Appealing to Agencies in Only 140 Characters? Towards More Compassionate Communication Architectures in Community Engagement

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Abstract: International humanitarian agencies invested more into being “accountable to affected people” (AAP) in the Typhoon Haiyan response than in any other emergency. Innovations include inter-agency working groups, and collective “common service” efforts in accountability practice. Crucially, agencies set up a suite of feedback mechanisms for local people to communicate their concerns, including SMS hotlines which automatically registered feedback on computerized databases. But in spite of these innovations, our analysis suggests that actual achievements have been modest, as agencies actually failed to make substantive corrections to their interventions and strategically develop new programs based on community feedback, particularly those gathered via SMS. Drawing from over 18 months of research with humanitarian agencies and affected communities in four areas affected by Haiyan, this paper critically reflects on opportunities and obstacles in using technologies for humanitarian accountability. It draws attention to the distorting effects of technologies, as the kind of feedback they elicit become decontextualized and de-emotionalized. It also identifies how digital feedback collection speeds up organizational processes around verification, thus facilitating opportunities to implement “tweaks” to agency interventions. This paper identifies organizational and cultural obstacles to this technologization of accountability in humanitarian agencies, where local accountability officers nevertheless reported that they felt like they “were the office at the far end of the hall” in spite of increased donor funding and organizational support extended to them.

At the same time, this paper explores case studies in which effective cultures of listening developed both within agencies and between agencies and disaster-affected communities. This paper ultimately argues that compassion must be central to the communication architecture of the humanitarian sector in its vision to build meaningful relationships with vulnerable communities. While this recent “technology fetish” in accountability may improve efficiencies, it might come at the expense of truly compassionate community engagement.

Keywords: communication technologies, accountability, media and development, humanitarian technologies, ethnography

Background to the Case Study: Research Objectives and Methods
The Typhoon Haiyan / Yolanda response has been noted for its investment and creativity on initiatives around “accountability to affected people” (AAP). Innovations include inter-agency working groups, the early deployment of an accountability coordinator (Wigley 2015), and collective “common service” efforts in accountability practice (Jacobs 2015). Crucially, agencies set up a suite of feedback mechanisms for local people to communicate their concerns, including SMS hotlines which automatically registered feedback on computerized databases. In many ways, the Philippines as a middle-income country, with high literacy and fluency in English, as well as a long vibrant history of civil society organization was an ideal laboratory to test the latest innovations in “humanitarian technologies”. As the 2012 World Disasters Report (WDR) optimistically states, humanitarian technologies refer to “the use and application of technology to support efforts at improving quality of prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery and rebuilding… by disaster-prone and disaster-affected communities (WDR 2012: 20). Given also the Philippines’ communication infrastructure as the “texting capital of the world” and “social media capital of the world”, many humanitarian agencies embraced the uses of digital technologies for potentially providing corrections to their traditional practice. It made sense that digital communication technologies, with their many potentials for two-way communication, reach, and speed become incorporated into accountability protocols of humanitarian organizations. As one senior humanitarian official we interviewed said, “If we can’t be accountable to affected people in the Haiyan response, then when can we be?”
Precisely because of the implementation of these many innovations, agency efforts to be accountable to affected people in the Haiyan response have attracted much attention from researchers within the sector and the academe. Within the sector, the CDAC Learning Review (CDAC, 2014) and the International Organization for Migration’s “Starting the Conversation” (Hartmann et al., 2014) have identified diverse uses of communication technologies, though with an emphasis on information dissemination.

In the academe, the Humanitarian Technologies Project (carried out by the author along with colleagues Mirca Madianou, Nicole Curato, Jayeel Cornelio and Liezel Longboan) provided a longer-term and ethnographic perspective on communication environments in post-disaster contexts (see: Madianou et al 2015). Projects that bridges humanitarian and academic researchers included “Who’s Listening?” (Buchanan-Smith et al 2015) and “Obliged to Be Grateful” (Ong et al 2015), which were listening projects that used qualitative methods in exploring affected communities’ and agency workers’ perspectives in the overall disaster recovery experience. This paper synthesizes findings from the Humanitarian Technologies Project and the listening project he has been involved in, as well as continuing research in the Haiyan response funded by the University of Leicester.

The research methods in these projects used the following approaches:

1) Exploring and capturing affected people’s perspectives of humanitarian agencies’ efforts to be accountable to them.

   The methodology for this part of the fieldwork was informed by an ethnographic approach designed to capture a wide range of local people’s experience of the humanitarian response and of agencies’ AAP efforts. Four areas were selected: Tacloban City, Bantayan Island, Roxas City, and Estancia, Iloilo, according to the following criteria: varied levels of devastation, geographical diversity (covering both urban and rural), varied experience in receiving humanitarian assistance, and varied availability of feedback platforms.

   Focus group interviews and individual interviews were conducted in each site. Respondents were purposively selected by socio-economic category, age, class, gender, and sexuality. The researchers were a combination of experienced foreign and Filipino researchers. Filipino researchers were familiar with the local language and customs, and with prior research experience of ethnographic fieldwork with Haiyan-affected communities.

2) Reviewing agency approaches, mechanisms, and tools

   This component of the research commenced with a review of relevant documentation. Interviews were carried out in national and international NGOs actively engaged in AAP activities and in the Pamati Kita project, with their field staff, sector specialists, AAP staff, and their senior managers. The research team had access to several agency feedback mechanism databases.

**Summary of Argument**

This paper reports on the disconnect between agencies and affected people’s perspectives and uses of technologies for accountability, as our fieldwork revealed that affected people expressed strong preferences for face-to-face rather than technological feedback following local cultural norms around communicating requests for aid and expressing criticism. It also identifies that because technological feedback mechanisms solicit responses that become de-emotionalized and decontextualized (such as through the short 140-character messages afforded by SMS), agencies failed to capture widespread criticism around the practice of aid targeting, which we found was dissonant with local cultural norms. Because of the tendency of computerized databases to favor simplified and category-specific responses to people’s requests, agencies’ solutions to community feedback were individualized; agency workers responded to “close” individual requests as they pertained to existing programs. This meant that technological feedback were not used for strategic decision-making, such as to plan new programs, but were often meant to facilitate the collection of evidence required for donor reports. As our interviews with accountability officers on the ground put it, their teams still felt that “they were the office at the far end of the corridor” unable to influence program planning and instead focused on addressing donor requirements.

The paper argues that communication technologies inadvertently inhibited compassionate communication with affected people in their tendency to reduce emotion and complexity in dialogue. The paper cautions that while this “technology fetish” may result in minor efficiencies when addressing to individuals’ particular concerns, they can inhibit genuine understanding of local cultures not to mention sustain power hierarchies between program officers and accountability teams within humanitarian agencies.

**Listening to Communities**
Technology Distorting Feedback Collection

One of the most striking findings from our “Who’s Listening” report is that agencies collected more feedback from affected people via SMS and suggestion boxes rather than face-to-face communication. In the computerized database of World Vision International, the agency we observed as having the greatest resources invested in accountability, communication via feedback box and Frontline SMS gathered six times more feedback than face-to-face methods such as help desk, community consultations, and one-on-one (Buchanan-Smith et al 2015: 25). (See Figure 1 below)

![Figure 1: Quantity of feedback provided to WVI per month, by mechanism, March 2014 to February 2015](source: WVI database, Tacloban)

This finding is all the more striking when contrasted with IOM’s (Hartman et al 2014) and our own findings that, overwhelmingly, affected people preferred to communicate face-to-face with agency workers than with technological mechanisms. From our in-depth interviews, we found that people valued the conversational and informal one-to-one interaction between an individual and agency worker. We analyzed that the strength of this communication is both in seeing—bearing witness to the state and condition of the person concerned, to their material realities, as well as listening. The opportunity this presented for dialogue and influence was valued by local people, who felt they could adapt their communication in response to visual cues and feedback from the agency staff member, so that arguments and claims could be presented in diverse ways, whatever way was judged to be most appropriate. Local people also fed back that face-to-face communication gave them quick resolution and a sense of closure where complaints were addressed on the spot (Ong et al 2015).

In contrast to these forms of face-to-face interaction, our research at community level revealed a certain skepticism about the use of hotlines as an accountability mechanism because of the impression that they did not generate meaningful responses from the agencies involved. One of the barriers to using SMS hotlines is not knowing who is at the other end and whether the information actually reaches decision-makers and is acted upon. It was well-understood by the AAP staff of some agencies that SMS was more likely to be used if the community already had a relationship and were in communication with agency staff on the ground.

This raises a challenge for international agencies. Although the more formal and dedicated feedback mechanisms are the easiest to monitor, they do not fit with community preferences, and may therefore be excluding a substantial amount of potential feedback and dialogue. Some agencies introduced logbooks for operational staff to capture issues raised, and whether/how they were dealt with, but this still did not work well. WVI struggled with this issue, feeling that it was too big a task to train hundreds of staff to systematically document their conversations, and they were concerned that such measures could stifle those informal conversations. At least one agency acknowledged that they were probably missing the richness of feedback provided through this mechanism. There may also be a deeper issue here in how “conversational feedback” is received by agency staff, for example as individual griping rather than raising fundamental and more widespread concerns.

Technology De-Emotionalizes and Decontextualizes Feedback

One of the arguments this paper makes is that the technologization of accountability resulted in the failure of agencies to address the issue that targeted aid was culturally incompatible in the local context.
Common to all the communities we visited was resentment about agencies’ procedures of targeting within villages. Given the local context of Filipinos having “relational selves” and a “consciousness of shared identities,” neighbor envy and status anxiety were outcomes of targeted aid that caused new material inequalities within the village.

In the local context, exclusion from aid created more than just an economic burden of having to find alternative means to secure shelter or a source of livelihood; it also left a deep emotional imprint in people that manifested as shame and jealousy in their neighborly interactions. Being excluded, compounded by the dread of being “left behind” by neighbours considered to be their extended family, had a profound impact on people’s self-confidence and civic and political connectedness. Some of our respondents reported withdrawing from the community in order to avoid neighbours’ gossip.

Social divisiveness and emotional harm were not easily captured in surveys, and may have only registered or been delegitimized as “petty jealousies” when logged by accountability mechanisms whose focus has been to seek feedback on existing programs rather than for strategic reflection on the intervention at large.

Our team’s interviews with CwC and AAP officials revealed that inter-agency cluster meetings in Tacloban during the early phase of the response discussed the issue of targeting and its appropriateness in the local context, but for various reasons no substantial change in targeting practice was proposed or attempted. I argue here that technologies played a role in how they emptied out emotion and complexity from the resentment and criticism held by local communities toward the procedure of targeting.

For instance, in Bantayan, we met Dolores, among the poorest informants we met in our fieldwork. She is a stay-at-home mom to two children. Her husband earns 2.50USD a day working as a trisikad driver, and income is also very seasonal—outside of tourist season, transport work in the small island isn’t very viable. What was especially striking about Dolores is the dilapidated condition of her home, where plastic sheets are used as roofs and old wood, as if they’re the leftover and junk kind of wooden material used as her walls. This is different from her next-door neighbors who all had newer looking wood and corrugated iron as roofs. Talking to Dolores, I learned that her neighbors who are fisherfolk received livelihood assistance, cash, and free boats and fishing nets from an agency, but this same agency did not extend any assistance to trisikad workers.

She was crying to me as she told me her story and showed me on her old feature phone the text that she sent them. The text read, “Hello, Oxfam. My name is XXX. Please help also trisikad drivers. I live in village XXX.”

What is striking in this text message is the its de-emotionalized and decontextualized quality. It has none of the communicative power to convey her suffering through emotional appeal and heartfelt expression. It is also decontextualized from the conditions in her village, where she sticks out among her neighbors for being left behind in destitute poverty in a neighborhood that was once a more or less egalitarian and homogeneous community in terms of class.

Discussing her case with the agency, I learned that agencies only gave her an automated response that they have received her request but do not have existing programs for the transport sector in the island. When I asked the accountability officer, they said that they did not consider this as consistent with their agency priorities on sustainable livelihood. In addition, agency officers identified that much donor funding especially in the Philippines case was available for fisherfolk and not for transport workers.

**Technology Limits Feedback Analysis and Response**

Feedback that pertained to an agency’s existing program was more often acknowledged and responded to, while feedback on issues that went beyond existing programs often received only an acknowledgment with no satisfactory response. There is evidence that agencies used communities’ feedback to tweak the delivery of existing programs, such as in correcting beneficiary lists or switching distribution procedures. However, we found no evidence that communities’ feedback was used for strategic planning to develop new programs that target previously excluded sectors or areas, nor were explanations for this lack of responsiveness given.

I surmise that computerized databases and log frames inadvertently reinforce this kind of mindset, as agency workers become preoccupied with “closing” individual requests. Databases require agency workers to tag each collected feedback (which often come from technological mechanisms) according to the list of available programs of agencies. This means that the database limits the range of possible actions of the accountability officer tasked to log and address feedback. Rather than listening to the “intelligence” of affected people’s emotions on the ground,
creatively developing new programs, or seeing patterns across a range of livelihood or cash transfer projects, accountability officers prioritize the simplistic categorizing of feedback and delivering said feedback to program managers whose hierarchy in this sequence is reinforced. Time spent with affected people on the ground is reduced as desk work increases.

Organizational Obstacles to Listening

Interviewing accountability officers, we were struck that, in spite of the high investment and emphasis on accountability in the Haiyan response, they nevertheless expressed their lack of strategic decision-making power within the organization. An officer from one of the largest agencies told us, “We feel like we’re just second-class citizens here. We’re the office at the far end of the corridor.”

When we presented “Obliged to Be Grateful” to local accountability officers in Tacloban representing five different international agencies in September 2015, many affirmed the findings and expressed frustration about the feedback collection process. Accountability officers suggested that program officers ultimately decided whether they would listen or not to accountability officers and their suggestions. We got a sense that accountability officers also felt that while they thought of themselves as more aware of the needs of local communities, they had less power and voice within the organization to the program officers, whom they perceived as ultimately more beholden to donor demands. One suggestion they raised was the need for more donor flexibility to allow them to effect change in programming. In addition, many also shared that the organizational structure of accountability officers being located only in the affected areas but having no representative in national office meant they could do little to influence strategic decision-making.

All the local officers we met affirmed that changes to programs were often in the form of minor tweaks, such as improving the quality of aid or revising beneficiary lists. One officer identified the strategic development of a new livelihood program as a result of community feedback, however this program was only of a pilot nature.

Potential Development Impact

In the next years, humanitarian agencies will continue to look at new technologies as carrying great potentials to solve long-time obstacles and criticisms to humanitarian practice. Glossy new initiatives around “digital humanitarianism” gain greater visibility as they can also facilitate easier collection of data and “evidence”, following broader trends in big data fetish as well as increased pressures for audit and accountability across sectors. As Wigley (2015) argues however, this obsession with the right “tools” may obscure the more fundamental need for the right “mindset”. This issue of the convergence of technologies with accountability mechanisms is here to stay and the challenge is for researchers and practitioners to find ways to ingrain compassion into the humanitarian architecture. The key question we are left to grapple with is: How can humanitarian practice be culturally sensitive and open to the intelligence of people’s emotions in the face of audit cultures and technological fetishism in the sector?

Recommendations for Future Research and Application in Practice

This paper encourages future and comparative research to humanitarian accountability. It advocates for ethnographic and qualitative approaches that are attentive to complexity and contradictions on the ground, and examines the operations of power not only between agencies and affected people but within communities and agencies themselves.

The current research I am involved in looks at decision-making processes within organizational hierarchies, particularly in the process of humanitarian accountability. I am also greatly interested in cross-cultural work in the analysis of targeting, given that historically this practice has been found to undermine community solidarity (Anderson et al 2012; Borton and Shoham 1989).

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