand relationships between armed groups and other key actors in a given environment (Bünzli and Eppler, 2017); machine learning to identify infrastructure damage from images posted after natural hazard-related disasters (e.g. Imran et al., 2015); or using metadata such as Facebook location history to track displacement patterns (Giraudy et al., 2021).

However, key informants for this study identified major challenges limiting how useful social media big data can be in practice. First, approaches piloted to date have not been particularly successful at providing 'actionable information', as opposed to 'nice-to-know' analysis. In particular, the timelines needed to develop and contextualise analytical processes generally don't align with the requirements of unpredictable or fast-moving crises. This means insights are often out of date, irrelevant or replicate what is already known. This is especially problematic given the substantial resources needed to set up these initiatives. Second, the widespread shift from public posting towards sharing information via 'dark spaces', such as closed Facebook groups or secure messaging apps, alongside recent restrictions on data that Facebook in particular makes available to third parties in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, mean that there is less information to analyse (Dotto et al., 2019). Because of these obstacles, the initial period of hype around social media big data appears to have died down. Nonetheless, a small number of interviewees reported their agencies were still committed to trying to work out which use cases were appropriate, as part of an ongoing process of trying to 'know ... how much you don't know', as one informant put it.

By contrast, other actors have focused on lower-tech strategies where networks of trusted individuals replace computational methods to understand information circulating on social media platforms. Highlighting the growing challenge of closed spaces, a recent report on social media monitoring in the DRC suggests shifting focus away from computational methods towards engaging via local civil society

---

6   Social media is far from the only information source for big data approaches in humanitarian action. Increasingly, attention has turned to using a wide range of other sources such as remote sensing, epidemiological data or market prices to build predictive models to support emergency preparedness and anticipatory action (Centre for Humanitarian Data, n.d.).

actors and citizen journalists (Fondation Hirondelle et al., 2019). Similarly, Internews has incorporated social media monitoring by liaison staff with relevant language and cultural skills into its efforts to track rumours in crises (Internews, 2019).

2.2.3   Community engagement and accountability

Community engagement was widely seen by both informants and secondary literature as one of the areas where social media holds the most promise as a humanitarian programming tool. Broadcasting messaging and information aimed at affected communities via social media platforms has been extensively used by humanitarian and disaster management organisations to spread information quickly, at scale and beyond the reach of other communications approaches (Reuter et al., 2019). This might range from straightforward public information campaigns on how to access services or stay safe, to more complex multimedia approaches focused on promoting behaviour change (Raftree, 2019). However, taking advantage of social media's interactive function as a vehicle for two-way communication has proved more challenging, with many informants sceptical of how far most agency approaches were going beyond 'blasting out' messaging unilaterally.[7]

Despite this, there are numerous examples of agencies attempting to use social media as a platform for dialogue. At a basic level, messaging apps have offered a way for programme staff to communicate with the people they serve, especially in hard-to-reach areas. While this replicates the function of phone calls and SMS, it also offers expanded functionality (via sharing images, video or audio recordings), may be more reliable, and (in some circumstances) provides a more informal and organic mode of interaction (ICRC et al., 2017). Related to this, efforts have been made to incorporate social media platforms into feedback mechanisms. This can be informal, such as logging and responding to replies underneath agencies' Facebook posts (Lüge, 2017), or more structured efforts to establish feedback channels on social media platforms as a complement or alternative to more conventional methods such as complaints desks or hotlines (Save the Children, 2018).

Significantly, several agencies have attempted to use social media to foster ongoing and open information exchange with affected communities beyond the siloes of specific programmes, sectors or 'beneficiary' groupings. This has formed an integral part of efforts to manage misinformation, such as the interactive WhatsApp groups set up by BBC Media Action in the West Africa Ebola crisis (Dial, 2018). More radically, initiatives such as UNHCR's 'El Jaguar' (Brookland, 2019) or the rights-focused Signpost project (Signpost, n.d.) have focused on working through Facebook groups and other platforms to support affected people to request, access and discuss information on their own terms, as well as serving as entry points for other services. However, as yet, these approaches are still largely in their infancy, with no detailed impact evaluations available at the time of this research. This reflects a wider evidence gap on the humanitarian use of social media (see Section 3.2).

---

7   This reflects a wider trend of comparative neglect – despite extensive guidance and efforts to the contrary – of two-way dialogue in humanitarian public information campaigns (see, for example, DuBois et al., 2015; Crawford et al., 2021; Lough et al., 2021).

2.2.4   A field of intervention

Alongside its use as a programming tool, informants reported a growing acknowledgement that social media is increasingly forming part of wider programming landscapes. In particular, there has been increased focus on how social media intersects with agencies' protection mandates, given the specific risks and harms that engaging in online spaces can expose people to (e.g. Amnesty International, 2018; Iyer et al., 2020). A recent UNHCR guidance document makes the case for including social media as a component of the agency's long-standing community-based protection approach, arguing that it presents an 'additional duty of care' the agency must address (Iacucci, 2021: 1). Other efforts, such as the Internews Safe Sisters project (Internews et al., 2019), have sought to support the digital safety of rights defenders and activists in fragile contexts.

Beyond protection, some informants discussed working to mainstream social media as a cross-cutting issue across their organisation's programmes – for example, encouraging staff designing youth employment programmes to consider what digital tools and spaces might be relevant to any proposed approach. Finally, several informants emphasised the growing importance of social media as an advocacy issue. Here, they highlighted the need for humanitarian actors to engage governments and social media platforms more proactively in debates around misinformation, data protection and privacy, given their outsized implications for vulnerable populations in crisis contexts.

3   Social media and digital divides

While social media is becoming an increasingly important in many humanitarian settings, multiple barriers exclude affected populations from this space entirely or leave them differentially exposed to the opportunities and risks it presents. At the same time, humanitarian engagements with social media have so far been limited in scope, while systematic efforts to incorporate it into regular practice are largely in their infancy. Therefore, even where social media forms an important part of how people experience crises, information from or interactions with humanitarians often make up a vanishingly small part of their digital lives. This section explores the factors that help or hinder affected people and humanitarians using social media more effectively and examines what is keeping them siloed in largely separate online worlds.

These issues have broadly been framed in terms of 'digital divides' that keep people from making the most of new technologies. This concept has often been broken down further into 'first-order' and 'second-order' divides, acknowledging that bridging these divides – i.e. achieving 'digital inclusion' – is much more complex than simple binaries of who does or does not use a phone or internet connection. Here, first-order divides concern questions of access, such as whether technologies are reliably available or affordable. Meanwhile, second-order divides concern use – whether people have the skills or agency to make technologies work for them (e.g. Hargittai, 2002; DiMaggio et al., 2004; Roberts and Hernandez, 2019).

These distinctions are helpful in exploring the intersection between digital inclusion and wider histories of unequal power dynamics. However, assessing digital divides from the perspective of individual users means there may be less focus on the political aspects of these processes – such as the collective and relational components of agency or the ways actors can work to actually perpetuate digital divides (for example, states cutting off the internet to marginalised populations or misogynistic abuse silencing women on social media platforms). Discussions around digital divides in humanitarian settings also have less to say about how they apply to actors in the sector itself, whether in terms of analysing the way they can exacerbate unequal power dynamics between different organisations or of applying concepts like 'digital literacy' to humanitarian organisations themselves (e.g. Iacucci, 2019; see also Box 2). Finally, diagnosing the drivers of digital divides is only the first step in the process of addressing them, which itself is fraught with tensions over who gets a say in what decisions.

Box 2   Defining digital literacy

The concept of 'digital literacy' (often used interchangeably with 'data literacy' or 'information literacy') is frequently discussed in literature around humanitarian technology, but rarely defined. In general, definitions focus on individuals' abilities to access, evaluate, create and communicate information safely using digital technologies (e.g. ALA, n.d.; Law et al., 2018). However, several authors highlight the need to extend this definition, given the growing complexities of people's digital lives. For example, touching on issues of increasingly pervasive digital surveillance, Sandvik and Lohne (2020: 99) argue that literacy needs to include not just technical competence, but:

> having a basic grasp of issues of law, digital risk and rights, and awareness of what it means to have a digital body – that is, a body made legible as data.

Focusing on the relational and collective aspects of people's online lives, Carmi et al. (2020) argue for a broader understanding of 'data citizenship' that looks at how people relate to and learn from each other as they engage with and create information. They also argue for a focus on how people use digital technologies, not just to pursue individual goals such as work, education or pleasure, but to take collective action in ways that integrate both online and offline spaces. And while many data literacy approaches focus on individuals, there is an increasing acknowledgement that this needs to be matched by a greater focus on how organisations and institutions understand and use technology, both in terms of staff capacity and how this is supported by wider policies, incentives and organisational cultures (e.g. van Solinge, 2019; El Hamouch, 2020).

3.1   Equitable access by affected people

3.1.1   First-order divides: who gets access?

The question of who has access to social media in crises is bound up with questions of connectivity: if you do not have access to an internet connection via a smartphone, computer or internet café, you cannot use social media platforms. At present, internet penetration rates in the 10 largest emergencies worldwide (in terms of their appeal requirements) average around one-fifth of each country's population, ranging from 34% in Syria to 2% in Somalia (FTS, 2021; World Bank, 2021).[8] While these figures are in many cases on steep upward trajectories, the reality is that, in most crisis contexts, social media users continue to be in the minority.

However, internet penetration rates are not a perfect proxy when considering the relevance of social media in each crisis context. Even in places where few people have access to a connection, social media

---

8   Venezuela is a notable outlier at 57%, having seen rapid growth in internet users in the prosperous years prior to its economic collapse in the mid-2010s.

can still play a critical part in local information ecosystems. In the DRC's North Kivu province during the 2018 Ebola outbreak, for example, local radio was reportedly among the most widely used and trusted media sources for people to access information about the disease. At the same time, the main information source for many journalists working at the radio stations themselves was social media networks (Fondation Hirondelle et al., 2019). At the community level, highly connected individuals may serve as brokers, mediating interactions between local offline networks and actors in online spaces. This could include relaying information back and forth from diasporas abroad or wider global audiences – whether to document human rights violations or perpetuate misinformation and hate speech (Aourargh and Alexander, 2011; Clifford, 2017). It can also extend to mobilising resources, sometimes vertically through requests for assistance from government authorities or humanitarian actors, but equally through direct fundraising from the public (Oo Tha, 2020; McKay and Perez, 2019). The identity and positioning of these brokers have significant implications for inclusion, both in the biases and perspectives they bring to their role in accessing and filtering information, as well as who their offline networks include and exclude. Especially given that brokers may not always overlap with traditional leaders or power-holders within their communities, their roles in many crisis settings appear critically under-researched.

When thinking about who is and is not able to get online in a given setting, connectivity often maps closely onto existing patterns of marginalisation, with socially excluded groups generally less likely to be connected. This can flow along multiple, intersecting axes. Alongside wealth and class, ethnicity can be an important determinant of connectivity. A study comparing internet connectivity rates among 'politically excluded'[9] ethnic groups worldwide found that:

> all other factors being equal, an included group with an average level of Internet penetration for its country would receive only ~60% of that level if it were an excluded group (Weidmann et al, 2016: 1154).

Similar patterns appear to hold true for issues of legal or political status. This is especially so for refugees, who as of 2016 (the most recent data available) were reportedly around 50% less likely to have internet-connected phones than the general population (UNHCR, 2016). These factors are often compounded by other factors such as age, gender or disability status. For example, a 2019 study on connectivity in refugee settlements in Jordan, Uganda and Rwanda found rates of mobile phone ownership within refugee populations were substantially lower among women, people with disabilities and older people (Casswell, 2019).

The reasons for differential connectivity levels are closely related to the wider drivers of marginalisation. In many cases, the same socio-cultural norms that limit people's opportunities offline play a significant role in whether they can get online. For example, gender roles around income generation, coupled with gendered restrictions on access to public spaces, often produce scenarios in which women are unable to afford their own phone and, if they can access the internet at all, must do so on shared devices, at home, on terms dictated by male family members (Downer, 2019; ICRC et al., 2017). Similarly, connectivity

---

9   Defined in the study as ethnic groups that take no part in wielding national-level executive political power.

interventions that overlook people with disabilities based on stereotypical or untested assumptions about how they will or will not engage may leave them unaware of products or services from which they could easily benefit (Hamilton et al., 2020).

These factors are often compounded by exclusionary business or policy choices. The most immediate example is the struggle that many people with disabilities, or those with poor literacy, face when getting online due to the tendency of platforms or hardware to design for the average user rather than with specific needs in mind (Troy, 2021). In some cases, these decisions reflect the wider workings of global power imbalances and legacies of colonialism: social media platforms headquartered in and focused on markets in the Global North are less likely to devote resources to optimising accessibility for less-profitable consumers in the Global South. This can be seen both in the lack of optimisation for minority languages[10] or the meagre resources devoted to moderating toxic behaviours and content that can silence marginalised groups in online spaces (Gani, 2021).

In addition to exclusion by omission, obstacles to access can equally be the direct or indirect result of deliberately exclusionary policy choices. As RLP's study in Uganda shows, the construction of 'infrastructures of exclusion' can severely limit people's ability to get online in refugee settings (Tshimba et al., 2022). Here, there is a direct line between government-imposed limits on refugees' participation in labour markets and their ability to afford devices, while identity or citizenship requirements may also limit their access to SIM cards.[11] Similarly, refugees' exposure to unreliable network coverage is linked to decisions to settle them in remote areas that are unprofitable – or perceived to be unprofitable – to network providers, as well as deliberate government interventions to limit bandwidth or shut down the internet entirely during politically sensitive periods.

As RLP's research and other studies highlight, despite substantial barriers to connectivity, many people in crisis settings can and do work extremely hard to get online, often because the pressures and disruptions of the crisis have made the networking affordances of social media essential (e.g. Culbertson et al., 2019). Here, the nature of the digital divides that people face is likely to impact the kinds of decisions and trade-offs they make to get online. Getting online imposes disproportionately high opportunity costs on those with fewer resources, such as the burden imposed on poorer refugees by Uganda's regressive[12] social media tax, which charges internet users a daily levy of 200 Ugandan shillings ($0.11 as of 9 February 2022) if they access Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter or other online platforms. These costs may be further exacerbated by the specific ways in which crises affect the

---

10   More broadly, the lack of content available online in minority languages may mean connectivity is of limited relevance or use for those who speak only these languages.

11   In Uganda, advocacy from UNHCR and other humanitarian actors resulted in the Government of Uganda relaxing its strict ID requirements for SIM card access in the case of refugees. However, refugees interviewed by Tshimba et al. (2022) reported that, despite this change, the process of registering a SIM was still a 'hustle'. Even after the relaxation of restrictions, following the legal route remained onerous and slow, and many refugees continued to prefer the more direct but riskier approach of purchasing one through a Ugandan proxy.

12   Regressive taxes such as value-added tax or flat tax rates are those that impose disproportionately large burdens on poorer individuals and households compared to wealthier ones.

connectivity requirements of certain groups; see, for example, the additional costs imposed on refugees using virtual private networks (VPNs) to get around government-imposed restrictions or to avoid the real or perceived risk of being monitored by hostile actors. In addition, the workarounds people use just to get online may expose them to greater risks. These include the potential dangers posed by using cheap or outdated hardware to get online, since this leaves users potentially more vulnerable to hacking (ICRC and Privacy International, 2018; Bouffet, 2020). As RLP's research shows, there is often a specific spatial component to these risks, despite dominant narratives around connectivity's potential to eliminate distance (see also Kaurin, 2020). For example, women and girls unable to access phones themselves may still choose to access the internet via connectivity hotspots, but this potentially exposes them to the threat of harassment if these spaces are not sensitively located or managed.

Ultimately, connectivity is a dynamic process that is often bound up with the impact and evolution of crises themselves. People's experiences of an emergency can push them across digital divides in both directions: in some cases, as in Uganda, the dislocation of displacement, the loss or fragmentation of previous social support networks offline, and new opportunities emerging post-displacement can shift the status of social media from an irrelevance to a 'must have' in the lives of younger refugees in particular (Latonero et al., 2019; Göransson, 2018; Culbertson et al., 2019). Meanwhile, where people are fleeing economic collapse, as in Venezuela, phones and computers may end up among many once-essential items that people are forced to sell as they run down their resources to survive and eventually flee (Torrealba and Acosta, 2022).

3.1.2 Second-order divides: how do people use it?

Even when people can get online, the different ways they are able to use social media often map onto – and have the potential to amplify – existing inequalities. People who have less access to resources, education or social capital because of pre-existing marginalisation or the impacts of crises may end up both more exposed to some of the risks social media spaces pose and less likely to take advantage of the affordances they offer.

Much of the discussion around second-order divides in humanitarian settings relates to the risks that people are exposed to in social media spaces and the extent to which they can navigate them. One major component that has come to the fore in recent public health emergencies, such as the DRC Ebola epidemic and the Covid-19 pandemic, is the potential risk of misinformation and disinformation. Here, widespread use of WhatsApp channels or Facebook groups as information sources exposes people to a mix of news, rumours and opinions, with little in the way of gatekeepers or authorities to mediate or filter for quality.

In crises involving displacement or disruption of infrastructure and social ties, these trends may be linked to the rapid fracturing and reconfiguration of people's information landscapes – i.e. the means by which they access, process and verify information (Kaurin, 2020). In Uganda, for example, South Sudanese refugee youth with some fluency in English have engaged heavily in Anglophone social media spaces since arriving in the country and gaining greater access to social media spaces.

However, in doing so, they are also cut off from the guidance of their non-Anglophone parents –
who might in other circumstances provide a 'safety net', helping their children think through the
information they are exposed to. More broadly, as a component of people's collective sense-making
processes on social media, misinformation may also flow more freely when people feel excluded from
access to appropriate information or to decision-making processes during periods of heightened
uncertainty, and when authorities fail to build trust. These dynamics are not unique to humanitarian
emergencies, but may be especially acute because of the intensity of fear, disruption generated by
crises and their aftershocks, collapses in trust in authority or social cohesion that often precede or
accompany crises, and due to top-down handling of responses by governments and humanitarian
agencies alike. In the early stages of the 2018 DRC Ebola epidemic, for example, the spread of
rumours on WhatsApp was reportedly linked partly to the failure of government and humanitarian
actors to engage communities or take their concerns seriously, with initial communications strategies
'directing community members in a paternalistic way to change their behaviour…rather than focusing
on two-way dialogue and shared ownership of the problem' (Crawford et al., 2021: 35; see also
Fondation Hirondelle et al., 2019; Elliott, 2020). While much discussion revolves around the need for
better 'digital media literacy' to distinguish between more and less trustworthy information online
(Mercy Corps, 2019), these issues suggest that addressing misinformation also needs to be linked to
a wider cultural shift towards greater transparency, strengthening trust, and a recognition of affected
people as active agents in their own information landscapes.

Another key component of risk is the question of what is variously referred to as 'digital awareness'
or 'digital hygiene': in other words, the skills people need to keep themselves safe online. This might
include protecting accounts from hacking or unwanted access (e.g. on shared devices), preserving
anonymity and privacy online – such as by not posting personally identifying information on public
forums or by adjusting privacy settings – or avoiding scams. This is especially important in cases
where the impact of crises heightens some people's exposure to risks. These may come in the form
of surveillance and potential reprisals by hostile actors during conflict and displacement, such as
repressive regimes in Syria or Myanmar (Dávila-Ruhaak et al., 2021; ICG, 2021) or European and UK
immigration and border authorities (Latonero and Kift, 2018; Brekke and Staver, 2019). More organically,
risks may manifest as hate speech against ethnic minorities or harassment and abuse directed at
women. This may be especially true in crises where greater connectivity is accompanied by heightened
disruption and contestation of gendered social norms. In the context of Typhoon Haiyan in the
Philippines, Madianou (2015a) also noted that people with fewer resources were more likely to engage
in 'risky' online behaviours to mitigate the impact of the disaster on their livelihoods and resources,
such as younger women seeking out relationships with wealthy strangers online.

Again, however, concerns over improving literacy around digital risks need to be matched with an
awareness of the steps people already take to mitigate them – which may be more sophisticated

than supposedly tech-literate populations in the Global North[13] – as well as the fact that people's willingness to take risks could be due to them feeling they have no other choice. Putting the onus on individuals to protect themselves also needs to be situated within the continued practices by some social media platforms of harvesting and sharing individuals' data in ways that could be harmful as part of their business models (Madianou, 2019; Kaurin, 2020), even as they may seek to situate themselves as partners in poverty reduction or disaster response.[14]

Compared to questions of risk, there has been less attention placed on how second-order digital divides impact the opportunities that social media offers people in a crisis, such as better access to information and support or greater ability to exercise voice. Here, multiple studies have highlighted the gap in *how* different populations use social media. In the Philippines again, people from middle-class backgrounds were found to have much 'richer' digital lives than lower-income users. In the wake of Typhoon Haiyan, they were able to exploit new opportunities, jumping between different social media platforms to 'self-actualise', find work, develop their businesses or build social capital. This compared with poorer individuals, who used social media mainly to maintain their position within patronage networks as a continued source of support (Madianou, 2015a). Focusing on gender, GSMA[15] research on connectivity among refugees in Uganda and Rwanda revealed that, among mobile phone users (where women are already a minority), men were generally more likely than women to use the internet for entertainment, online education or reading the news (Downer, 2019). Here, several informants argued that humanitarian actors needed to do a better job of understanding and engaging with the diverse ways different people use social media, rather than framing these variations simplistically as 'divides' that need to be overcome.

Critically, the ability to make fuller use of social media is grounded not just in skills, but in the level of agency and confidence people have, as well as the strength of their existing networks. People who have been socially excluded and ignored by those in power may lack the confidence to engage more fully with the interactive functions of social media, especially when seeking help or holding authorities to account. This can be magnified when efforts to reach out are ignored or rebuffed (Roberts and Hernandez, 2019; Madianou et al., 2015). Here, several studies have highlighted the catalysing role that civil society organisations can play as an intermediary. This could be in terms of building and linking people with informal networks they might struggle to access on their own (Alencar, 2018), or of mobilising and coordinating collective action (Madianou et al., 2015).

---

13   As one respondent in a recent study on social media practices in Kurdish regions of Turkey put it: 'Really? Do people in Milan and London only have one Facebook account? Don't they use pseudonyms or fake profiles? I can't believe it. How could it be possible?' (Costa, 2018: 3461).

14   See, for example, Facebook's 'Data for Good' initiative (https://dataforgood.facebook.com)

15   GSMA is an industry association representing the interests of around 1,200 network operators across the world.

3.1.3   Addressing digital divides around social media

Within the humanitarian sector and beyond, the question of if and how to address digital divides around social media in crises has been handled with varying levels of coherence and sensitivity towards inclusion. There has been an increasing focus on addressing first-order digital divides around internet access for crisis-affected communities in recent years, although in practice connectivity is subject to multiple and overlapping mandates and jurisdictions, often pursued through a patchwork of approaches involving humanitarian organisations, private sector actors and governments. At best, this can mean affected populations end up being covered by government-mandated universal access commitments, supported by humanitarian advocacy to ensure they are upheld, as well as pragmatic work with private sector partners to make the business case for extending coverage (e.g. Fildes, 2018). On the other hand, it can also lead to uneven outcomes when coverage is driven by the priorities and limitations of specific actors, such as connectivity initiatives that focus primarily on strengthening humanitarian-to-humanitarian communication or corporate social responsibility approaches that may be limited in their spatial reach.

The variety of different initiatives is also reflected in the rationales given for providing internet access. Arora (2018) introduced the concept of digital 'leisure divides' to explore the double standard between approaches to connectivity in the Global North and South; that is, online access as a basic necessity to be enjoyed by all citizens versus a more utilitarian focus on communities having access to information or to support income generation (e.g. GSMA, 2016; Avanti, 2021). By contrast, other initiatives emphasise connectivity as a right and a source of empowerment (e.g. UNHCR Innovation Service, n.d.; Signpost, n.d.).[16] These distinctions can have significant implications for who gets to access connectivity, where and on what terms (Marchant, 2020).

Dealing with second-order divides is potentially more fraught. Several interviewees felt this raised the question of whether digital literacy regarding the risks of social media formed part of agencies' duty of care or 'responsibility to protect in the digital space'. Some also felt that enabling or encouraging affected communities' access to the internet and social media raised dilemmas around 'do no harm' in contexts where agencies did not have the resources or capacity to mitigate risk. Others countered by cautioning against humanitarians adopting an overly paternalistic view of themselves as guardians of others' online safety, rather than acknowledging and supporting the agency and right of affected people to make their own choices (see Section 3.2). Beyond risk, there was also the question of whether efforts to support more effective use of social media fell within humanitarian mandates, or required better linkages with other, more long-term approaches. As one Red Cross interviewee explained:

> There's a larger discussion around our role and responsibility in terms of increasing digital literacy. We might teach people anything from microenterprises to vaccinating cattle to seed distributions. This is a larger discussion and it can push us away from our core mission.

16   This distinction echoes a wider tension within the humanitarian sector in terms of both broader and narrower interpretations of what qualifies as a 'need' (especially in protracted crises), and between needs-based and rights-based approaches to assistance (Barbelet and Wake, 2020).

Across both first and second-order divides, interviewees highlighted approaches to address the needs of different groups. Here, commitments to remove supply-side barriers to the availability of internet access are not always matched by exploration of how to address questions of access and use. This can result in accessibility-blind, 'build it and they'll come' approaches to connectivity interventions and social media strategies that risk magnifying existing inequalities by favouring those who already have the resources and capacity to access and use the internet effectively. Conversely, it can also manifest in a humanitarian reluctance to engage with social media on the basis that it excludes too many people, an approach that can neglect the needs of certain sub-sections for whom it is the preferred form of communication.

A common solution to this dilemma highlighted by many interviewees was that social media should never be viewed in isolation, but should form one possible part of multifaceted approaches that acknowledge the different information landscapes that different people occupy. A few interviewees went further, arguing that, while 'meeting people where they are' was important, there was also value in unpicking whether the terms of 'where they are' could be improved. One argued that, if those facing the most severe access barriers potentially had the most to gain from overcoming them, then interventions needed to be designed *for* the most marginalised, rather than around them:

> … this assumption that old people or people with disabilities aren't going to be able to engage so let's do what we're doing. We need to interrogate these assumptions, how do we present ourselves differently, take even small corrections to make ourselves more accessible by using a different font colour, a design specialist, all of these things that get us to universal design.[17]

Ultimately, these different emphases on inclusion are not necessarily 'either/or' questions, but do represent alternatives on what to prioritise when resources and capacity are limited.

The fragmentation of actors and approaches involved in addressing digital divides can lead to a lack of joined-up thinking on what the implications of a given approach might be in a specific context. This was evident in RLP's work in Uganda, where the provision of free internet access in one study location was not accompanied by much thought among camp management authorities as to how this might change the nature of their engagement. Nor did it trigger efforts by humanitarian organisations to be more available and responsive in the new online spaces the connectivity intervention had opened up. As Marchant (2020) highlights, gaps like these may be linked to failures to include affected populations in the design or management of connectivity or digital literacy programming, meaning they are likely to overlook how these people would like to use and manage online spaces. These will rarely align neatly with the pathways anticipated or intended by their designers. As one interviewee argued, there was a need to move away from paternalistic approaches based around 'we will give you digital literacy' and towards understanding how to augment and support the ways people are already learning and sharing

---

17   Universal design is built around the assertion that environments or products should be designed so they can be 'accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability' (NDA, n.d.).

information. Conversely, other settlements in Uganda have demonstrated a more bottom-up approach to internet governance and digital literacy, with refugee-led organisations setting the terms of use for internet access in communal facilities, as well as leading in the development of digital skills curricula.

3.2 Exclusion by omission? Humanitarian struggles to engage with social media

As discussed above, humanitarian actors are notable by their (comparative) absence from social media spaces. Just how much of an issue this is depends on the specific role social media plays in the information landscapes of the people they support. However, in an increasing number of settings, not taking social media seriously may mean neglecting an important part of the wider operating environment. It also implies a failure to meet many people 'where they are' in terms of talking to and listening to them. Whether or not humanitarians choose to engage, people will continue to rely on social media; if aid agencies remain excluded from these spaces, they may risk missing opportunities to provide protection and assistance, as well as losing relevance to some of the people they seek to serve (Iacucci, 2019; Raymond, 2021).

3.2.1 Struggles with change, struggles with platforms

One of the challenges facing humanitarian organisations is the pace of change in the uptake and use of social media. Facebook's active user base has grown from around 740 million in 2011 to almost 3 billion in late 2021. Since launching in 2004, it has been joined by an increasing number of other platforms, many of which have expanded at similarly rapid rates (WhatsApp: launched 2009, more than 2 billion users by late 2021; Tiktok: launched in 2017, more than 1 billion users by late 2021).[18] These are rapid shifts compared to how slowly new approaches tend to be adopted within the humanitarian sector (Anson et al., 2017; Obrecht and Bourne, 2018; Alexander, 2021). As one interviewee explained, it had taken several years for their organisation to recognise that social media could be relevant, and several more to build a critical mass of staff and expertise to begin engaging more seriously on the issue.

At the same time, the way social media is used continues to evolve along rapid and unpredictable lines, whether in terms of people's changing behaviours or platform preferences, or of increasingly sophisticated surveillance or 'weaponisation'. The same is true for the functionality of the platforms and the regulatory environments that govern them. Several interviewees highlighted the ongoing challenge of upholding ethical commitments to informed consent, as well as legal commitments around data protection, given constant changes to platforms' terms of service or end-user license agreements. Having started late, the feeling was that humanitarian actors were in a constant struggle to catch up, with the eventual result that, in some cases, 'people get overwhelmed and just decide to not handle it at all'.

A related issue is that social media platforms are neither built for nor responsive to the needs of humanitarian agencies. This has led to issues where the design of platforms doesn't match humanitarian

---

18 Data sources for Facebook (www.businessofapps.com/data/facebook-statistics/); for WhatsApp (www.businessofapps.com/data/whatsapp-statistics/); for Tiktok (www.businessofapps.com/data/tik-tok-statistics/).

use cases. For example, because the visibility of Facebook pages is tied to engagement via comments, 'likes' or other reactions, this creates a dilemma when aid actors need content to be highly visible to affected communities, but where high levels of engagement could potentially put vulnerable people at risk. Similarly, Facebook has since the mid-2010s required businesses to pay for algorithms to prioritise the content they post. While free advertising credits are available for non-profits, this involves an application and certification process that may be challenging for many smaller organisations. As several interviewees pointed out, the fact that business from humanitarian actors is little more than a 'rounding error' in the budgets of multi-billion-dollar social media companies means even large agencies have limited leverage to push for change. As one United Nations (UN) agency interviewee explained in relation to pricing packages: 'Sometimes they give us stuff for free as part of their corporate social responsibility, but overall it's very inflexible.'

Several interviewees also felt that, while some individuals or units at social media platforms were genuinely interested in engaging with humanitarian actors – especially on issues of misinformation and digital harm – the entry points to the humanitarian space were not always immediately apparent to them. As one pointed out, the disconnect in both directions was being exacerbated by a lack of intermediaries who could effectively facilitate connections between the two spheres, pointing to the role the GSMA has played in building bridges between humanitarian organisations and mobile network operators.

3.2.2   Questions of relevance and effectiveness

In addition to grappling with rapidly changing technology, several interviewees also expressed concerns about how appropriate it was for humanitarians to be engaging with social media at all in many settings and use cases. Here, a minority were sceptical of how far using social media in their work aligned with their priorities and mandates, precisely because of the risk of perpetuating many of the exclusionary dynamics described in Section 3.1 of favouring the well-connected or excluding the most vulnerable:[19]

> We look for the outlier, we don't look for mass information, and the outlier tends to be hidden in social media. So, one person screaming for help is drowned by a thousand or a hundred thousand screams of rage (international NGO respondent).

> If we'd sat there and said we should use Facebook as a key feedback tool and make it systematic and that everyone knows about it, the pushback from protection and gender would have been that people don't have access to it and therefore making it as a formal mechanism would be blocking out voices (international NGO respondent).

---

19   These findings are echoed in a 2017 study on messaging apps in humanitarian action, which found that: 'Most humanitarian organizations … were not using messaging apps in any formalized, official way. When asked why, most indicated that smartphone ownership rates among the people they worked with were too low to justify the use of messaging apps and mentioned SMS-based programmes as their primary method of communication' (ICRC et al., 2017: 46).

Interestingly, while many other commonly used humanitarian communication channels such as suggestion boxes pose similar challenges, these concerns do not appear to have stood in the way of their widespread uptake within the sector.

The problem of judging whether working with social media represents the best use of limited resources is also exacerbated by the lack of good-quality evidence on operational outcomes. As several interviewees explained, this evidence gap reflects the wider challenge of measuring the effectiveness of 'intangible' humanitarian community engagement activities in often highly complex information landscapes and decision-making processes (see Lough and Spencer, 2020).

3.2.3   Risk

Risk was at the forefront of discussions with many humanitarian interviewees, who highlighted the tension between the need to engage affected people via their preferred channels and the commitment to upholding the principle of 'do no harm'. Beyond this, another major concern was the kinds of harms humanitarians could be exposing people to by interacting with them on social media platforms. This is in part linked to the challenge of engaging in conversations in unregulated spaces: the risk that discussions in humanitarian-managed Facebook or WhatsApp groups could rapidly 'spiral out of control' if not properly moderated – whether in terms of becoming magnets for hate speech and political controversy or becoming swamped with misinformation and rumour.

A wider issue concerned the risks people could experience if they were identified during their interactions with aid actors. This might involve potential for surveillance and reprisals by hostile actors, for example, traffickers looking to target vulnerable migrants, or states and armed groups seeking out political opponents (ICRC and Privacy International, 2018). However, it also involves more insidious threats. As several studies have highlighted, being identified as a recipient of humanitarian assistance can lead to an unpredictable range of consequences later on, such as damaging an individual's credit rating or exposing them to predatory advertising for high-interest loans, gambling sites or other high-risk content (McDonald, 2016; ICRC and Privacy International, 2018; Latonero and Kift, 2018). Here, the means of identification could be as basic as sharing personally identifying details as part of requests for assistance (one interviewee described how colleagues had developed a bot to automatically recognise and delete phone numbers and email addresses posted to their organisation's Facebook groups). But it could also involve the harvesting of people's metadata[20] by social media companies or third parties – often in ways poorly understood by either affected people or humanitarians (ICRC and Privacy International, 2018). Several interviewees emphasised the dilemma of using social media for communications while knowing the data generated did not belong to them and would be used to generate profit by actors they could not hold to account.

---

20   'Metadata' is data about other data, such as the location history of a social media user or the time messages were sent from an app. While this might not directly reveal information about the content of communications or who sent them, such data can still be used to infer a significant amount of information about individuals and groups, especially when different datasets are combined (ICRC and Privacy International, 2018).

Alongside risks to affected people, many interviewees highlighted the potential danger to organisations and humanitarians that engaging on social media could pose. At one level, there was a concern that, in making themselves available online, organisations risked incurring reputational risk by 'opening the floodgates' to questions and feedback they might not be able to respond to or refer onwards. This had implications for their ability to manage expectations among affected people about what support they could provide, as well as maintaining trust if they were seen to be unresponsive and ignoring people's concerns.

This problem could be further magnified when humanitarian organisations became subject to viral smear campaigns questioning their neutrality or legitimacy – whether borne of genuine grievance or manufactured and amplified by actors opposed to their presence or mandate (see, for example, the coordinated misinformation campaign against the Syrian civil defence group, the White Helmets, as documented in Mercy Corps, 2019). As one interviewee explained, this could escalate into real-world security threats to organisations and their staff, as well as diverting time and resources to damage limitation efforts (see also Sandvik, 2016). Here, Medianálisis's research in Venezuela highlighted the concern shared by many organisations that their communications were being monitored by a government hostile to the perceived 'political' role of humanitarian organisations, and eager for opportunities to turn them into scapegoats for wider challenges. Consequently, some had opted to maintain a low profile on public social media platforms to minimise exposure.

One key challenge highlighted by several respondents was how far humanitarians were able to assess and manage these risks. Interviewees highlighted the various responses from different organisations, ranging from detailed and well-resourced risk analysis and mitigation approaches to a more generalised sense of risk aversion. As one put it, 'people [say], "it's a big problem", and that's where the analysis stops'. Here, there may be a slippage between struggles to understand the complexity surrounding risks specific to social media and efforts to assess their actual severity. One limitation facing many organisations is a lack of tools or frameworks for assessing and managing digital risk, perpetuating what one commentary described as a 'doctrine gap' between the availability of social media and the ability to use it safely and responsibly (Raymond and Harrity, 2016; see also Centre for Humanitarian Data, 2020). According to one respondent, this is also mirrored by a greater focus on the potential risk to humanitarian organisations' own systems and processes, and less on broader risks to affected populations.

The same is true for contextualising risk, with one interviewee highlighting the growing need for a digital equivalent of the International NGO Safety Office to provide up-to-date information on cybersecurity threats in specific crises. Several interviewees pointed to the need to work collectively on developing risk mitigation approaches. Ultimately, there also appears to be comparatively little focus on how communities themselves might be involved in assessing and mitigating digital risk,[21] which

---

21   A recent example of a pilot approach to work with Ugandan refugees on joint digital risk analysis and mitigation strategies is described in Martin (2021).

is still often framed as a back-end issue for humanitarians to address (Marchant, 2020). As several interviewees highlighted, it is not always clear that the risk of *not* engaging – of failing to meet and support communities where they are – is being sufficiently considered.

3.2.4 Resources, capacity, strategy

For many uses, incorporating social media into humanitarian programming needs proper resourcing. Effective content moderation requires sustained engagement by trained staff, as does ensuring that organisations' social media presences are responsive to feedback. Other elements can also incur significant expense, such as the proprietary software required for analytics or community management, or payments to social media platforms to boost the visibility of content. These costs are not necessarily large in absolute terms but can be hard to cover if donors and senior management are unconvinced of social media's value or have unrealistic expectations about the costs of this kind of programming.[22] As one interviewee explained:

> One issue is people assume that because social media is 'free' that the engagement part is also free. So, they've been good at providing access to information, but the engagement part is weaker. So [the social media component of our community engagement programme] had more than 400,000 regular users. We had a team of 26 administrators. It's not expensive if you think that 26 people can help 400,000 people. But based on what the donors were willing to pay, it sounded like a lot of money.

A lack of proper resourcing can leave initiatives struggling to expand beyond the conceptual stage. One operational interviewee described being given space to explore setting up a social media feedback channel, but was then left more or less alone to set up what was a completely new system for their organisation on top of their day-to-day responsibilities. By contrast, another explained how a generously and flexibly funded pilot set up during an already well-resourced emergency had been able to grow and replicate its approach in a variety of other contexts. Resourcing challenges can also pose a significant barrier to entry for smaller, local organisations, potentially perpetuating unequal power dynamics within the humanitarian sector itself (see Box 3).

There is also the issue of having the right capacity in the right places. Here, several interviewees highlighted the potential misalignment between the intended or potential role social media could play, and the capacities or job descriptions of the staff responsible. As discussed above, the initial focus on social media as a PR tool in the humanitarian sector means that it often falls within the remit of communications or grants teams, who may not have the right skills or connection to programming. Conversely, frontline programme staff who might be able to make effective use of social media as part of community engagement strategies, for example, could lack familiarity or see it as an unnecessary distraction.

---

22   This reflects similar challenges encountered in funding communications and community engagement activities more generally. See Lough and Spencer (2020): 21-22.

Box 3   Local organisations and social media

There was a perception among some interviewees that local and national NGOs had the potential to make more agile and creative use of social media, because they were more familiar with local contexts and more trusted by communities. However, evidence from this study suggests a complex picture, depending very much on the use case and type of organisation. As discussed in Chapter 2, social media has been a significant facilitator for local and translocal mobilisation of mutual aid and self-help groups. In several contexts, specialised local organisations have also been at the forefront of digital inclusion in crises. Examples include the Burmese technology accelerator, Phandeeyar, which was at the forefront of calling Facebook to account for its role in the Rohingya genocide (Mozur, 2018); or the refugee group, CTEN, which supports access to technology and facilitates locally led conversations around internet governance in Uganda's Rhino settlement (Marchant, 2020).

However, in other cases, the way social media platforms are designed and run can put local organisations at a disadvantage compared to their better-funded national or international peers. For example, while local organisations in Venezuela and Colombia interviewed by Medianálisis recognised the potential value of social media, the resources required for its use for community engagement were prohibitive. Consequently, they were limited in how they were able to use it, often relying on tech-savvy younger staff (if they had them) to manage their social media presence on top of other responsibilities (Torrealba and Acosa, 2022; similar trends were observed by Armstrong and Butcher (2018) in Nigerian civil society organisations). Even in one area where they were able to engage – using posts on Facebook and Twitter to raise awareness of their activities and hence compete for funding and recognition – the expense of ensuring content was promoted to wider audiences by platform algorithms was often beyond them.

Here, one interviewee working with local organisations in the Philippines highlighted again the importance of working collectively to overcome some of these barriers, by promoting partnerships between different actors with different strengths and ensuring smaller organisations were not marginalised. More fundamentally, several respondents were sceptical about the relevance of many affordances of social media to local organisations – especially those focused on creating virtual proximity between agencies and affected people – because organisations already had a greater physical presence in the communities they supported.

More fundamentally, humanitarian organisations' ability to properly grapple with the dilemmas and challenges posed by social media has been constrained by a lack of strategic approaches. For some interviewees, allowing innovation to develop from the bottom up has had advantages in terms of letting teams work out solutions grounded in specific contexts. However, as other interviewees pointed out, without a structure in place to both support bottom-up initiatives and learn from them, engagement with social media was likely to remain siloed within specific projects rather than mainstreamed. As one NGO respondent explained, a lack of capacity to think and act systematically could leave agencies locked out in ways that mirror the digital divides faced by populations:

> There's ... a real gap in understanding digital tools – knowledge, culture, literacy. We talk about digital literacy of end-users, but we're not investing in the digital literacy of institutions.

4   Beyond digital divides: impartiality, equity and upsetting the balance of power

While questions of digital divides must necessarily underpin any discussion of social media within the humanitarian sector, the technology also has broader implications for inclusion in humanitarian action. This is in terms of who aid reaches and who gets a say in shaping humanitarian assistance.

4.1   Impartiality and equitable access: can social media help stop people falling through the cracks?

4.1.1   Social media and needs assessment

Several studies and policy documents have flagged social media's potential to contribute to more impartial aid by strengthening 'data-driven decision-making' around the prioritisation of needs (OCHA, 2021: 12; see also Whipkey and Verity, 2015; Mukkamala and Beck, 2016; Reuter et al., 2019; Chan and Purohit, 2020). At a basic level, social media has become a means for disaster management agencies and humanitarian first responders to identify urgent needs in the early hours and days of a crisis when information is scarce and fragmented. As one interviewee explained in the context of Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines:

> We were using it as an extra data source but augmenting what we know … This is always in the early phases of an emergency … It buys us time in the first few days when even officials are affected and you can't expect them to be out collecting data.

As an addition to an existing suite of tools for situational awareness, and especially when triangulated with other data sources, social media can thus support agencies in making immediate decisions on where to prioritise scarce resources (see also Chernobrov, 2018).

In recognition that manually sifting through social media data can be both labour-intensive and ad hoc, various actors have experimented with analysis of social media data for needs assessment purposes by using 'big data' techniques. Due to technical challenges, discussed in Section 2.2, these are for the most part still in their infancy. The most prominent current example is Facebook's collaboration with the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), which uses metadata collected from Facebook users to identify patterns of displacement.

That the outputs of big data processes can be skewed along existing inequalities in people's technology access and use has been well documented, as has the fact that they reflect the biases and assumptions of the people designing the analytical models on which they are based (e.g. Castillo, 2016; Mulde et al., 2016; O'Neil, 2016; Crawford and Finn, 2014; Reuter et al., 2018). With so few real-world examples of social media big data in the humanitarian sector to date, it remains to be seen how far its uptake will

be informed by an awareness of these potential biases. While Facebook acknowledges the limitations inherent in which people and what information its 'disaster maps' represent (Maas et al., 2019), the results of its pilot for IDMC contain no discussion of who gets left out, the implications and how these might be compensated for (Giraudy et al., 2021). More promisingly, the OCHA-run Centre for Humanitarian Data has proposed that any computational approaches for 'predictive analytics' be subject to rigorous peer review, including cross-checks for biases and ethical issues such as informed consent.[23] This is an approach that could be applied to big data analytics within the sector more broadly (Centre for Humanitarian Data, 2021).

4.1.2   Reaching the hard-to-reach?

In theory, social media can offer a way to strengthen equitable access to information and assistance by providing marginalised individuals or communities with an entry point to providers they might otherwise be cut off from. As one interviewee explained, giving the example of migrant populations in El Salvador, reaching out via social media could be critical for 'hidden' populations to access advice – either because they live or are moving far beyond the reach of physical service points or because directly accessing these could lead to them being identified and put at risk. However, tangible examples of social media fulfilling this role are comparatively scarce. As Medianálisis's work in Venezuela demonstrates, making oneself visible depends on having access to social media, being aware of existing services and there being providers available to connect with in the first place. Many of the Venezuelan refugees they spoke to had sold their mobile devices before or during their long trek on foot towards the Colombian border, so struggled to access information from sources beyond word of mouth. Meanwhile, the journey itself took them well outside the focus of the comparatively limited humanitarian response inside the country, thus rendering them doubly invisible to providers of assistance (Torrealba and Acosta, 2022).

4.2   Shifting the power

As Barbelet and Wake (2020: 11) highlight, inclusion is not only about delivering assistance impartially and equitably, but about 'empowerment and ensuring a voice for the marginalised'. Inclusion places emphasis not just on people's vulnerability but on their capacity and agency, seeing them not as passive recipients of aid but as active participants in responses. As spaces built around user-generated content and (often public) dialogue and interaction, social media platforms have the potential to shift some of the power in the humanitarian sector away from aid agencies and towards affected people, both in terms of recentring them in humanitarian communications and narratives and pushing aid agencies to be more responsive and accountable.

---

23   In contrast to comparatively rigorous protocols around informed consent in needs assessments, the question of informed consent in the use of social media data is much fuzzier: while people who post on social media or share their location data during crises have consented to the platforms' general terms of use, they are unlikely to have explicitly agreed to the ways it ends up being used for humanitarian analysis.

4.2.1   Facilitating more inclusive, bottom-up responses?

Social media has demonstrated potential in strengthening equitable access to assistance through the role it plays in facilitating 'humanitarian solutions' (Baguios, 2021) beyond the scope of the formal humanitarian system.[24] Critical here is the networking role it plays, both supporting better coordination for self-organising and autonomous responses to crises, and facilitating more rapid connections between specific needs and resources. At the local level, these networks can be critical in facilitating collective work to identify vulnerable individuals and in providing support in cases where other responders are not flexible enough to meet their complex needs, lack the resources to do so, or do not have a detailed enough understanding of local conditions to 'see' them in the first place.

For example, community-based WhatsApp groups were established during the Covid-19 pandemic to support elderly or other vulnerable people who were inadequately supported by an overwhelmed government response (Carstensen et al., 2021; Chevée, 2021). Similarly, communities in Somaliland organised via WhatsApp to mitigate the impact on the most vulnerable households during a period of drought in 2016 (Currion, 2018). This can also be replicated at higher levels, with social media used to facilitate support for whole communities or population groups that have been overlooked or excluded by more formal responses. See, for example, McKay and Perez (2019) on brokered support to communities on outlying islands in the Typhoon Haiyan response, and Mason and Buchmann (2016) on activist support to refugees during the 2015 European migration crisis.

At the same time, the inclusionary potential of networked action via social media has limits that mirror offline patterns of exclusion. In particular, the sense of moral obligation and solidarity that drives both the local and translocal aspects of this form of support are less likely to extend to individuals and groups perceived to be outside the boundaries of local, national or religious communities (see Box 4).

Critically, existing evidence also suggests that larger, especially international, humanitarian actors tend to operate at the fringes of these forms of networked action, pointing again to the wider challenge larger aid actors face in engaging in the kinds of relationships and forms of communication that are outside the hierarchical norms of the formal humanitarian sector (Lai et al., 2015; Currion, 2018; Carstensen et al., 2021; Chevée, 2021).

---

24   This is especially important given recent research that demonstrates international humanitarian assistance often makes up only a small fraction of the resources people rely on during crises (Willitts-King et al., 2019b).

Box 4   Social media and networked responses during Myanmar's Cyclone Komen

During the response to 2015's Cyclone Komen in Myanmar, the country's social media landscape was filled with words and images requesting assistance or documenting volunteer efforts. Together, they invoked a powerful sense of 'moral citizenship' among both the public and businesses, which led to a substantial mobilisation of resources in support of affected communities, as well as some forms of coordination that cut across voluntary assistance and official disaster response efforts (Oo Tha, 2020). However, non-Buddhist communities living in remote upland areas hit by the cyclone attracted comparatively little attention and support from the welfare groups that had mobilised relief to majority-Buddhist lowland areas (McCarthy, 2020). This disconnect was even more acute for Rohingya communities in Rakhine state. Perceived as non-citizens by many Burmese, they were largely ignored by welfare efforts in other parts of the country. After years of systematic exclusion from political and economic life, they were also less able to mobilise attention to their situation and had fewer sources of outside assistance to draw on (Desportes, 2019). Worse, the same discursive environment on Facebook that gave rise to powerful elaborations of moral citizenship during Komen went on to produce a widespread and violent rejection of the Rohingya as members of Myanmar's body politic, during the subsequent military campaign that drove nearly a million of them out of the country in 2017.

4.2.2 Centring affected populations in humanitarian communication

Social media is often framed as being part of strategies aimed at giving people the information they need to make informed decisions. However, the extent to which these approaches are effective depends on how seriously they engage with people's agency. Despite notable exceptions, there was a consensus among many interviewees that humanitarians and affected populations often seemed to exist in parallel online worlds. As noted above, humanitarian actors and messaging are often absent from the online spaces where affected people share and discuss information. And while agencies push out significant amounts of content on social media aimed at affected populations, it is not always clear that the people they target are interested or listening.

As multiple guidance documents emphasise, the basis for effective social media messaging is making sure the information is relevant to people's needs, and delivered in ways that align with how they consume information online and by actors that they trust (e.g. Lüge, 2017; ICRC and HHI, 2018; Internews, 2019). This means inclusion is a critical consideration in terms of who creates and shares content. Here, having people who are familiar with the dynamics of local information ecosystems is key. As one interviewee highlighted, this underlines the importance of inclusive human resources processes to digital communications efforts:

> [We need to be] moving the organisation from a very white, Western-centric comms standpoint to a much more diverse group of human beings creating and making decisions around comms. So, one of them is around hiring ... you need an Iraqi digital officer to contribute to an Iraqi audience, to understand the culture and make decisions that aren't coming from 'our' viewpoint.

This might also involve bringing in outside actors with expertise in ensuring communications are relevant, such as using private sector marketing agencies to test and refine social media messaging for disaster preparedness in Bangladesh (Lüge, 2017). Similarly, involving people that social media users can relate to and trust – who may be different from the 'trusted actors' like religious authorities or community elders that aid agencies often partner with in offline spaces – is critical to engagement and uptake. Here, several interviewees highlighted the need for aid agencies go beyond co-opting local actors to deliver their messaging and to do more to support affected populations to develop and share messaging and narratives in accordance with their priorities (see Box 5).

Box 5   Narratives and counter-narratives

Several interviewees argued that the public, open-access nature of many interactions on social media had played a significant role in blurring the boundary between aid agency communications aimed at donors and people in the Global North and those aimed at affected communities themselves. Interviewees argued that social media's expansion of the narrative space to include affected communities had highlighted the inadequacies of communications practices traditionally used by agencies to raise funds and promote engagement in the Global North. In many cases, these can reinforce colonial hierarchies of power in ways that continue to minimise the perspectives of affected people. Examples include enduring tropes of aid workers and donors as 'white saviours' and aid recipients as either passive, suffering beneficiaries or resilient neoliberal subjects responsible for their own self-improvement and divorced from the political conditions that underpin crises.

At the same time, the networking affordances of social media offer ways for affected communities to construct their own narratives as part of the collective sense-making described previously. In some cases, these may explicitly push back against how outsiders frame their communities, such as challenging the reduction of their identities to refugees or victims. As elsewhere, interviewees observed a widespread lack of connection between forms of self-representation and narrative construction happening within communities themselves and external communications by aid agencies, with local capacities marginalised, overlooked or used in extractive ways. One described how, even as a flourishing community of youth activists in Uganda were using social media to create and disseminate their own artistic responses to displacement, international agencies continued to rely on professionals flown in from overseas to generate communications content. Positively, interviewees did give several examples of attempts to counter this trend, whether in terms of work by large international agencies to recentre their communications around narratives generated by communities, or through more open-ended efforts to support local creators with the tools they needed to tell their own stories, on their own terms, to audiences they deemed important.

4.2.3   Facilitating two-way dialogue

For many interviewees, another critical component of building trust in and engagement with communications via social media was that they should take the form of a dialogue; in other words, humanitarians should make themselves available when people came back with questions (see also ICRC and HHI, 2018). Given the innately interactive nature of social media, public messaging efforts are always likely to generate responses from the people they target. Yet interviewees felt that, generally, humanitarians struggled to engage in two-way exchanges on social media due to challenges around capacity and risk (see Section 3.2). Here, several agencies have worked on setting up alternative approaches where dialogue is the entire point, such as the Signpost project (originally established by the International Rescue Committee and Mercy Corps in the European refugee crisis) and UNHCR's El Jaguar Facebook page in Mexico. These initiatives work on the basis that focusing on specific programmes or messages is not an adequate reflection of how people experience the world, leaving agencies unable to respond to the 'messy' feedback and queries they encounter on social media.[25] As a consequence, they have tried to adopt a more open stance that emphasises sustained dialogue – usually via some combination of public posts and private messaging – and centres the information needs of affected people. This involves both a willingness to admit when agencies can't provide the answers people are looking for, as well as trusting people to be able to decide things for themselves.

The evidence on social media's ability to make humanitarian aid more accountable to the people it serves – let alone to deliver on the wider promise of 'democratising' humanitarian responses – is mixed. At a basic level, there are multiple cases where social media, especially messaging apps, have played an important role in increasing responsiveness and reducing the distance between practitioners and communities where face-to-face interactions are infrequent (ICRC et al., 2017; UNHCR Innovation Service, 2021). Here, the nature of communications in this medium (open-ended, informal, mixing text, images and voice messaging) may help to humanise the experience of remote conversations for both affected people and aid providers alike. However, as one interviewee pointed out, there are limits to how far these kinds of engagements can happen at scale, given staffing and capacity constraints, raising the question of what types of interaction make sense, at what level and between whom.[26]

4.2.4   Integration with the humanitarian system

Wider efforts to integrate social media into accountability and feedback systems have also tended to mirror and magnify the challenges inherent in humanitarian approaches to accountability. Here, several interviewees highlighted the problem that standard humanitarian complaints and feedback

---

25   This logic has also driven wider attempts to adopt more collective approaches to communication and community engagement in responses (see Holloway et al., 2020).

26   For example, one UNHCR guidance document suggests using WhatsApp 'trees' to keep these interactions at a manageable scale (UNHCR, 2020); one interviewee instead saw a greater role for community-based organisations as the most likely protagonists in these kinds of exchanges with communities, with larger humanitarian agencies better suited to engaging indirectly via these organisations.

systems – which can be heavily structured, quantitatively focused and narrowly defined – face when dealing with uncontrolled, 'messy' feedback from people on social media. This can result in badly designed systems that are hamstrung in their ability to meaningfully respond to the feedback they receive: one interviewee highlighted instances of government feedback platforms in the Philippines being shut down due to their inability to process the volume of messages coming through. At worst, it can result in a reluctance to engage at all, because patterns of use and engagement online don't fit with what is most convenient or familiar to humanitarian agencies themselves. In Uganda, Tshimba et al. (2022) highlighted a contrast between digitally connected refugee youth attempting to reach out to aid providers with feedback and suggestions via WhatsApp and Facebook, and the indifference of 'old-school' humanitarians, who were perceived as more comfortable 'communicating via megaphone' than on a more equal footing where people could talk back.

Nonetheless, outside 'formal' humanitarian feedback channels, social media does offer ways for affected people to challenge or make claims on humanitarian actors on their own terms, regardless of whether these actors are listening. In Yemen, for example, local activists mounted a campaign on Twitter built around a hashtag translating as #YemenNGOBlackHole, demanding greater transparency in how humanitarian aid in the country was delivered and monitored in response to perceived corruption (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2020). According to one interviewee, coordinating via WhatsApp across different camps and given movement restrictions was a critical component of (partially) successful efforts among Rohingya activists to push back against elements of a new 'smart ID' registration process, which they felt was not adequately consultative.

These forms of mobilisation may involve demands that go well beyond humanitarian concerns or mandates, dragging humanitarian actors into wider spheres of explicitly political contestation. They may also involve very different goals: in the above cases, campaigns were focused in large part on insisting that humanitarians adhere to their own commitments and principles; in others, demands may run entirely counter to humanitarian principles. There is relatively little evidence on when and how these forms of mobilisation are linked to changes in the behaviour of humanitarian actors, but, by generating both reputational and operational risks for the actors they target, they create new challenges to how agencies navigate the wider humanitarian space. As discussed earlier, who actually gets to exercise 'voice' in this manner is also dependent on first- and second-order digital divides, raising the difficult question of how far humanitarian actors should play an enabling role in supporting people's agency to potentially engage in activities that could run counter to their own interests or principles.

5   Conclusion

Despite almost a decade of bold claims regarding the potential for social media to support humanitarian action, practical engagements among humanitarian actors are, for the most part, still on the starting block. Given both the steady expansion of internet access and smartphone use worldwide, social media is likely to play an increasingly prominent role for affected people in current and future crises. Consequently, it is not a phenomenon humanitarian actors can continue to side-step. Given the tendency of social media platforms to mirror and amplify existing dynamics of marginalisation, a specific focus on promoting inclusion will need to be at the heart of efforts to engage more deeply as part of fundamental humanitarian commitments to impartiality and to 'do no harm'. This conclusion offers four key considerations for humanitarian actors to consider in this respect as they plot their paths forward.

5.1   Taking a more systematic approach to avoid exclusion by absence

Overall, there are comparatively few examples of humanitarian actors seeking to systematically incorporate social media into their work. In part, this is linked to justifiable concerns over risk: whether of reputational damage, of excluding people or of putting them in harm's way. However, this needs to be balanced with a realistic appraisal of the potential risks of *not* engaging in a space that may be critical to how affected people navigate crises. This will need to involve shifting from risk avoidance to risk mitigation, as well as developing more contextually grounded understandings of the specific risks and opportunities that different approaches to using social media involve for different people within different information ecosystems. Including affected people in these processes and discussions will likely be key to making them more effective.

In thinking through how best to systematise approaches to social media, several interviewees spoke of the need to start looking at it more holistically as a broadly applicable component of multiple different activities rather than as a specific programming tool. As one explained:

> The biggest thing on scalability is to start messaging to people and helping them understand that digital is an everyday part of the conversation, so asking about the digital ecosystem, what kinds of devices people have access to, what are they using them for, and from there asking, 'how does that affect the interventions we're conducting?' So, for example, if we're looking at youth employment, how does digital intersect with that? [This involves] building teams' specific capacity on how to use it – and it requires a deep-dive into these sectors to understand how they're working and how to bring tech in seamlessly, [so that] we're not just doing tech for tech's sake.

In this view, 'scale' may look like having proper strategies, policies, technical support and spaces for cross-organisational learning rather than a single over-arching approach or product. Here, the bottom-up innovation that tends to take place at the grassroots level, or within individual programmes

or teams, needs to be complemented by effective top-down support – including resources where necessary – to ensure it can reach its full potential, be shared more widely and be implemented in ways that are both safe and sensitive to the potential for exclusion.

5.2   The need for partnerships and collective action

Many of the barriers identified in this study highlight the challenge of organisations attempting to 'go it alone' when trying to operationalise social media in their work. For smaller organisations in particular, the cost of developing and setting up individual approaches may be unsustainable, while even larger organisations are unlikely to have all the technical capacity and ways of thinking siloed entirely in-house. Here, working together offers a way to both defer costs and share expertise. Given that messy and open feedback via social media rarely fits within agency programmes and mandates, working collectively offers a way to better share and analyse information between organisations. In theory, it also provides a means to better respond to people's needs by facilitating referrals and consistent information sharing.[27] Complementary partnerships between different types of actors also offer ways to mitigate some of the challenges of trust, distance and familiarity with local information ecosystems that larger organisations may face when engaging online. However, any such partnerships will need to be sensitive to the power dynamics involved: standard, contractually based grant arrangements are unlikely to promote thus-far elusive collaboration between digitally organised self-help groups and larger, more 'formal' humanitarian agencies. Larger organisations may need to consider how they can better amplify the approaches and voices of smaller organisations – for example, in advocacy efforts with social media platforms or in other policy spaces to which they have privileged access – rather than seeking to impose top-down or standardised approaches based on what is most familiar.

5.3   Decentring humanitarians

In addition to barriers related to risk and resourcing, the inability to 'let go' (Bennett et al., 2016) appears to be a key barrier to humanitarian organisations' engagement with social media as a part of crisis-affected populations' information ecosystems and support networks in positive and relevant ways. At a basic level, this involves taking seriously how people want to interact with humanitarian actors, which may not be in ways that are most convenient or comfortable to them. This will involve not just 'meeting people where they are', if this happens to be social media platforms, but engaging in ways that reflect how different people actually use those platforms. Conversely, it will also involve asking how far tools or approaches to social media are relevant to the specific needs and priorities of affected people, as opposed to a response to the incentives driving humanitarian agencies (such as pressure from donors or a need to be seen as 'innovative').

More broadly, part of 'letting go' may include doing more to highlight a rights and empowerment lens when thinking about people's online engagements. How can humanitarian actors support the

---

27   In recent years, similar considerations have driven increased interest in collective approaches to community engagement more broadly (e.g. CDAC Network, 2019; Holloway et al., 2020).

agency of people in crises to engage effectively and safely in online spaces in pursuit of their own priorities and aspirations? A critical part of this will involve acknowledging and addressing the capacities and preferred solutions to challenges of digital literacy and digital voice that already exist within communities. There is a genuine question here over where the role and mandate of humanitarian action ends and that of development work begins, especially in cases of protracted crisis or disaster preparedness, pointing to the need for better joined-up thinking and approaches across the two.

5.4   From 'yes, but...' to 'yes, and...' approaches to digital inclusion

Humanitarian actors have a potentially critical role to play in mitigating the exclusionary potential of social media. However, this needs to move beyond a starting point of making the potential for exclusion a reason not to engage. Focusing on the most acute needs remains at the core of humanitarian approaches to inclusion, and this will always involve trade-offs around what is feasible with limited time and resources. However, there is a need to ask whether working to communicate offline with the most marginalised people, who are cut off from social media by digital divides, must come at the expense of engaging in online spaces with those who are not.

Given that digital divides exist on a spectrum, part of the answer to this question will involve interrogating assumptions around the risks and patterns of exclusion that people who are able to use social media do or don't face. It will also involve acknowledging that events in online spaces have spillover effects in offline ones – and vice versa. These can impact – whether positively or negatively – people who may themselves have no online presence. Finally, it will involve thinking through, with affected communities, how to balance a focus on minimising the impact of digital divides on exclusion with efforts to address those divides themselves, exploring what risks and benefits supporting digital inclusion for the most marginalised might bring.

References

ALA – American Library Association (n.d.) 'Digital literacy'. Webpage (https://literacy.ala.org/digital-literacy/).

Alencar, A. (2018) 'Refugee integration and social media: a local and experiential perspective' *Information, Communication & Society* 21(11): 1588–1603.

Alexander, J. (2021) 'Then and now: aid's slow pace of change'. The New Humanitarian, 6 May (www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2021/5/6/then-and-now-aids-slow-pace-of-change).

Amnesty International (2018) *Toxic twitter – a toxic place for women*. London: Amnesty International (www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-1/).

Anson, S., Watson, H., Wadhwa, K. and Metz, K. (2017) 'Analysing social media data for disaster preparedness: understanding the opportunities and barriers faced by humanitarian actors' *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 21: 131–139 (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2016.11.014).

Aouragh, M. and Alexander, A. (2011) 'The Egyptian experience: sense and nonsense of the Internet revolution' *International Journal of Communication* 5: 1344–1358 (https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1191).

Armstrong, C. and Butcher, C. (2018) 'Digital civil society: how Nigerian NGOs utilize social media platforms' *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 31: 251–273 (https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-017-9268-4).

Arora, P. (2018) *The next billion users: digital life beyond the West*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Avanti (2021) 'Avanti Communications and UNHCR give connectivity to refugees in Uganda', 20 May (www.avantiplc.com/news/avanti-communications-and-unhcr-give-connectivity-to-refugees-in-uganda/).

Baguios, A. (2021) 'Localisation re-imagined: localising the sector vs supporting local solutions'. London: ALNAP (www.alnap.org/localisation-re-imagined-localising-the-sector-vs-supporting-local-solutions).

Barbelet, V. and Wake, C. (2020) *Inclusion and exclusion in humanitarian action: the state of play*. HPG working paper. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/inclusion-and-exclusion-in-humanitarian-action-the-state-of-play/).

Bennett, C., Foley, M. and Pantuliano, S. (2016) *Time to let go: remaking humanitarian action for the modern era*. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/time-to-let-go-remaking-humanitarian-action-for-the-modern-era/).

Bouffet, T. (2020) *Connecting with confidence literature review*. Geneva: UNHCR (www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Connecting-with-confidence-LitRev-Web.pdf).

Brekke, J. and Staver, A.B. (2019) 'Social media screening: Norway's asylum system' *Forced Migration Review* 61: 10–11 (www.fmreview.org/ethics/brekke-balkestaver).

Brookland, J. (2019) 'Humility over brand – rethinking how to use social media for those on the move in the Americas'. UNHCR Innovation Service, 27 March (https://medium.com/unhcr-innovation-service/humility-over-brand-rethinking-how-to-use-social-media-for-those-on-the-move-in-the-americas-ce309e3d6a13).

Bryant, J. (2021) *Digital mapping and inclusion in humanitarian response*. HPG working paper. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/digital-mapping-and-inclusion-in-humanitarian-response/).

Bünzli, F. and Eppler, M. (2017) *Humanitarian aid 2.0: social media analytics and stakeholder engagement at the International Committee of the Red Cross*. St. Gallen: University of St. Gallen.

Carmi, E., Yates, S.J., Lockley, E. and Pawluczuk, A. (2020) 'Data citizenship: rethinking data literacy in the age of disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation' *Internet Policy Review* 9(2) (https://doi.org/10.14763/2020.2.1481).

Carstensen, N., Mudhar, M. and Munksgaard, F.S. (2021) '"Let communities do their work": the role of mutual aid and self-help groups in the Covid-19 pandemic response' *Disasters* 45(S1): S146–S173 (https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12515).

Casswell, J. (2019) *The digital lives of refugees: how displaced populations use mobile phones and what gets in the way*. London: GSMA (www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Digital-Lives-of-Refugees.pdf).

Castillo, C. (2016) *Big crisis data: social media in disasters*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

CDAC Network (2019) *Collective communication and community engagement in humanitarian action: how to guide for leaders and responders*. London: CDAC Network (www.cdacnetwork.org/tools-and-resources/i/20190205105256-aoi9j).

Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and Minority Rights Group International (2019) *Peoples under threat 2019*. London: Minority Rights Group International (https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/PUT-2019-Briefing-with-spread.pdf).

Centre for Humanitarian Data (n.d.) 'Catalogue of predictive models in the humanitarian sector' (https://centre.humdata.org/catalogue-for-predictive-models-in-the-humanitarian-sector/).

Centre for Humanitarian Data (2020) 'Humanitarian data ethics', 3 February (https://centre.humdata.org/guidance-note-humanitarian-data-ethics/).

Centre for Humanitarian Data (2021) *Peer review framework for predictive analytics in humanitarian response*. New York: OCHA (https://centre.humdata.org/peer-review-framework).

Chan, J.L. and Purohit, H. (2020) 'Challenges to transforming unconventional social media data into actionable knowledge for public health systems during disasters' *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness* 14(3): 352–359 (https://doi.org/10.1017/dmp.2019.92).

Chernobrov, D. (2018) 'Digital volunteer networks and humanitarian crisis reporting' *Digital Journalism* 6(7): 928–944 (https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2018.1462666).

Chevée, A. (2021) 'Mutual aid in north London during the Covid-19 pandemic' *Social Movement Studies* (https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2021.1890574).

Clifford, L. (2017) 'Words matter: hate speech and South Sudan'. The New Humanitarian, 5 September (www.thenewhumanitarian.org/fr/node/259739).

Collinson, S. and Elhawary, S. (2012) *Humanitarian space: a review of issues and trends*. HPG report 32. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/humanitarian-space-a-review-of-trends-and-issues/).

Costa, E. (2018) 'Affordances-in-practice: an ethnographic critique of social media logic and context collapse' *New Media & Society* 20(10): 3641–3656 (https://dx.doi.org/10.1177% 2F1461444818756290).

Crawford, K. and Finn, M. (2014) 'The limits of crisis data: analytical and ethical challenges of using social and mobile data to understand disasters' *GeoJournal* 80: 491–502 (https://doi.org/10.1007/ s10708-014-9597-z).

Crawford, N. and Holloway, K. with Baker, J., Dewulf, A., Musema, E.K., Ciza, A.M. and Southgate, R. (2021) *The Democratic Republic of Congo's 10th Ebola response: lessons on international leadership and coordination*. HPG report. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/ publications/the-democratic-republic-of-congos-10th-ebola-response-lessons-on-international- leadership-and-coordination/).

Culbertson, S., Dimarogonas, J., Costello, K. and Lanna, S. (2019) *Crossing the digital divide: applying technology to the global refugee crisis*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation (www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4322.html).

Currion, P. (2018) *Network humanitarianism*. HPG working paper. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/ publications/constructive-deconstruction-imagining-alternative-humanitarian-action/).

Dávila-Ruhaak, S., Guruli, N. and Samaro, D. (2021) *Digital dominion: how the Syrian regime's mass digital surveillance violates human rights*. Chicago, IL: UIC John Marshall Law School International Human Rights Clinic (www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2021/03/Digital- dominion-Syria-report.pdf).

Delgado, J.D., García, Y.M. and Dupraz-Dobias, P. (2021) 'As Cubans' needs mount, grassroots groups step in'. The New Humanitarian, 27 September (www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news- feature/2021/9/27/Cuba-food-medicine-shortages-spur-citizen-led-aid).

Desportes, I. (2019) 'Getting relief to marginalised minorities: the response to Cyclone Komen in 2015 in Myanmar' *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* 4(7) (https://doi.org/10.1186/ s41018-019-0053-z).

Dial – Digital Impact Alliance (2018) *Messaging apps for development*. Washington DC: Dial (https://digitalimpactalliance.org/research/messaging-applications-for-development- messengers-initiative/).

DiMaggio, P., Hargittai, E., Celeste, C. and Shafer, S. (2004) 'Digital inequality: from unequal access to differentiated use' in K. Neckerman (ed.) *Social inequality*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 355–400.

Dotto, C., Smith, R. and Wardle, C. (2019) *First Draft's essential guide to closed groups, messaging apps and online ads*. London: First Draft (https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/ Messaging_Apps_Digital_AW-1.pdf?x58095).

Downer, M. (2019) *Bridging the mobile gender gap for refugees*. London: GSMA (www.gsma.com/ mobilefordevelopment/resources/bridging-the-mobile-gender-gap-for-refugees/).

DuBois, M. and Wake, C. with Sturridge, S. and Bennett, C. (2015) *The Ebola response in West Africa: exposing the politics and culture of international aid*. HPG working paper. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/the-ebola-response-in-west-africa-exposing-the-politics-and- culture-of-international-aid/).

Dwyer, E. and Woolf, L. (2018) *Down by the river: addressing the rights, needs and strengths of Fijian sexual and gender minorities in disaster risk reduction and humanitarian response*. Carlton, Vic: Oxfam Australia (www.edgeeffect.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Down-By-The-River-May2018.pdf).

El Hamouch, M. (2020) 'IFRC digital transformation virtual dialogues'. 510 Blog, 19 November (www.510.global/ifrc-digital-transformation-virtual-dialogues/).

El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, S., Al Jeddawy, Y. and Holloway, K. (2020) *Accountability dilemmas and collective approaches to communication and community engagement in Yemen*. HPG commissioned report. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/accountability-dilemmas-and-collective-approaches-to-communication-and-community-engagement-in-yemen/).

Elliott, V. (2020) 'In Congo's Ebola zone, misinformation persists even as cases slow'. The New Humanitarian, 15 January (www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/1/15/Ebola-Congo-social-media-whatsapp-misinformation).

Fildes, N. (2018) 'Telecoms operators dial in to refugee markets'. Financial Times, 24 September (www.ft.com/content/753cba1e-9bef-11e8-88de-49c908b1f264).

Fink, C. (2018) 'Dangerous speech, anti-Muslim violence, and Facebook in Myanmar' *Journal of International Affairs*, 17 September (https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/dangerous-speech-anti-muslim-violence-and-facebook-myanmar).

Fondation Hirondelle, Demos, Harvard Humanitarian Institute and Icredes (2019) *Influencers and influencing for better accountability in the DRC: sources and circulation of information in the DRC – the case of North Kivu* (www.hirondelle.org/pdfviewer/?lang=en&id=314).

FTS – Financial Tracking Service (2021) 'Appeals and response plans 2021' (https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/overview/2021).

Gani, A. (2021) 'Facebook's policing of vitriol is even more lackluster outside the US, critics say'. The Guardian, 17 October (www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/oct/17/facebook-policing-vitriol-outside-us).

Giraudy, G., Maas, P., Iyrer, S., Almquist, Z., Schneider, J. and Dow, A. (2021) *Measuring long-term displacement using Facebook data*. Geneva: IDMC (www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2020/downloads/background_papers/2020-IDMC-GRID-background-facebook-data.pdf).

Godin, M. and Dona, G. (2016) '"Refugee voices," new social media and politics of representation: young Congolese in the diaspora and beyond' *Refuge* 32(1): 60–71 (https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40384).

Göransson, M. (2018) *Apping and resilience: how smartphones help Syrian refugees in Lebanon negotiate the precarity of displacement*. CRU Policy Brief. Den Haag: Clingendael Institute (www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/PB_Mobile_phones_July_2018.pdf).

GSMA (2016) *Humanitarian connectivity charter*. London: GSMA (www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Charter_Principles_document.pdf).

The Guardian (2018) 'The Cambridge Analytica files' (www.theguardian.com/news/series/cambridge-analytica-files).

Hamilton, Z., Casswell, J. and Alonso, A. (2020) *The digital lives of refugees and Kenyans with disabilities in Nairobi: a human-centred design approach to identifying mobile-enabled opportunities*. London: GSMA (www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/M4H_AT_Research_Findings.pdf).

Hao, K. (2021) 'How Facebook got addicted to spreading misinformation'. MIT Technology Review, 11 March (www.technologyreview.com/2021/03/11/1020600/facebook-responsible-ai-misinformation/).

Hargittai, E. (2002) 'Second-level digital divide: differences in people's online skills' *First Monday* 7(4) (https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v7i4.942).

Holloway, K., Barbelet, V., Gray Meral, A., Lough, O. and Spencer, A. (2020) *Collective approaches to community engagement: models, challenges and ways forward*. HPG commissioned report. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/collective-approaches-to-communication-and-community-engagement-models-challenges-and-ways-forward/).

Holloway, K., Al Masri, R. and Abu Yahiya, A. (2021) *Digital identity, biometrics and inclusion in humanitarian responses to refugee crises.* HPG working paper. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/digital-identity-biometrics-and-inclusion-in-humanitarian-responses-to-refugee-crises/).

Iacucci, A.A. (2019) 'Weaponization of Information, data literacy and inclusion'. The Unwilling Colonizer, 23 December (https://anahiayala.com/2019/12/23/weaponization-of-information-data-literacy-and-inclusion/).

Iacucci, A.A. (2021) *Using social media in community-based protection*. Geneva: UNHCR (www.unhcr.org/handbooks/aap/documents/Using-Social-Media-in-CBP.pdf).

ICG – International Crisis Group (2021) *Myanmar's military struggles to control the virtual battlefield*. Asia Report No. 314. Brussels: ICG (www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/314-myanmars-military-struggles-control-virtual-battlefield).

ICRC and HHI – International Committee of the Red Cross and Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (2018) *Engaging with people affected by armed conflicts and other situations of violence: taking stock, mapping trends, looking ahead*. Geneva: ICRC (www.icrc.org/en/publication/engaging-people-affected-armed-conflicts-and-other-siutations-violence).

ICRC and Privacy International (2018) *The humanitarian metadata problem: 'doing no harm' in the digital era*. Geneva and London: ICRC and Privacy International (https://privacyinternational.org/report/2509/humanitarian-metadata-problem-doing-no-harm-digital-era).

ICRC, The Engine Room and Block Party (2017) *Humanitarian futures for messaging apps: understanding the opportunities and risks for humanitarian action*. Geneva: ICRC (www.icrc.org/en/publication/humanitarian-futures-messaging-apps).

Imran, M., Castillo, C., Diaz, F. and Vieweg, S. (2015) 'Processing social media messages in mass emergency: a survey' *ACM Computing Surveys* 47(4): 1–38 (https://doi.org/10.1145/2771588).

Internews (2019) *Managing misinformation in a humanitarian context: Internews rumour tracking methodology*. London: Internews (https://internews.org/resource/managing-misinformation-humanitarian-context/).

Internews, Defend Defenders and Pollicy (2019) *Safe sisters: a common sense guide to digital safety for women and girls in sub-Saharan Africa* (https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Safe-Sister-Guide.pdf).

Iyer, N., Nyamwire, B. and Nabulega, S. (2020) *Alternate realities, alternate internets: African feminist research for a feminist internet*. Kampala: Pollicy (https://ogbv.pollicy.org/).

Jung, J. and Moro, M. (2014) 'Multi-level functionality of social media in the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake' *Disasters* 38(2): 123–143 (https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12071).

Kaiser, T. (2006) 'Between a camp and a hard place: rights, livelihood and experience of the local settlement system for long-term refugees in Uganda' *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 44(4): 597–621 (https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X06002102).

Kaspersen, A. and Lindsey-Curtet, C. (2016) 'The digital transformation of the humanitarian sector'. Humanitarian Law and Policy, 5 December (https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2016/12/05/digital-transformation-humanitarian-sector/).

Kaurin, D. (2020) *Space and imagination: rethinking refugees' digital access*. Geneva: UNHCR (www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Space-and-imagination-rethinking-refugees%E2%80%99-digital-access_WEB042020.pdf).

Lai, C., She, B. and Ye, X. (2015) 'Unpacking the network processes and outcomes of online and offline humanitarian collaboration' *Communication Research* 46(1): 18–116 (https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0093650215616862).

Latonero, M. and Kift, P. (2018) 'On digital passages and borders: refugees and the new infrastructure for movement and control' *Social Media + Society* 4(1) (https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2056305118764432).

Latonero, M., Hiatt, K., Napolitano, A., Clericetti, G. and Penagos, M. (2019) *Digital identity in the migration and refugee context: Italy case study*. New York: Data & Society (https://datasociety.net/library/digital-identity-in-the-migration-refugee-context/).

Law, N., Woo, D., de la Torre, J. and Wong, G. (2018) *A global framework of reference on digital literacy skills for Indicator 4.4.2*. Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/ip51-global-framework-reference-digital-literacy-skills-2018-en.pdf).

Lough, O. and Spencer, A. (2020) *Funding collective approaches to communication and community engagement in humanitarian action*. HPG Commissioned Report. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/funding-collective-approaches-to-communication-and-community-engagement-in-humanitarian-action/).

Lough, O., Spencer, A., Coyle, D., Jainul, M.A. and Barua, H. (2021) *Participation and inclusion in the Rohingya refugee response in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh: 'We never speak first'*. HPG working paper. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/participation-and-inclusion-in-the-rohingya-refugee-response-in-coxs-bazar-bangladesh-we-never-speak-first/).

Lüge, T. (2015) *Social media monitoring during humanitarian crises – lessons learned*. Geneva: ACAPS (www.acaps.org/lessons-learned-social-media-monitoring-during-humanitarian-crises).

Lüge, T. (2017) *How to use social media to better engage people affected by crises*. Geneva and New York: ICRC, IFRC and OCHA (www.icrc.org/en/document/social-media-to-engage-with-affected-people).

Maas, P., Gros, A., McGormann, L., Iyer, S., Park, W., Nayak, C. and Dow, P.A. (2019) *Facebook disaster maps: aggregate insights for crisis response & recovery.* WiPe Paper. Social Media in Crisis and Conflicts Proceedings of the 16th ISCRAM Conference, May, València, Spain (https://research.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/iscram19_camera_ready.pdf).

Madianou, M. (2015a) 'Digital inequality and second-order disasters: social media in the Typhoon Haiyan recovery' *Social Media + Society,* July–December (https://doi.org/10.1177% 2F2056305115603386).

Madianou, M. (2015b) 'Polymedia and ethnography: understanding the social in social media' *Social Media + Society,* April–June (https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2056305115578675).

Madianou, M. (2019) 'Technocolonialism: digital innovation and data practices in the humanitarian response to refugee crises' *Social Media + Society* July–September (https://doi.org/10.1177% 2F2056305119863146).

Madianou, M., Longboan, L. and Ong, J.C. (2015) 'Finding a voice through humanitarian technologies? Communication technologies and participation in disaster recovery' *International Journal of Communications* 9: 3020–3038 (https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/4142).

Madianou, M., Ong, J.C., Longboan, L. and Cornelio, J. (2016) 'The appearance of accountability: communication technologies and power asymmetries in humanitarian aid and disaster recovery' *Journal of Communication* 66(6): 960–981 (https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12258).

Marchant, E. (2020) *Internet governance in displacement.* Geneva: UNHCR (www.unhcr.org/ innovation/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Internet-Governance-in-Displacement_WEB042020.pdf).

Martin, A. (2021) *Connecting with confidence: managing digital risks to refugee connectivity.* Geneva: UNHCR Innovation Service (www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CWC-Managing-Digital-Risks-To-Refugee-Connectivity-Report.pdf).

Martin-Shields, C. (2019) 'When information becomes action: drivers of individuals' trust in broadcast versus peer-to-peer information in disaster response' *Disasters* 43(3): 612–633 (https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12349).

Mason, B. and Buchmann, D. (2016) *ICT4Refugees: a report on the emerging landscape of digital responses to the refugee crisis.* Berlin: betterplace lab (https://regasus.de/online/datastore?epk=74 D5r0Yc&file=image_8_en).

McCarthy, G. (2020) 'Bounded duty: disasters, moral citizenship and exclusion in Myanmar' *South East Asia Research* 28(1): 13–34 (https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828X.2020.1715240).

McDonald, S.W. (2016) *Ebola: a big data disaster.* CIS Papers 2016.01. Bengaluru and Delhi: The Centre for Internet and Society (https://cis-india.org/papers/ebola-a-big-data-disaster).

McKay, D. and Perez, P. (2019) 'Citizen aid, social media and brokerage after disaster' *Third World Quarterly* 40(10): 1903–1920 (https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1634470).

Mehta, A., Bruns, A. and Newton, J. (2017) 'Trust, but verify: social media models for disaster management' *Disasters* 41(3): 549–565 (https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12218).

Mercy Corps (2019) *The weaponization of social media: how social media can spark violence and what can be done about it.* Portland, OR: Mercy Corps (www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/ weaponization-social-media).

Mirani, L. (2015) 'Millions of Facebook users have no idea they're using the internet'. Quartz, 9 February (https://qz.com/333313/milliions-of-facebook-users-have-no-idea-theyre-using-the-internet/).

Mozur, P. (2018) 'Groups in Myanmar fire back at Zuckerberg'. The New York Times, 5 April (www.nytimes.com/2018/04/05/technology/zuckerberg-facebook-myanmar.html).

Mukkamala, A. and Beck, R. (2016) 'Disaster management and social media use for decision making by humanitarian organizations'. Paper prepared for 49th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/50528884.pdf).

Mulde, F., Ferguson, J., Groenewegen, P., Boersma, K. and Wolbers, J. (2016) 'Questioning big data: crowdsourcing crisis data towards an inclusive humanitarian response' *Big Data & Society* 3(2) (https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2053951716662054).

NDA – National Disability Authority (n.d.) 'What is universal design'. Webpage (https://universaldesign.ie/what-is-universal-design/).

Nganji, J.T. and Cockburn, L. (2019) 'Use of Twitter in the Cameroon Anglophone crisis' *Behaviour & Information Technology* 39(3): 267–287 (https://doi.org/10.1080/0144929X.2019.1620333).

O'Neill, C. (2016) *Weapons of math destruction: how big data increases inequality and threatens democracy*. London: Allen Lane.

Obar, J.A. and Wildman, S. (2015). 'Social media definition and the governance challenge: an introduction to the special issue' *Telecommunications Policy* 39(9): 745–750 (https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2647377).

Obrecht, A. and Bourne, S. (2018) *Making humanitarian response more flexible*. ALNAP background paper. London: ALNAP (www.alnap.org/help-library/making-humanitarian-response-more-flexible-alnap-workshop-background-paper).

Obrecht, A. and Warner, A.T. (2016) *More than just luck: innovation in humanitarian action*. HIF/ALNAP study. London: ALNAP (www.elrha.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/hif-alnap-more-than-just-luck-2016.pdf).

OCHA (2021) *From digital promise to frontline practice: new and emerging technologies in humanitarian action*. New York: OCHA (www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/OCHA%20Technology%20Report.pdf).

Oo Tha, K.K. (2020) 'Exploring the role of ICTs in addressing societal challenges in developing countries: an affordance perspective'. D. Phil Thesis, University of New South Wales (http://handle.unsw.edu.au/1959.4/66650).

Pereira, G., Carmago, I.B.B. and Parks, L. (2021) 'WhatsApp disruptions in Brazil: a content analysis of user and news media responses, 2015–2018' *Global Media and Communication* (https://doi.org/10.1177/17427665211038530).

R4V – Response for Venezuelans (2019) *Regional information and communication needs assessment* (www.r4v.info/en/document/r4v-information-and-communication-needs-assessment).

Raftree, L. (2019) *Digital and social media for social and behaviour change communication*. Inverness: iMedia Associates (https://imediaassociates.org/app/uploads/2019/07/Digital-and-Social-Media-for-SBCC-March-2019.pdf).

Raymond, N. (2021) *Conceptualizing digital risks to persons of concern in the WhatsApp era*. Geneva: UNHCR Innovation Service (www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Conceptualizing-Digital-Risks-to-PoCs-in-the-WhatsApp-Era-.pdf).

Raymond, N. and Harrity, C.S. (2016) 'Addressing the 'doctrine gap': professionalising the use of Information Communication Technologies in humanitarian action' *Humanitarian Exchange* 66: 10–13 (https://odihpn.org/magazine/addressing-the-doctrine-gap-professionalising-the-use-of-information-communication-technologies-in-humanitarian-action/).

Reuter, C., Hughes, A.L. and Kaufhold, M. (2018) 'Social media in crisis management: an evaluation and analysis of crisis informatics research' *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* 34(4): 280–294 (https://doi.org/10.1080/10447318.2018.1427832).

Reuter, C., Stieglitz, S. and Imran, M. (2019) 'Social media in conflicts and crises' *Behaviour & Information Technology* 39(3) 241–252 (https://doi.org/10.1080/0144929X.2019.1629025).

Roberts, T. and Hernandez, K. (2019) 'Digital access is not binary: the 5'A's of technology access in the Philippines' *The Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries* 85(4) (https://doi.org/10.1002/isd2.12084).

Sandvik, K.B. (2016) 'The humanitarian cyberspace: shrinking space or an expanding frontier?' *Third World Quarterly* 37(1): 17–32 (https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1043992).

Sandvik, K.B. and Lohne, K. (2020) 'The struggle against sexual violence in conflict: investigating the digital turn' *International Review of the Red Cross* 102(913): 95–115 (https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383121000060).

Save the Children (2018) *Balkans migration and displacement hub: multimedia suggestion box.* (https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/balkans-migration-and-displacement-hub-multimedia-suggestion-box/).

Schulman, S. (2018) '"Worse off than a war zone": inside Venezuela's healthcare crisis'. The New Humanitarian, 25 October (www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2018/10/25/worse-war-zone-inside-venezuela-s-healthcare-crisis).

Shringarpure, B. (2020) 'Africa and the digital savior complex' *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 32(2): 178–194 (https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2018.1555749).

Signpost (n.d.) *An evidence review of the Signpost Project: empowering through responsive information* (www.signpost.ngo/evidence).

Stieglitz, S., Mirbabaie, M., Schwenner, L., Marx, J., Lehr, J. and Brünker, F. (2017) 'Sensemaking and communication roles in social media crisis communication' *Proceedings der 13. Internationalen Tagung Wirtschaftsinformatik*: 1333–1347 (https://aisel.aisnet.org/wi2017/track14/paper/1/).

Torrealba, M .and Acosta, Y. (2022) 'Social media and inclusion in humanitarian response: "caminantes" at the Venezuela–Colombia border'. HPG briefing note. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/social-media-and-inclusion-in-humanitarian-response-caminantes-at-the-venezuelacolombia-border).

Treem, J.W. and Leonardi, P.M. (2012) 'Social media use in organizations: exploring the affordances of visibility, editability, persistence, and association' *Communication Yearbook* 36: 143–189 (https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2013.11679130).

Troy, C. (2021) 'The oxymoron of "data-driven innovation"'. Chelsea Troy, 30 July (https://chelseatroy.com/2021/07/30/the-oxymoron-of-data-driven-innovation/).

Tshimba, D., Dolan, C. and Nuwagira, G. (2022) 'Social media and inclusion in humanitarian response: the case of refugees in Uganda'. HPG briefing note. London: ODI.

UN Global Pulse and UNHCR Innovation Service (2017) *Social media and forced displacement: big data analytics & machine-learning* (www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/FINAL-White-Paper.pdf).

UNHCR (2015) 'Social media in emergencies' (https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/29319/social-media-in-emergencies).

UNHCR (2016) *Connecting refugees: how internet and mobile connectivity can improve refugee well-being and transform humanitarian action.* Geneva: UNHCR (www.unhcr.org/5770d43c4.pdf).

UNHCR (2020) *Engaging with communities via 'WhatsApp trees'.* Geneva: UNHCR (https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/77836).

UNHCR Innovation Service (n.d.) 'Connectivity for refugees'. Webpage (www.unhcr.org/innovation/connectivity-for-refugees/).

UNHCR Innovation Service (2021) 'Six key findings from engaging communities through messaging apps', 8 October (https://medium.com/unhcr-innovation-service/six-key-findings-from-engaging-communities-through-messaging-apps-95a9291818f7).

van Solinge, D. (2019) 'Digital risks for populations in armed conflict: five key gaps the humanitarian sector should address'. Humanitarian Law and Policy, 12 June (https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2019/06/12/digital-risks-populations-armed-conflict-five-key-gaps-humanitarian-sector/).

Weidmann, N.B., Benitez-Baleato, S., Hunziker, P., Glatz, E. and Dimitropoulos, X. (2016) 'Digital discrimination: political bias in Internet service provision across ethnic groups' *Science* 353(6304): 1151–1155 (https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaf5062).

Whipkey, K. and Verity, A. (2015) *Guidance for incorporating big data into humanitarian operations.* Digital Humanitarian Network (www.digitalhumanitarians.com/guidance-for-incorporating-big-data-into-humanitarian-operations/).

Willitts-King, B., Bryant, J. and Holloway, K. (2019a) *The humanitarian 'digital divide'.* HPG working paper. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/the-humanitarian-digital-divide/).

Willitts-King, B., Bryant, J. and Spencer, A. (2019b) *Valuing local resources in humanitarian crises.* HPG working paper. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/valuing-local-resources-in-humanitarian-crises/).

Wilmot, C., Tveteraas, E. and Drew, A. (2021) 'Duelling information campaigns: the war over the narrative in Tigray'. The Media Manipulation Casebook, 20 August (https://mediamanipulation.org/case-studies/dueling-information-campaigns-war-over-narrative-tigray).

World Bank (2021) 'Individuals using the Internet (% of population)'. Online dataset (https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS).

WSJ – The Wall Street Journal (2021) 'The Facebook files: a Wall Street Journal investigation' (www.wsj.com/articles/the-facebook-files-11631713039).

Xu, R. (2021) 'You can't handle the truth: misinformation and humanitarian action'. Humanitarian Law and Policy, 15 January (https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2021/01/15/misinformation-humanitarian/).