

Between surveillance and recognition: Rethinking digital identity in aid

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Abstract

Identification technologies like biometrics have long been associated with securitisation, coercion and surveillance but have also, in recent years, become constitutive of a politics of empowerment, particularly in contexts of international aid. Aid organisations tend to see digital identification technologies as tools of recognition and inclusion rather than oppressive forms of monitoring, tracking and top-down control. In addition, practices that many critical scholars describe as aiding surveillance are often experienced differently by humanitarian subjects. This commentary examines the fraught questions this raises for scholars of international aid, surveillance studies and critical data studies. We put forward a research agenda that tackles head-on how critical theories of data and society can better account for the ambivalent dynamics of ‘power over’ and ‘power to’ that digital aid interventions instantiate.

Keywords

Digital identity, surveillance, humanitarianism, data practices, biometrics, recognition

Introduction

A pronounced tension is emerging in debates around datafication and technology use in the aid sector. There is a growing tendency among international organisations, scholars and commentators to depict aid industry data practices in unhelpfully polarised terms. On the one hand, the use of data technologies in aid interventions is treated by aid organisations and their commercial partners as a straightforward means of increasing the inclusion, recognition and empowerment of affected populations, often with minimal acknowledgement of the attendant risks. On the other hand, scholars and civil society organisations tend to present the use of data technologies as harm-inducing ‘technosolutionism’ (Molnar, 2020: 34) or ‘technocolonialism’ (Madianou, 2019) fuelled by the neoliberal logics of surveillance and capitalist value extraction. These critical responses have catalysed action and advocacy around privacy, non-discrimination and other human rights, providing an essential counterweight to narratives of technological utopianism. In this commentary, however, we suggest that the current polarisation forecloses dialogue and learning between the key actors deploying and evaluating data technologies in aid. Furthermore, it stunts deeper empirical analysis of

and serious engagement with the diverse perspectives of so-called beneficiary communities.

Debates surrounding the global COVID-19 pandemic remind us that, while critical data studies mark ‘surveillance’ as strongly negative, medical discourse (which powerfully informs humanitarian discourse) treats ‘surveillance’ as largely positive (cf. Hay et al., 2013). In medicine, surveillance refers not only to public health data collection and analysis, as in the control of infectious diseases, but also to the monitoring of an individual patient’s symptoms and responses to treatments. A more nuanced approach, then, will acknowledge these starkly different starting positions on surveillance as harm and as care (Armstrong, 1995).

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In this commentary, we describe the dialectical relationship between surveillance and recognition before drawing attention to the ambivalences of power inherent in digital identity interventions in aid. We accept the political realism of data governance (Clark and Albris, 2020) and so argue for a constructive research agenda to advance debate, policy and practice. In particular, we outline why and how researchers can achieve more theoretically careful, methodologically rigorous and empirically informed approaches to understanding data practices in aid. We focus on digital identity systems as an exemplary case of datafication in this space, and the polarised debates around it.

Digital identity systems are information systems that typically support identity proofing, authentication and authorisation (Nyst et al., 2016: 28–29). The ability to prove that you are who you say you are enables access to many public and private sector services, and underpins essential humanitarian service provision, including cash transfers. The significance of digital identity systems in aid has been accelerated by their centrality to COVID-19 responses (Masiero, 2020) and has increased aid and government stakeholders' dependence on these systems.

Debates about the implications of digital identity are particularly polarised among the diverse groups involved. For example, from a critical research perspective, Latonero (2019) focuses on identity case studies to describe aid industry data collection systems as 'surveillance humanitarianism'. This framing has been widely taken up. In a recent report, UN Special Rapporteur Achime foregrounds the risks that datafied humanitarian identity systems bring to vulnerable populations (Achime, 2020: 12). In contrast, and despite such criticism, the development community prioritises UN Sustainable Development Goal 16.9 ('legal identity for all') and celebrates International Identity Day (Crowcroft et al., 2020).

In what follows, we examine the case of digital identity in humanitarian and development aid to argue for a depolarised approach to surveillance and recognition. A depolarised approach is equally wary of technopologetics and naïve empiricism as it is of reflex technophobic rhetoric. This opens up a research agenda capable of bringing researchers, technologists, aid organisations, civil society activists and aid subjects into dialogue. This commentary has wider implications since humanitarian settings often serve as global 'technological testing grounds' (Molnar, 2020).

The dialectics of surveillance and recognition

Surveillance studies scholars have long acknowledged that surveillance and recognition, repression and

inclusion are inextricably connected (Bauman, 2000; Lyon, 2007; Monahan et al., 2010; Scott, 1998). The ambivalence of identification – which combines the *power over* with the *power to* – is evident in theories about individual and institutional subject-making (Butler, 1990; Castells, 2010; Foucault, 1988; Giddens, 1991). The ability to count and keep track of a population is necessary for the fair and targeted delivery of social protection and welfare. Access to formal identity is intimately connected with protection from exploitation, undue detention and deportation (Manby, 2016; Szreter and Breckenridge, 2012). Referencing South Africa's biometric-based cash transfers to the poor, Ferguson (2015) argues that 'inclusion in systems of registration and accounting may appear less as an oppressive system of control than as a valued token of recognized membership'. Even those less than sanguine about digital identity have acknowledged that technology may facilitate redistributive forms of justice (Awenengo et al., 2019; Breckenridge, 2014).

Rather than two sides of a binary debate, surveillance and recognition are mutually compatible developments that are increasingly collapsed. Talk of 'financial inclusion' and the empowering potential of digital identity are routine in aid discourse (World Bank, 2019). Here, surveillance is often framed as a form of belonging (Boellstorff, 2013). Yet to understand the securitisation of identity merely as 'control by totalizing surveillance is misleading,' argues Rose (2000: 326). Identity technologies have opened up avenues for formal claims-making just as they have enabled extractive and intrusive forms of monitoring.

Contemporary research on aid technologies, however, rarely unpicks the ambivalent qualities and effects of digital identity systems. An illuminating body of critical work has highlighted the risks of harm that digital innovations and data practices pose to already vulnerable populations (Hosein and Nyst, 2013; ICRC and Privacy International, 2018; Sandvik et al., 2017). Scholars have argued that aid organisations are normalising the use of invasive tracking technologies, thus further entrenching power asymmetries between international organisations, donor states and intended beneficiaries (Latonero, 2019; Madianou, 2019; Topak, 2019). The use of biometrics in refugee contexts has provoked particular concern among scholars and civil society groups alike, as has the limitations of 'informed consent' (Hayes and Marelli, 2020; Jacobsen, 2015; The Engine Room and Oxfam, 2018).

Fieldwork experience with aid organisations nevertheless complicates straightforward narratives about humanitarian surveillance. Ethnographic studies reveal unwieldy bureaucracies, often motivated less by a desire for panoptic oversight than for expedient, cost-cutting solutions to fraud (Kibreab, 2004; Walkey,

2019). Aid industry debates about future models for identification are driven by competing rather than coherent logics, for example, in relation to political power and markets (Cheesman, 2020). While collecting data can yield power over subjects, humanitarian data collection efforts are sometimes purely performative, outstripping the capacity of organisations to use or analyse collected information (Crisp, 2018). The information humanitarian field workers collect includes mundane and anonymised data (e.g., about refugees' soap use patterns); accordingly, field workers articulate the gap between activist and policy concerns about data protection, and the everyday demands of refugee camp management (Macias, 2019).

Fieldwork with aid recipients also provides a more ambivalent picture. While there are ample cases of resistance to digital identity systems across various regions of study (Martin et al., 2009; Weitzberg, 2020), communities sometimes embrace them (Schoemaker et al., 2021). Although there is reason to be sceptical of survey approaches in this domain (Haggerty, 2009), 87% of rural residents surveyed across three Indian states approved of the mandatory linking of government services to Aadhaar, India's 'foundational' digital identity system (Abraham et al., 2018). Data subjects may accept new identity systems for complex reasons, ranging from recognition and belonging to efficiency and convenience. As Murakami Wood and Firmino (2009) show in contemporary Brazil, it can be the case that 'the fear of anonymity and being 'lost' is far stronger than any concern about surveillance or control' (p. 299). Such findings point to a need for a less totalising view of identification practices. Too often, perspectives that do not fit into the critical 'surveillance humanitarianism' analytic are dismissed as non-expert. The assumption that aid recipients simply do not understand enough about data systems to be critical of them is patronising.

The 'power over' and the 'power to'

This commentary argues for a renewed attention to the ambivalences of power. Nuanced literature on digital identity systems has examined how different technologies both empower and disempower, and so reshape relations between the 'targets' of aid and the state, corporate and non-state actors who dispense it. Focusing on the impacts of customer identification requirements, Martin and Taylor (2021) explore how regulatory policy environments shape local power dynamics, which in turn include some refugees while excluding others from accessing mobile and financial services. Others have focused on the structures of power in which identification systems are rooted. Masiero and Shakthi (2020) highlight the 'embeddedness of Aadhaar within wider techno-social formations' and

the making of 'coded citizenship'. People often actively seek recognition from powerful authorities, since identification can confer important rights and protections. According to Janmyr and Mourad (2018), people fleeing the Syrian War are deeply affected by 'classification struggles' – contests over the legal, bureaucratic and social labels used by state and non-state actors in Lebanon. In each of these contexts, power is too dispersed, contested and shifting for a top-down, unidirectional surveillance model.

Both the power over *and* the power to are exercised through digital technology. Recognising this duality can enable us to better understand why some aid recipients and their political proxies accept identification while others resist, contest and circumvent it. Houthi authorities in Yemen resisted the World Food Programme's (WFP's) mandatory use of biometric identification in exchange for aid in 2019 (Parker and Slemrod, 2019). Their motivations related not to surveillance or data collection per se, but to concerns about how technologies like biometrics challenged local sovereignty and redrew constellations of power. Resistance, in this case, eventuated an alternative system design, granting Houthi control over data storage and access. This suggests that global systems are not necessarily resistant to adaptation to local contexts and needs.

We implore scholars to avoid over-generalising about digital identity technologies. The different 'affordances' (Davis, 2020) of technology matter greatly both in terms of their capacity to 'empower' users as well as their ability to facilitate forms of surveillance. For example, while both are by definition 'biometric', facial recognition technologies allow for the unwitting identification of individuals at scale and are readily deployed for covert surveillance (Roussi, 2020), whereas voice authentication systems can offer users much more control over authentication processes (GSMA, 2021). Refusing essentialist, universalising accounts of digital identity technologies, including biometrics, helps us avoid the trap of technological determinism.

A depolarised research agenda

A depolarised research agenda for understanding digital identity in aid and beyond would entail not only asking new questions, but also rethinking methodological and theoretical commitments. As Scott-Smith (2015) suggests, scholars of humanitarianism often rush to Foucauldian critiques, which can mischaracterise the nature of control. Rather than involving dispersed self-government (biopower), authority in many refugee camps is highly centralised (Scott-Smith, 2015: 22). By the same token, theories of panoptic, top-down control can misapprehend the nature of power

elsewhere. Humanitarian contexts are also subject to overlapping interventions by state and non-state actors, who sometimes work at odds with one another. In Kenya, for example, UNHCR and government officials often radically disagree about questions of refugee management and protection (Weitzberg, 2020).

A reorientation towards the nuances of power should involve studying the actors and funding structures that financially motivate digital identity programmes. This is particularly important when digital systems are pursued by international donors with assistance from non-governmental organisations and think tanks. Among the pertinent questions we should ask are: Whose interests are being served in the frenzy to digitise identity in aid? Who stands to lose from the embrace of new technologies for beneficiary identification? Institutional ethnography is well-suited to assist in mapping these concerns. Since it involves long-term, close-up work, ethnography is attuned to rapidly shifting practices, agendas and incentives within international organisations. It helps to ‘unearth the remarkable depth, richness, and variability of digital media in everyday and institutional life’ (Coleman, 2010: 498).

At the same time, there is a need to examine local exercises of agency and resistance. The conflict between Houthi representatives and WFP officials over the use of biometrics has wide-ranging implications for Yemen and beyond. Yet we know very little about how the Houthis asserted their influence, why the WFP changed tack and whether specific technologies played a role in helping broker a compromise. This case makes evident the critical role of field access – though difficult to achieve in the current global health crisis – in understanding the dynamics of digital identity systems.

Likewise, we urge attention to the routine practices that can reconfigure the relationship between aid recipients and identifying institutions. In particular, there is a paucity of research on the role that mediators – such as frontline bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1983) – play in digital identification practices. These actors shape the introduction, acceptance and negotiation of identity systems in many aid contexts. Nevertheless, little can be found in the literature about the ways they broker interactions between identifiers and the identified.

To move beyond binary approaches to recognition and surveillance, we encourage scholars to foreground the perspectives of subjects of aid intervention in all their diversity, ambivalence and contradictions. As Breckenridge (2019) argues, accounts of India’s Aadhaar system too often ‘ventriloquise for the Indian poor’ with one side ‘insisting on their investment in the refuge of opacity and the other endorsing strategies of recognition and formalisation’ (p. 608). We encourage scholars inspired by notions of ‘data justice’ (Taylor, 2017) to examine ‘emic’ responses to identity systems,

and the dynamics underpinning data subjects’ everyday exercises of agency. For example, resistance to panoptic digital identity systems is widely recognised, but less so is how digital identities might be viewed (and accepted) as a means of correcting historic injustices, particularly among ‘invisibilised’ groups. Answering these questions will require deep research engagement with the users of digital identity systems.

Similarly, we must also avoid ‘ventriloquising’ for technologies. By drawing upon STS methods, such as the tracing of information infrastructures (Bowker and Star, 1999; Star, 1999), one can avoid painting all forms of data collection as inherently invasive or detrimental. In aid and migration studies, the infrastructural analytic can capture the systematic connections between specific technologies, databases, techniques, institutions and actors (Gillespie et al., 2018; Jensen and Wintereik, 2013; Leurs, 2020). Attention to embedded, relational and mundane material systems (infrastructures) reveals how they can yield suffering *and* advantage (Bowker and Star, 1999: 6). In this vein, examining the embedded structures and relations that identity systems rely upon would help unravel the specific effects of particular socio-technical arrangements.

Finally, a more precise scholarly treatment of digital identification systems must also confront the deployment of privacy-by-design approaches and privacy-enhancing technologies (PETS), and what these mean for the tensions between recognition and surveillance. Decisions to forgo the centralisation of biometric data – as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has committed to (ICRC, 2019) – can potentially reduce surveillance risks while still allowing for the digital identification of beneficiaries (Hayes and Marelli, 2020: 75). Comprehensive data protection legislation is critical to ensuring the security of identification programmes (ID4D, 2019) yet the reality of realising data protection goals in humanitarian contexts is a complex negotiation between governments, emergency management and humanitarian professionals (Clark and Albris, 2020). Political economy analysis of identification programmes can help reveal power asymmetries between these diverse stakeholders (Khan and Pallavi, 2019). Both privacy-enhancing innovations and data regulations have yet to be widely implemented in aid contexts, but the growing number of policy commitments and pilot projects must factor into our understandings of recognition, surveillance and power in aid.

Conclusion

Clearly, extensive data collection undertaken in the aid sector can be used to police people, limit their opportunities and control their mobility (Metcalfe and

Dencik, 2019). In many cases, data is collected without meaningful purpose, consent, or alternatives (Kaurin, 2019). Arguably, ‘the humanitarian sector has not developed the calculus to weigh the benefits of digital identity systems against the costs to fundamental rights’ (Latonero, 2019). Yet, as Latonero also points out, ‘for humanitarian organisations, monitoring and collecting data are essential for delivering the right amount of aid to the right people at the right place and time.’

As critical, engaged scholars, we need to recognise that components of data collection and identification are essential in delivering aid, and that there are potential benefits to using digital technology for aid distribution – both for humanitarian institutions and recipients of aid. Surveillance for purposes of care is not simply a narrowly medical practice. We need more nuanced research that recognises and unravels the complex motivations and practices of aid organisations as well as the variety of experiences and perspectives that aid subjects have with data and technology. This is important for a number of reasons. First, a depolarised approach is more likely to enable access to research sites and data that are notoriously hard to reach. Furthermore, research findings are more likely to be engaged with and learned from if they recognise the aspects of identification systems that are valuable to aid organisations and beneficiaries. Perhaps most importantly, such an approach allows us to theorise the complexity of digital identity – how it is embraced and resisted in productive and problematic ways – not as preconceived positions imagine it should be.

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