

Exacerbating the Vulnerabilities of Undocumented Migrants: The Risks Involved in the Humanitarian Information Activities of Migrant-Aid Organizations

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Abstract. The information practices and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) by humanitarian migrant-aid organizations, including activities that encompass collecting, storing, processing, analyzing, using, transmitting, and releasing data about migrants to the public can help humanitarian and migrant-aid organizations be more effective in their work. However, the use of ICTs and certain information practices in these contexts may also increase or exacerbate significant risks to the people these organizations intend to help. In this project, we examine and compare HIA-related activities in three distinct contexts: 1) humanitarian organizations working to provide lifesaving assistance to undocumented migrants crossing clandestinely into the United States from Mexico, and 2) humanitarian organizations and 3) colleges working to provide assistance and support to undocumented migrants already in the United States. We argue that humanitarian organizations need to develop an extraordinary and sophisticated awareness of the limits of information technologies regarding ethics, security, privacy, and permanence of digital information to truly help vulnerable populations rather than inadvertently increase their vulnerabilities.

Keywords: Humanitarian Information Activities, Information and Communication Technologies, Vulnerability.

1 Introduction

Humanitarian Information Activities (HIA), defined by Greenwood et al. [1] as "Activities and programs which may include the collection, storage, processing, analysis, further use, transmission, and public release of data and other forms of information by humanitarian actors and/or affected communities," can help humanitarian and migrant-aid organizations be more effective in their work to help undocumented migrants and other vulnerable populations. Nonetheless, information and communication technologies used in these contexts can also increase or exacerbate significant risks to the people they intend to help. Irregular (undocumented) migrants in the United States are today particularly vulnerable, and organizations seeking to help them may inadvertently make

things worse by collecting and disseminating information that can end up harming rather than helping undocumented migrants.

In this project, we examine and compare HIA-related activities in two distinct contexts: 1) humanitarian organizations working to provide lifesaving assistance to undocumented migrants crossing clandestinely into the United States from Mexico, and 2) humanitarian organizations and colleges working to provide assistance and support to undocumented migrants already in the United States. In both cases, we discuss how information technologies can help the humanitarian organizations be more effective in their work, and at the same time, how their use of information technologies can exacerbate the vulnerability of the populations they seek to help. We argue that humanitarian organizations need to develop an extraordinary and sophisticated awareness of the **limits of information technologies** regarding **ethics, security, privacy, and permanence** of digital information to truly help vulnerable populations rather than inadvertently increase their vulnerabilities.

We identify the information behaviors and existing HIA engaged in by these organizations (and their staff and volunteers) and the HIA-related needs the organizations have. We examine possible (technical) limitations, and possible solutions to address these needs. However, throughout this process, we deliberately seek to understand and unpack, through a critical lens, the risks and vulnerabilities at play in these contexts, to ensure a more conscientious approach to designing technology-based solutions. For example, (how) do existing HIA practices expose migrants to possible abuse, extortion, or surveillance? (How) Do HIA practices inadvertently collect information that can be used against undocumented migrants in different contexts? Would certain technical solutions to the needs facing these organizations increase or decrease these risks (and, if so, how and why)? Is it possible to provide solutions to these organizations' HIA-related needs without posing greater risks to the vulnerable populations of people the organizations are seeking to assist? We will focus on both small humanitarian organizations which, in our experience, tend to use publicly available tools (Google Docs, Gmail, Facebook, etc.), as well as larger organizations which tend to have better infrastructure and the resources to outsource their technical support and database management to professional vendors.

2 Research Context 1: Humanitarian Organizations at the US-Mexico Border

Work with humanitarian organizations in Tucson, AZ, San Diego, CA, and Nogales, Sonora, Mexico that provide humanitarian aid and assistance to irregular migrants during their clandestine border crossing attempts into the US and after deportation back into Mexico. Some of these organizations place food, water, and first-aid supplies on known migration trails near the U.S.-Mexico border and hike the trails in search of migrants in distress. Others provide meals and other forms of assistance to migrants in shelters in northern Mexico. Some of the organizations have also utilized geographic information systems (GIS) and GIS-based analyses to improve the impact and effectiveness of their work, created maps and posters containing safety-related information

for migrants considering a clandestine border crossing, and photography and video to document and illuminate migrant suffering, Border Patrol activity, and the other related aspects of their work. We seek to better understand the HIA-related activities employed by these organizations, the risks and benefits (to migrants) generated by these activities, and the potential for new ideas or technical solutions to benefit these efforts without making those they seek to help (clandestine migrants) more vulnerable in the process.

3 Research Context 2: Humanitarian Organizations in the US

Work with humanitarian organizations in Los Angeles, CA and in Seattle, WA that provide help and support to undocumented migrants in the US. In one case, we observed the design of a community rapid-response information system to inform people about ICE activities in the region. The system is designed to work as a hotline, a way of verifying if information is reliable, and to send out alerts to people in the area. The system uses data from sourced from different organizations working to offer legal assistance to migrants in the state and the organization has considered the main security aspects of the case. In another case, we helped an organization develop a database to facilitate intake of case information as undocumented migrants seek help, including screening for legal representation for asylum seeking in the US. Prior practice by the humanitarian organization relied on paper intake forms, and the conversion to digital intake forms is seen as contributing efficiency, ease of access, error reduction, ease of analysis of trends, and eventual interoperability with other information systems of humanitarian organizations across Mexico, and in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. Nonetheless, the collection of personal information of undocumented migrants, already extremely vulnerable in the US, adds extra layers of potential vulnerability: unsecured databases on the cloud can be hacked, access to the datasets can be demanded by federal authorities, and personal information can be inadvertently disclosed or leaked. Heightened awareness of the risks and limitations, and added layers of security to the technical infrastructure, can reduce but do not eliminate the risks posed by the conversion to digital intake forms. Continued monitoring and training, as well as analysis of best practices by other, larger humanitarian organizations, can help shed light to improve the performance and minimize the risks of information technologies in HIA in this context.

4 Research Context 3: Public Universities and Colleges and Undocumented Students

Public universities and colleges in the Pacific Northwest continue to defend the rights of undocumented students as part of their community. In Washington, undocumented students can pay in-state tuition and have access to a small number of scholarship and funding opportunities. To better serve the needs of undocumented students, college and university administrators need to know who these students are and hold personal information about them in admissions, financial aid, and other student support systems. The

drive to streamline and unify the information systems about undocumented students' conflicts with the need to protect their privacy and security, as it is information that could be hacked, access can be demanded by federal authorities, or personal information could be inadvertently leaked or disclosed. Continued monitoring, training, and analysis of best practices by other colleges and universities can help ensure that information technologies about undocumented students does not end up hurting their cause more than it helps them.

References

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