

Limits of social media monitoring in humanitarian crises

This paper explores the use of social network data in humanitarian crises. I introduce three theoretical pillars - the techno-optimist concept of digital humanitarians, which describes how social network data improves the ability of humanitarian organizations to locate people in need of assistance. The second theoretical pillar is an analysis of the use of Facebook and Twitter in the context of the so-called Arab Spring, where I show that each network has specificities that need to be taken into account. I then present the concept of techno-colonialism to show how much of a problem it can be when the use of technology is approached without critical reflection. The theoretical introduction is followed by literature review and my own research. The aim of the literature review is to determine whether the limitations and potential risks of using social network data are perceived by current research. The review shows four main directions that the research addresses - the processing of so-called big crisis data, the analysis of specific tools, the possibilities of crisis management using big data, and critical reflection on the limits of social media monitoring. The literature review concludes by stating that critical reflection on the topic is not lacking in academia. The literature review is followed by the my research, which aims to establish the state of play among humanitarian aid practitioners. Using a structured questionnaire, I investigated how the limits of social media monitoring in humanitarian crises are perceived by a total of 17 humanitarian practitioners from 7 humanitarian organisations representing the most prominent humanitarian actors across the sector. The research showed that social media monitoring is important for humanitarian organisations, but perceptions of the limits and potential risks are not sufficient. I conclude the thesis by presenting options for further research to build on this thesis.

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