Understanding humanitarian information infrastructure: An ethnographic case study of designing public health surveillance systems monitoring sexual violence and exploitation

Rebecca Dean
UCLA Information Studies
GSE&IS Building, Box 951520
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1520
PH: 310.825.8799
beccadean@ucla.edu

Conference Theme:

Information infrastructure development in the home, in organizations, in communities, in society, globally

ABSTRACT

Sexual violence and exploitation (SVE) in conflict settings is an under reported phenomenon that has challenged service delivery and humanitarian intervention. A proposed solution to this problem is to create a global SVE surveillance system to monitor and assess SVE in conflict settings. This requires large scale collaboration and technical systems design among many humanitarian actors including United Nation agencies, international non-governmental associations, and community-based organizations. While the solution to design the SVE surveillance system has been initiated, little is known about the existing information infrastructure that these groups currently use. A better understanding of the information infrastructure will inform the design and increase the chances of success in implementing a SVE surveillance system.

Related studies conducted in information studies by Susan Leigh Star of large scale information infrastructures has provided a relevant methodological theory for this particular study, known as an ethnography of infrastructure. Ethnography of infrastructure relies on qualitative and naturalistic investigative methods such as in depth interviews. The study lends itself to generalizable knowledge about data sharing, humanitarian information infrastructure, and complex systems design.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2005 a technical consultation on Methods & Systems for the Assessment and Monitoring of Sexual Violence and Exploitation in Conflict Situations convened on behalf of the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and the Social Science Research Council. Thirty-four participants from various international non-governmental organizations and UN agencies came together under the stated goal to "initiate the design of a standardized system for the assessment, monitoring, and reporting of sexual violence and exploitation (SVE) in conflict affected settings" (Marsh, 2005).

This growing imperative to design large scale technical systems that provide surveillance of global public health issues warrants a research response. The development of the overall public health surveillance apparatus is supported and promoted by many parties including: international health and UN agencies, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), community based organizations (CBO's), local governments, human rights activists, and public health and international development scholars. Similar surveillance systems and standardizations include the Children and Armed Conflict Monitoring, Reporting and Compliance Mechanism (2008). Consequently, the growth of surveillance systems is on the rise. And yet little is known about the existing information infrastructure the surveillance systems are meant to remedy and ultimately replace.

This study aims to describe and understand the humanitarian information infrastructure using the case of the SVE surveillance system. No doubt, an analysis of infrastructure that facilitates design recommendations will also allow for an unpacking of several critical concepts, which are taken for granted in the effort to monitor and assess SVE. For gender, technology, and development researchers as well as information studies researchers, it is the unpacking of critical concepts like 'standardization', 'classification' and 'surveillance' in the context of designing an SVE surveillance system that warrants the research and will be of most interest.

Despite the stated research imperative, sexual violence and exploitation is socially significant in that it disproportionately affects women and young girls and its root causes are extreme oppression and gender-inequality. This being the case, SVE is grossly underreported. Initiative to collect data are often inconsistent or inflexible and therefore inadequate at meeting local needs and cultural context. Interestingly, the humanitarian effort to restore the rights and dignity of victims of SVE has crossed into the information world. The humanitarian field seeks technical solutions and information systems to facilitate and remedy the ad-hoc information infrastructure their humanitarian effort now rely on (Marsh, 2005; Basil & Saltzman, 2002). The current mode toward fulfilling their lack of information infrastructure has been through developing surveillance via standardization, data-collaboration, and documentation; critical notions for information studies.

This raises questions such as what is the role of classification and standardized case definitions in the process of collecting data?

How are indicators delegated and finally decided upon to measure and monitor these large issues? What are the methods for collecting this data? And how is the process of developing standards creating the impetus for collaboration and knowledge sharing?

While we know coordinating humanitarian services involves coordinating data sharing during conflicts and complex emergencies it is important to make explicit that the research and systems discussed here have to do with saving and protecting the lives of women and children. So, the 'data' we are referring to is data that protects a child from being sexually exploited, killed, or sick. Therefore, data protection needs, ethics, and accountability for design cannot be overly stressed. Similarly, the surveillance system and research must be dynamic enough to bridge and collate data collected about an issue that touches diverse ranges of conflicting paradigms between local and global classifications about language, violence, reproductive health/ rights, and exploitation.

2. RESEARCH AIMS

My research aim is to carry out an ethnographic study of information infrastructure in the humanitarian field using the design case of the SVE surveillance system in order to make claims about specific properties of that infrastructure. Through a process of data collection, coding and data analysis the research will identify aspects of infrastructure that emerge in order to facilitate a descriptive account of humanitarian information infrastructure. I will also pursuit answers to the following research questions:

What are the effects of standardization or formal classification in the humanitarian sector?

How do we understand humanitarian work on SVE as affected by standards and classification?

What are the values and ethics inscribed in the standardization and classification/protocols?

3. REFERENCES

[1] Basile, Kathleen, and Linda E. Saltzman. (2002). *Sexual Violence Surveillance: Uniform Definitions and Recommended Data Elements.* Atlanta, Georgia: Center for Disease Control and Prevention,. http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/pub-res/sv_surveillance/SexViolSurv.pdf.

[2] Bowker, G., & Star, S. L. (1998). Building Information Infrastructures for Social Worlds - The Role of Classifications and Standards. In T. Ishida (Ed.), *Community Computing and Support Systems* (pp. 231-248). Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg.

[3] Bowker, G., & Star, S. L. (2000). *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*. . Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

[4] *Buildin gdata systems for monitoring and responding to violence against women: recommendations from a workshop.* (2007). Atlanta, Georgia: Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

[5] Marsh, M. (2005). Methods and Systems for the Assessment and Monitoring of Sexual Violence and Exploitation in Conflict Situations, A technical consultation. *Produced by the Social Science Research Council for the United Nations Population Fund and the World Health Organization*.

[6] Saltzman, Linda. (2004). "Issues Related to Defining and Measuring Violence Against Women: Response to Kilpatrick.." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, no. 19: 1235 -1242.

[7] Smith. *Sexual Violence in Conflict: Making Data Work for Change*. Geneva: AllianceDARC, August 2006. http://www.dcaf.ch/women/Smith.pdf.

[8] Star, S. L. (1999). The Ethnography of Infrastructure. *Sage Publications*, American Behavioral Scientist., 43, 377-391.

[9] Star, S. L., & Bowker, G. (1995). Work and Infrastructure. *Communications if the ACM*, 38(9), 41.

[10] Star, S. L., & Ruhleder, K. (1994). Steps Towards and Ecology of Infrastructure: Complex problems in design and access fr large-scale collaborative systems. In (pp. 253-264). Chapel Hill, North Carolina, United States: ACM.

[11] *WHO Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Researching and Monitoring Sexual Violence in Emergencies*. (2007). World Health Organization. http://www.who.int/gender/documents/OMS_Ethics&Safety 10Aug07.pdf.

[12] Women's Commision for Refugee Women & Children. (2004). *Gender-Based Violence Tools Manual: For Assessment & Program Design, Monitoring & Evaluation in Conflict-Affected Settings.* New York, NY: RHRC Consortium.