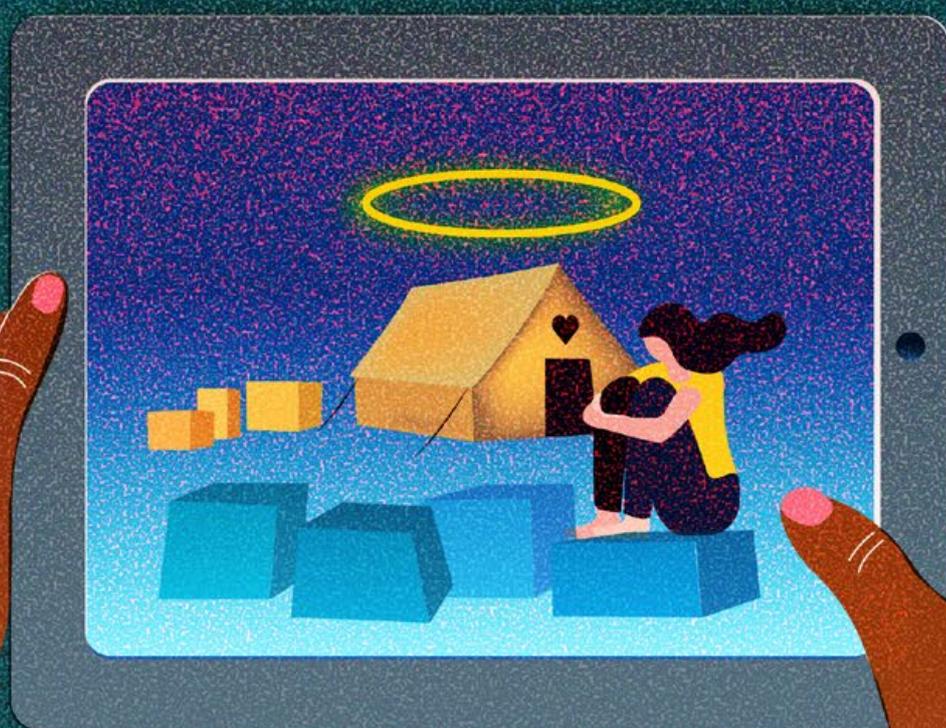Where Technology Meets Ethics:
The Humanitarian Principles and Their Problematic Relationship to Technology

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Where Technology Meets Ethics:
The Humanitarian Principles and Their Problematic Relationship to Technology

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Design

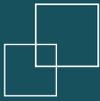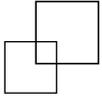/ **Alexandra Sternin | alexsternin.com**

Interviewees

The authors would like to extend our deepest gratitude to the 10 individuals who took the time to meet with us to share details about their projects, lessons learned and recommendations. Without their contributions, this paper would not be as compelling.

This paper does not represent the views of the interviewees unless explicitly stated. The authors have drafted the paper based on a combination of literature review and interviews.

Name	Title	Organization
Bárbara Paes	Community Engagement Manager	The Engine Room
Ben Parker	Senior Adviser to USG	UNOCHA
Paul Currion	Independent	Independent
Heather Leson	Digital Innovation Lead Solferino Academy	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
Joe Masoodi	Senior Policy Analyst	Cybersecure Policy Exchange
Julia Keseru	Executive Director	The Engine Room
Katherine Hsiao	Executive Vice President, Health and Life Sciences	Palantir
Lydia Kwong	Data Security and Privacy Mentor	UNICEF
Nathaniel Raymond	Executive Director of YSPH Humanitarian Research Lab	Yale University
Pierre Guillaume Wielezynski	Director of Digital Transformation	WFP

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Introduction

The end of the 17th century saw the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment, a period of human thought that challenged the most fundamental assumptions in the Western world. In this roughly 150-year period, nothing was safe from the march of human reason and scientific advances. God, monarchy, economics, morality, legitimation stories for political authority, and any other societal truth or way of being in the world was uprooted and exposed to the rising waters of the Enlightenment.

It was a turbulent time through which many institutions and individuals saw themselves literally and metaphorically brought to the chopping block. Many institutions, such as the church, could not adapt to the changing sentiments brought on by the Enlightenment. Instead of being flexible, the church remained anchored because of its inability to adequately adjust Christian truth to the changing political and moral landscape around it.

By the end of the Enlightenment, the church — one of the most influential forces in the West — had been reduced to an organization of such unimportance that German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche appeared at the end of the 19th century declaring: "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him."[1] The primary cause of this reduction was not that the church was incapable of changing with the tides; it was that the church saw its moral claims as absolute, and it was unwilling to bend, reluctant to reinterpret and unwilling to embrace what it had no chance of stopping. In today's era, every major organization and sector is presented with a similar problem: the Information Age.

Similar to the thought in the Age of Enlightenment, technology and data are rapidly beginning to deconstruct long-held truths, challenge what is considered moral, undermine institutions, recreate economics and disrupt the political status quo. Unlike the Enlightenment, which was defined by a progression in thought, the Information Age is progressing so quickly that it is now human thought that finds itself lagging behind the technologies that define the modern world and its boundaries. The standard ethical, moral, political and economic models that have guided the Western world since the Age of Enlightenment are rapidly becoming obsolete. Their inability to handle the changing landscape brought about by the Information Age is becoming more apparent with each passing day.

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1   Human, All Too Human, Friedrich Nietzsche

Taking a lesson from the church during the Enlightenment, it is unwise to attempt to remain rigid in the face of undoubtable change, especially when that change is uncertain in its nature. With each passing day, major events are becoming more pronounced: the outbreak of State-to-State war in Europe, the reappearance of great power competition, the looming global food crisis, the uncertain global economic future, the rise of autocratic leaders and the increase in climate-related disasters. These events may very well produce a level of suffering that the world, especially the West, has not seen in several decades. This perfect storm of natural catastrophe, human failure and historical force coupled with the Information Age is starting to challenge the people who work to mitigate human suffering — those in the humanitarian sector.

An apparent problem exists for the humanitarian sector and those who interact with it: How will the Information Age alter the sector's existence? Or perhaps an even more important question: Will the Information Age do to major humanitarian organizations, such as the UN, what the Enlightenment did to the church? And if this were to happen, what would the humanitarian sector look like at that point?

Over the past decade, alarms have sounded the need for the humanitarian sector to start seriously considering the impacts of technology and how it should be used. **This paper aims to raise another but different alarm: The time for theorizing is coming to an end. The need for action has arrived.**

The Humanitarian Sector and Guiding Principles
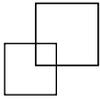
Whether they work in large international organizations with thousands of personnel or in small NGOs comprising a handful of people, humanitarians are the front line against the plethora of catastrophes and injustices that regularly befall humanity. When ethnic conflict results in genocide, rape and starvation, it is the humanitarian sector that moves first. When a natural disaster rocks a small island and leaves people without access to food, water or medical supplies, it is the humanitarian sector that responds. And when an aggressive State invades a neighbour, it is the humanitarian sector that rushes in to evacuate refugees and assist in any way it can. These disasters, which most people see only on a screen, are the day-to-day reality for humanitarians. One would be hard pressed to find a humanitarian unwilling to risk life, limb and comfort to do what needs to be done to assist.

At first glance, as an outsider looking in, it can seem as if the humanitarian sector has one goal: to alleviate human suffering using humanity as the singular principle to guide itself towards that goal. Yet, as the interviewees confirm, it is not that simple.

The humanitarian sector is guided by four principles: humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. Through these principles, the humanitarian sector makes decisions such as which activities to engage in, which technologies to use, which data to acquire, which companies to partner with and which donations to accept. As a sector, humanitarians are rarely capable of acting independently. And deciding what means are acceptable to achieve the ends is where the humanitarian principles play the greatest role. Whether it's negotiating food distribution with a local warlord or deciding whether to incorporate technologies from ethically questionable technology firms, there is a constant moral and ethical challenge that every humanitarian organization must face. How any individual in a position of authority decides to interpret the principles will determine the means to meet any stated end, and it is this freedom of choice that is creating issues for how the humanitarian sector is dealing with the rise of technology. A decision made in line with the principles of one humanitarian may be completely out of bounds for another. This split forces disagreement within the sector and can result in the disruption of sector cohesion, as seen in the partnership between the World Food Programme (WFP) and Palantir,[2] which is discussed in more detail on page 18.

As necessity begins to force people's hands, an increase in divisive decisions can be expected, as differing views of what is in line with the existing principles will have to be applied in real-world scenarios.

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2   The New <u>Humanitarian</u>

The humanitarian sector needs guiding principles, that is not a point of dispute. But the issue of how to interpret those principles is constantly discussed, which slows down the sector's ability to act. There is, of course, a necessity to continue discussing the principles and morality. But if those discussions are happening in small pockets across the sector, then no concrete conclusions can be reached and the ability to respond to humanitarian problems is slowed down. Most interviewees noted the lack of a unified conversation and that this lack of unity is beginning to force the development of different doctrines across the sector. As these different doctrines begin to shape actions, a precedent will be set based on their success or failure, regardless of whether the moral conversation, once it catches up, decides to condemn them.

There is a window of opportunity to produce a moral doctrine that can serve to guide the humanitarian sector, but it is narrow and will soon be closed by the necessity of action. Unlike our morals and ethics, technology is making clear progress every year. The direction it will take humanity is far from determined, so any discussion about fixed morals and principles immediately runs into the problem of having to predict the future in which they will need to be applied. In this situation, a look at an unlikely source may contain some useful insight for humanitarians looking to develop a strategy for dealing with this problem. That source is the United States Marine Corps.

The US Marine Corps' motto is Semper Fidelis, which is Latin for 'Always Faithful.' A common unofficial motto is a play on the original, Semper Gumby, which implies always having to be flexible as orders and standards are constantly shifting. While it may seem like a simple play on words, Semper Gumby lies at the heart of the US Marine Corps' doctrine. Unlike many military forces, the Marine Corps uses decentralized command, which gives lower-ranking marines the ability to act in fast-moving situations such as those encountered in warfare. In the heat of the moment, the Marine Corps not only allows but actively encourages the individual marine to take charge of a situation without seeking direction from the entire chain of command. This doctrine creates a force that, in the face of changes not anticipated by prior planning, can rapidly switch tactics and adjust to fluid situations.

Clearly, the humanitarian sector neither conducts warfare nor remotely resembles a military organization. But it does operate in a fluid and unclear environment. Transitioning to a more Semper Gumby type of moral reasoning will perhaps be necessary to allow the sector to achieve its primary goal of alleviating human suffering.

The Current Principles

There is no getting around working with companies that have ethically questionable philosophies and business models, as these value judgments are subjective and the humanitarian sector is broad. By creating a loose doctrine that eliminates the possibility of the largest grievances, a more productive relationship can be developed between the sector and companies that allows for experimentation and accepts that this experimentation will fail from time to time. The principles' goal should not be to avoid making mistakes with terrible consequences; it should be to steer the sector in a direction that provides the most assistance to people who need it with as little negative consequence as possible.

The humanitarian sector will make decisions that amplify human suffering and breach human rights. This is unavoidable, despite our greatest efforts. This should not be happily embraced, but it must be pragmatically accepted. The humanitarian principles were not thought of with modern technology in mind, and thus perhaps they do a poor job of producing a moral framework for working with said technology. This fact is most clearly evidenced by the absence of the words 'technology' and 'data' in any of the principles' descriptions, as written by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). After reviewing the current principles and their relationship with technology, a discussion can be had around possible solutions to this relationship that offer a different approach to how the humanitarian sector uses principles to interact with technology and the companies that create it.

Humanity

> **"** *Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings.* **"**
>
> — UNOCHA[3]

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3   UNOCHA description of the humanity principle.

But what does 'humanity' mean exactly? Generally we understand its essence while having to recognize that it is quite subjective and value based. For example, when an individual runs into a burning building to save someone, we can understand the sentiment that "it was the humane thing to do." However, when somebody facing a lifetime of immense suffering takes the option of assisted suicide, supporters will say "it was the humane thing to do" while others disagree.

Subjectivity can become especially problematic for humanitarians when asking themselves what the humane thing to do is in any given situation. For instance, when an organization is trying to determine whether to use a particular company's technology, it could find itself stuck between increasing the speed and effectiveness of delivering aid and the constraints of the humanitarian principles. Is it more humane to get the aid where it needs to be as quickly and effectively as possible, or is it more humane to use a different method that is slower but avoids possible breaches of the principles? This situation is not about efficiency but rather time as a critical component of the humanity principle.

Time is a precious resource and, in many instances, the humanitarian's greatest foe. Starvation, dehydration, war and disaster wait for nothing and are impartial in their nature. If a humanitarian decides that using a specific technology or cooperating with a particular company saves precious time, is this not acting in the name of humanity? Conversely, if the humanitarian decides not to use that technology or cooperate with a company because it is unethical, they are equally following the principle of humanity. Perhaps the next logical question would be if both actions are humane, which is more humane: maximizing the efficient use of time, or following a moral code in accordance with the principles?

As UNOCHA says in its description of humanity: "the purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health…"[4] The efficient use of time leads to an increased capability to protect life and health. Suppose food and medical shipments can be delivered two days faster with the use of a particular technology. Could it be argued that two days is in fact the line between life and death for some and certainly the reduction of suffering for others?

The essence and urgency of hunger are best described by Gulag survivor Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in his novel One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich: "That bowl of soup—it was dearer than freedom, dearer than life itself, past, present, and future."[5] If this is the reality of hunger, can the argument be made that it is the humanitarian sector's place to adopt technologies that would reduce this condition based on ethical grounds? If humanity is the driving principle, the question must be asked: Is there anything more humane, more critical, than addressing the suffering and death inflicted by starvation?

The action most in line with the principle of humanity is not to extend the duration of suffering but to use the most time-effective technologies to address it. Do we truly have the moral argument necessary to decide for the starving child that there are more pressing concerns, such as protecting their data rather than their hunger? We need to ensure life first before worrying about other privileges.

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4   Ibid.

5   Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr Isayevich, One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich.

Neutrality

> **❝** *Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.* **❞**
>
> — UNOCHA[6]

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At first glance, neutrality seems like a relatively straightforward principle in terms of remaining neutral in hostilities and controversies. However, neutrality becomes much more complicated when applied to technology. What does a neutral stance on the implementation of technology look like? Should humanitarians be neutral to a company's imperative? Should they be neutral to how the company applies its technologies in other places? Should they be neutral to every aspect of a particular technology or company that does not pertain directly to humanitarian efforts? More generally, if the technologies are provided by a particular State, can their use of it be considered neutral? Or an even more problematic position: If two States are offering competing technologies, does choosing one State indicate bias? What about continual preference for technology that comes from a particular State? Technology companies such as Palantir, TikTok, Facebook and Amazon are certainly not independent of particular nation States.

The argument could perhaps be made that a balance of technologies from different States would fulfil the neutrality principle. But if a subpar technology is used to meet the principle of neutrality, does this not interfere with the principle of humanity?

Neutrality in the realm of technology is all but impossible. This is no fault of the humanitarian sector; it is a reality of the essence of technology. Technology is multifaceted in its nature — just think about the plethora of ways in which social media can be used. For some people it's simply a tool for communicating with friends and family, for others it's a place for political debate and disinformation. But in the hands of some, it is a tool for manipulating elections or selling products. One technology, millions of uses. How can neutrality even begin to be applied to something such as a social media company? In the same way social media could be used to greatly benefit some aspects of humanitarian efforts, it could also be the primary tool that drives the very conflicts to which humanitarians must respond. Technology is intrinsically linked to politics. It is the defining feature of the 21st century, and a neutral position towards it is made impossible by this fact.

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6   UNOCHA description of the <u>neutrality principle.</u>

Because technology is inherently void of neutrality, how should the humanitarian sector apply the principle of neutrality to it? Or a more difficult question: Should this principle even be applied when considering the sector's relationship with technology? The church held moral positions during the Enlightenment that undermined its ability to adapt to the times, and which led to its decline as an institution. In the same way, the humanitarian sector's pursuit of neutrality will likely continue to stall its ability to adapt to the changing tides brought about by technology's rapid development and implementation.

Darwin's theory of natural selection is just as relevant here as it is when viewing nature. After all, human institutions are bound to nature just like the humans who create them. Need will necessitate action, and a sort of natural selection process will occur in the humanitarian sector that chooses the most effective methods and eliminates areas of the sector unable to adapt. This natural selection can be embraced by decisive action in a particular direction, but there is an incredibly high likelihood that those groups that place emphasis on neutrality will be outcompeted by those who do not.

Impartiality

> *Humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions.*
>
> **— UNOCHA**[7]

Impartiality, as defined above, is also a tricky principle to apply to the humanitarian sector's relationship with technology. Where will impartiality be applied? Will the sector be impartial to who produces technologies, selecting based only on the quality and functionality of the technology being used? If so, how will this create conflict with the other principles? It is easy to define being impartial to race, gender or religious beliefs, but technology is not so clear cut. If impartiality is to be applied at the company level, should it be impartial to the company's other dealings or personal imperatives? How would that look using Palantir as an example? Should WFP be impartial to Palantir's ideological position? That is certainly not the argument of those who were against the partnership.

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7   UNOCHA description of the impartiality principle.

Impartiality lends itself to the pragmatic use of technology more than any of the other principles do, yet many interviewees shunned the idea of a pragmatic position to technology. It seems that applying impartiality to the relationship between the humanitarian sector and technology would only create problems, as it produces a strong argument for disregarding any considerations as to where a certain technology originates or how it can be negatively used by other actors. While pragmatism is a critical component for the moral reasoning necessary to develop a better relationship with technology, open indifference could be incredibly problematic.

The line between impartiality and neutrality is vague, but a clear distinction exists in that neutrality indicates not having a stance and impartiality indicates a lack of consideration for certain factors. Neutrality is impossible given the necessary use of technology and technology being intrinsically linked to States and private companies with their own imperatives. Impartiality is unwise as a principle regarding technology because indifference towards technology and its ethical ramifications is irresponsibility to the highest degree.

Independence

> "
>
> *Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented*"
>
> — UNOCHA[8]

The relationship between independence and technology is one of the most interesting dilemmas facing humanitarians. If technology has done anything it has created an extreme dependence, as operating without it is now simply impossible. It has become so central to humanity that if it disappeared overnight the consequences would be apocalyptic. There is nothing in the modern world that has not become permanently dependent on technology. Food distribution, communications, economics, energy, infrastructure, the ability to write this paper and your ability to read it all depend on technology and continued development.

As humanity begins bumping up against the challenges of climate change, our core doctrine for addressing it lies in the development and roll-out of clean energy, which relies on technology and its continued advancement. Because everything has become dependent on technology, how can the humanitarian sector remain independent from its influence? If the sector wishes to remain effective, it has no choice but to continue its dependence. And through this dependence, it will, by proxy, become dependent on whatever companies or States provide the technology.

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8   UNOCHA description of the independence principle.

Expanding the Principles

As States and companies develop more effective technologies, the sector will have two choices: pick what to become dependent on or develop all the technologies it wishes to utilize itself. One approach breaks the principles whereas the other, metaphorically, breaks the bank. Developing the types of technologies that will rival those offered by States or major tech companies is a task the humanitarian sector is neither up to nor designed for. Perhaps on a small scale it could produce beneficial technologies that assist with humanitarian efforts, but it cannot possibly compete with the products and services provided by Silicon Valley-type companies or nation States.
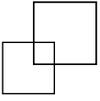
Perhaps the best route forward is not one that attempts to jam the square principles of the 20th century into the round hole of the 21st. There are certainly areas where the current principles must be applied. However, it is an argument for reconsidering whether they are the ideal principles for the humanitarian sector's adaptation to the Information Age in general and the use of technology specifically. It was the inability to adjust and be flexible that played a significant role in the crumbling of the church as an institution. The humanitarian sector is not shackled in the same way as the church, which was permanently bound to a particular morality and truth. It does not claim objective truth or proclaim that its principles are the only principles to be followed. Adjusting its moral reasoning and principles would not be hypocritical or misguided but a sign of developing thought and introspection on the part of humanitarians trying to wrestle with the current reality.

Extending the principles in a way that allows the sector to explore the unknown waters of technology and the Information Age, and enable a certain degree of Semper Gumby, will allow the sector to experiment with different partnerships and analyse not just effectiveness but also different types of relationships with technology companies. By creating a loose doctrine that eliminates the possibility of the largest grievances, a more productive relationship between the sector and companies can be developed that allows for experimentation and accepts that this experimentation will fail from time to time. The principles' goal should not be to avoid making mistakes with terrible consequences; it should be to steer the sector in a direction that provides the most assistance to those who need it with as little negative consequence as possible. Mistakes are unavoidable and should not be happily embraced, but they must be pragmatically accepted and learned from.

Four new principles to make this a reality:

1. **Consistency.** Are we staying consistent in our efforts to adapt to technological change while still providing the maximum aid possible?

2. **Maneuverability.** Are we staying flexible enough to successfully maneuver through the constant changes of the Information Age while still providing the maximum aid possible?

3. **Transparency.** Are we remaining transparent in our moral reasoning and corporate agreements regarding technology and data, admitting when it is problematic and requires adjustmen

4. **Failure.** Are we embracing our failures in our relationship with technology and data, accepting them as a natural consequence of forward movement?

Data

Along with the development of technology comes the explosive growth of data and data-collection methods. This shift introduces the pressing matter of data security and digital rights, both factors that the humanitarian sector must take into account as it begins developing partnerships with companies. A starting point for this discussion is a rather wide philosophical question: What is data?

Nathaniel Raymond of Yale University defines data as "a record of a characteristic."[9] This description provides an excellent platform for a better understanding of the impact of data and why it is so important. What characteristics do humanitarians need to record and why? These are the first questions that must be asked when deciding to do anything related to the acquisition, use and storage of data. The next question is: When the data is collected and has served its purpose, what happens to it? The issue of data protection and collection is far less abstract and philosophic in nature than that of the existing principles and their interaction with technologies. However, that does not make the conversation any easier to have, especially when considering the individual ends that different groups within the humanitarian sector are attempting to achieve. The data that WFP needs may not be the same data that Oxfam needs. And what Oxfam considers unnecessary data, the Red Cross might consider critical.

To have this conversation and develop a doctrine for data collection, a more coordinated and united effort is needed. Throughout the interviews, two things were made abundantly clear regarding data: yes, we are all talking about it, and no, we are not talking about it together. This foxhole-type discussion, where everyone is in the same fight but nobody is coordinating, is detrimental to the cause that everyone is working towards. Furthermore, by having separate conversations, different doctrines regarding the use, collection and retention of data will emerge, thereby complicating matters further.

Different humanitarian organizations need to have flexibility in their handling of data, but there should also be an agreed umbrella that contains the extent of what organizations are allowed to do when it comes to data. Perhaps an effective approach to dealing with this problem would be a confederate-type structure that allows for a wide breadth of independent action by humanitarians across the sector, while still tethering them to a central structure that is utilized to prevent the most harmful types of data-related incidents and acts as a centre for the evolving discussion around this topic.

Assuming that data is best described as a "record of a characteristic," which characteristics are harmful and which are benign? An equally pertinent question is: Which characteristics are benign singularly but harmful in large quantities? The Signal Code refers to this information as demographically identifiable information (DII) and defines it as "data points that enable the identification, classification, and tracking of individuals, groups, or multiple groups of individuals by demographically defining factors. These may include ethnicity,
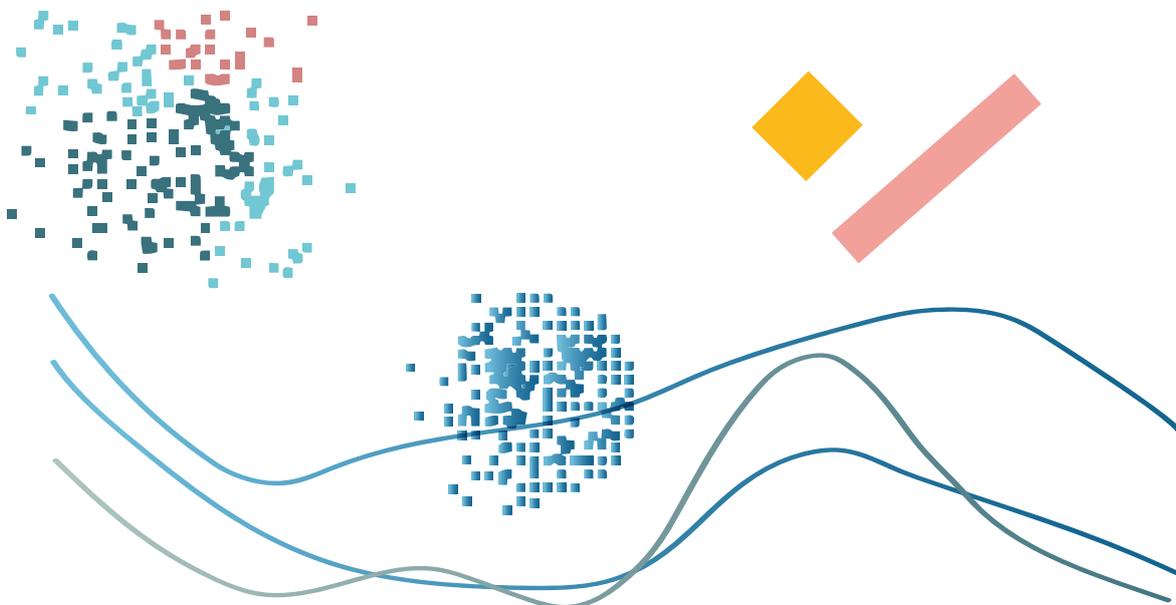

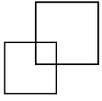9   Quote from Nathaniel Raymond during an interview held on 04 May 2022.

gender, age, occupation, and religion."[10] Independently some of this information is relatively benign data that most people have posted over several social media accounts or is apparent simply by looking at an individual. However, it could become dangerous when collected in large quantities, especially if there is an unseen political shift that begins to target specific DII. Unfortunately for everyone, political persecution of any particular demographic identifier could flare at any time and is impossible to predict. Thus, a method for safeguarding not just personally identifiable information but also DII is at the forefront of the challenges facing humanitarians attempting to collect data to better achieve their objectives.

Data seems simple enough at first glance, but unfortunately it is incredibly complicated. Understanding what data is and how it can be used is a field in itself. Yet we tend to treat it as if all opinions regarding it are equally valid, which is simply not the case. The people who understand data, who understand software and who are professionals in the field need to be at the forefront of the conversation around data protection and data rights. Throughout the history of political theory, there have been strong arguments against the idea of democracy and republics. The arguments made against them are diverse, but most critiques focus heavily on the average person's ability to think through political matters and understand the complexities and nuances of governance and political systems. Data is no different. Someone may not understand enough to have a well-informed opinion on the topic, but they can still discuss it and talk about it from a philosophic point of view, all while having no idea how data protection works. Is this person's opinion as valid as the opinion of someone who spent a decade of their life dealing with data, collecting it, organizing it and creating software to interpret it?

Data is the currency of the 21st century. The people who make data-related decisions should be those who understand it most intimately, not those who are experts in other areas.

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10   The Signal Code

Case Study: Palantir and WFP

In February 2019, WFP signed a five-year partnership agreement with Palantir, an American technology company specializing in the creation of data analytics software. The partnership drew immediate criticism from individuals within WFP and across the humanitarian sector. While criticism of the deal gets some things right, it is faulty in other areas. This is not an argument for or against the deal between WFP and Palantir, but there are substantial misconceptions that surround Palantir as a company and further issues of how the humanitarian principles should be applied to the WFP and Palantir partnership.

Many interviewees expressed a deep dislike for Palantir, especially regarding its relations with State security agencies such as US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the US Central Intelligence Agency and the Chicago Police Department. There was also concern about Palantir's relationship with several nation States and the ways in which those States utilize the software that Palantir provides.

 This brings us to a problem addressed in the first half of this paper: Where and how are we going to apply the original humanitarian principles in our relations with technology companies? Should WFP have declined the partnership on the basis of principles because of Palantir's relationship with certain States and State agencies? If so, which principles?

If the argument is one that criticizes Palantir for working with ICE, could it be on the basis of humanity? If so, what does that mean for partnerships between humanitarians and Microsoft, a technology company also used by ICE? If the humanitarian sector denies Palantir based on the principle of humanity, it would either have to stop working with Microsoft or admit hypocrisy in its moral reasoning. It could also make the claim that Microsoft is simply too embedded in the humanitarian sector and thus it is too difficult to pull out, but that would be an argument for efficiency. It would not be impossible to stop using Microsoft, just highly inefficient and inconvenient. Or perhaps it is impossible to disengage from Microsoft and the humanitarian sector has become dependent on Microsoft, thus violating its own principle of independence.

Remember UNOCHA's definition of independence: "Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian actions are being implemented." Any humanitarian organization cannot remain autonomous while relying on the services of a particular technology company, as 'autonomous' means being able to govern and control one's own affairs. Without Microsoft's technologies, could these major humanitarian organizations control their own affairs? If not Microsoft, would it not be necessary to use another tech company such as Apple or Google, which provide the same services?

The end part of UNOCHA's definition of the independence principle states: "or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian actions are being implemented." Do Google or Microsoft hold other objectives in areas where humanitarian action is being implemented? If so, doesn't this further violate the principle of independence? And if they don't now, could they in the future?

An additional point to consider is that these major organizations have their own philosophies that change over time according to who is currently working for the company. If the humanitarian sector becomes dependent on a company whose philosophy shifts away from the values that coincide with the humanitarian principles, what is the course of action then? There is far too much uncertainty in the 21st century to know what will still exist in a year, let alone a decade. Because companies and organizations are often forced to bend to the capitalist imperative, a shift in philosophy and morals becomes necessary to remain in the market. Many companies will likely take that leap since their primary driver is profit rather than principled action.

As with humanity and independence, making a case against the partnership between WFP and Palantir is a tricky task as the principles can easily be used for or against the partnership, with no clear moral clarity. The principle of neutrality states: "Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature." If the argument is that the partnership violates neutrality by working with a company that got started using funding from a State security agency or is biased towards a particular State, then can't a counter argument be made that even taking this factor into consideration violates neutrality?

A further argument could be made that to "not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature" could be interpreted as affirming the partnership and encouraging WFP not to consider Palantir's guiding philosophy and State relationships.

Similar to neutrality is impartiality. The end half of UNOCHA's explanation of impartiality states: "...and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions." If the distrust of Palantir is rooted in its political affiliations, shouldn't the humanitarian sector be impartial to this? As discussed in the earlier section discussing impartiality, the word is so closely linked to indifference that without a clear agreement on how impartiality applies to technology and the companies that produce it, an interpretation of indifference to a technology company's personal dealings will always be a valid argument for defending a decision to utilize its services.

This line of argument could go on for quite some time, as could strong arguments against it. Since the principles cannot provide enough clarity for action, the issue becomes a never-ending argument. This lack of clarity is why WFP decided to go against the grain and partner with Palantir; it needed to accomplish a certain task, and it was able to produce an argument for doing so that could not be refuted in a concrete manner. WFP conducted its due diligence, took the time to understand Palantir as a company, developed a plan of action and then pursued it.

WFP listened to the arguments against the partnership and found that its understanding of Palantir was more thorough than the understanding of many of the critics. Because of Palantir's dealings with Governments and State security agencies, there is a major fear that Palantir collects data and may hand it over to them. However, this shows many critics' lack of understanding, since Palantir does not collect data. Only the company utilizing the software, WFP in this case, has access to the data on its own servers. For most people, this nuance is difficult to see or understand, as the transparency surrounding the partnership is incredibly limited. A clear lesson learned from this partnership is to significantly increase transparency in deals such as this.

A major issue briefly touched on earlier is the fluency gap between many humanitarian organizations and the realities of data collection and storage. This is not an insult but a problem that the entire sector needs to address. Only a handful of humanitarians understand data and software enough to be able to look at a company like Palantir and understand exactly what is going on. This is natural and to be expected. We cannot all be experts in everything and not all opinions are equally valid. There is a desperate need for the sector to establish a team of data experts that can lead the due diligence process on partnerships such as those between WFP and Palantir.

Palantir does not sell, collect or store WFP data. It provided a closed software system to WFP and then taught WFP personnel how to operate it effectively. The authors of this paper believe that had this been explained within the sector, and even publicly, before the partnership was officially announced, fewer strong criticisms would have been lobbied by a breadth of individuals.

Applying Additional Principles: WFP and Palantir

Perhaps it is worth trying to view the WFP and Palantir partnership through a different set of principles that help to guide us where the current principles simply lack. This is not because they are bad principles but because they are perhaps simply inadequate for providing a useful framework for dealing with the turbulence of the Information Age.

How could the deal between WFP and Palantir be understood and navigated using the principles proposed in section two: consistency, maneuverability, transparency and failure?

CONSISTENCY. Are we staying consistent in our efforts to adapt to technological change while still providing the maximum aid possible?

It is clear that the WFP and Palantir partnership is controversial. But it is not apparent whether WFP made the best choice. A positive route forward for WFP and the humanitarian sector in general would be to consistently appraise the situation between the two organizations and continually evaluate Palantir as an organization and the ends it is attempting to achieve. During an interview with a Palantir representative, it was impressive to hear about the company's discussions around philosophy and the role that philosophy plays in shaping its decisions. In time, this evolving philosophical conversation within Palantir could see it become more aligned with the humanitarian imperative. But it could also see Palantir shift in a direction that the humanitarian sector finds incommensurate with its own principles.

As new technologies become available and the companies that produce them evolve, the humanitarian sector would be wise to remain consistent in its efforts to adapt and be constantly on the lookout for the technologies that will allow it to provide maximum aid and remain in accordance with the sector's moral and ethical standpoints. Consistency as a principle means remaining constantly vigilant of partnerships with technology companies and constantly evolving strategies for partnerships with them. This principle is especially important for partnerships with companies that divide the community, and it encourages a willingness to recognize that the voices that most strongly speak against any particular deal should always have a place at the table. A consistent effort to keep opposing points of view engaged in any given partnership is a necessary check to prevent the humanitarian sector becoming too complacent with a company that is shifting in a direction inappropriate for the sector.

MANEUVERABILITY. Are we staying flexible enough to successfully maneuver through the constant changes of the Information Age while still providing the maximum aid possible?

Drawing on the principle of independence, is the humanitarian sector remaining maneuverable regarding its commitments and partnerships? Suppose Microsoft made a drastic shift and became aligned with a State that expressly wished to use Microsoft technologies to oppress or kill people of a certain ethnicity, religion, gender or other category. Could the humanitarian sector maneuver away from its partnership with the company? While such a scenario may seem unfathomable at this moment, Microsoft and other technology companies are first and foremost companies seeking profit and market shares. They often bend to whatever the culture around them demands in the market. During the Nazi reign over Germany, car manufacturer Bayerische Motoren Werke (BMW) supplied arms to the Nazis and used forced labour to produce parts for their vehicles. Now, 80 years later, BMW uses LGBTQ+ pride as a marketing scheme, as do many other companies.

Whether or not companies believe the principles they espouse is of little importance to them. Sales, production, profit and innovation are all that matter; everything else is just bells and whistles. This is absolutely not the case for the humanitarian sector. Principles and ethical action are the bedrock of everything it does.

To the best of its abilities, the sector must try to remain independent from major technology companies and not become dependent on their products and services. Because independence from technology and technology companies is objectively impossible, it should, at a minimum, remain, and maintain the agency necessary to rapidly shift away from a partnership or technology that has become detrimental to the humanitarian sector and directly opposes humanitarian action. The reality is that this will be the most difficult of the suggested principles, as certain technologies become so embedded that separating can mean extreme loss and disorder. Beginning to incorporate maneuverability now will help to dampen the shocks, should they occur.

TRANSPARENCY. Are we remaining transparent in our moral reasoning and corporate agreements regarding technology and data, admitting when it is problematic and requires adjustment?

One of the most pressing concerns among those who disliked the WFP and Palantir partnership was the lack of transparency around the deal, especially when it came to releasing the end-user license agreement (EULA). Transparency is simple in theory but an absolute nightmare in practice. It is easy to understand that having no transparency will cause a plethora of problems. However, complete transparency is an equally bad idea; it exposes critical information to those who have no good reason to see it, and it opens the door to endless criticism. Complete transparency can also mean that critical data collected by the sector falls into the hands of individuals and organizations with malicious intent. Therefore, an open-door policy towards partnerships with technology companies is a problematic proposition.

Where the humanitarian sector can and should be transparent is in the moral reasoning it uses to reach the conclusion that a partnership should be created with a particular company and in the details of the partnership, especially the data-related details. When the sector reaches an agreement with a technology company, the EULA of the agreement should be made available to other individuals within the sector and include any data-related details: what data is being collected, how it is being stored, how it will be used, whether or not it will be deleted after use and who will have access.

Transparency around moral reasoning is equally important to transparency around data and contracts. As uncomfortable as it may be to admit, moral experimentation will be needed over the coming decades. It is important to be open about that reasoning as to better learn from its successes and failures.

FAILURE. Are we embracing our failures in our relationship with technology and data, accepting them as a natural consequence of forward movement?

This is perhaps the most important principle, as the sector would embrace its failures and learn from them. Mistakes of large proportions will be made over the coming decades, this is unavoidable. But when the cause of these mistakes is not malevolent, the mistakes should be treated as growing pains necessary to the sector's development.
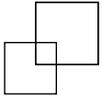
At first, failure as a principle may sound like a joke. But given some thought, 'failure' is a word that has to be understood positively, because it will describe some aspects of the humanitarian sector's attempts to adapt to the 21st century. By viewing failure as a principle, as something to guide future action, then mistakes made can be more easily avoided. Fear of failure will stunt great ideas and encourage an atmosphere where people attempt to hide their failures or cast blame.

Suppose the WFP and Palantir partnership had failed; say the software provided was not functioning properly and logistics went down for several days. Or perhaps from a different angle, there was a security breach and the data WFP was using was stolen because of a software problem. How would the humanitarian sector respond to such a situation? What would the media say? Would the attempt to try something new and more effective be discussed side by side with the failure, or would the focus be only on the failure?

Making failure a principle allows for a better discussion, and it initiates a team-oriented troubleshooting process that aims to incorporate failures into the overall learning experience as opposed to punishing them. When a culture of fear has been built around failure, it is natural to attempt to cover up the failure, which only makes the issue worse. But by openly recognizing that there will be failures and then using them as a guide for future action, the humanitarian sector will be less prone to making the same mistake twice and more willing to speak openly about some of the most complex issues that lead to failure in the sector's partnerships with technology and the companies that produce it.

Conclusion

The Information Age is not presenting an issue of bringing the pieces together and constructing a puzzle. Rather, it is more akin to a box full of LEGO pieces with no instructions. It is clear that we are trying to build something, but it is unclear what that something is. This lack of a clear direction other than "forward" creates a difficult operating environment, the results of which are most clearly seen on the current world stage and in the current problems of the 21st century. The humanitarian sector is relatively young, and its continued existence is not guaranteed. To stay modern and relevant in a constantly changing world, it will have to make choices. Some of those choices will be wrong, some will be a success and some will have consequences impossible to predict.

To mitigate this problem, the sector must begin establishing a clear path forward that is mindful of the difficulties it will face along the way. The core questions have to be asked: How are we going to successfully pursue humanitarian efforts in an increasingly fractured and technologically driven world? How will the sector react to a global war, or the more likely scenario of the future, fractured conflicts around the globe between multiple nation States, something more akin to the Thirty Years' War? The Enlightenment found its foundation in the conclusions drawn by the end of that war. In modern times, we now face a similar moment of crisis. From a geopolitical perspective, the work of humanitarians is about to be much more needed but under much more difficult conditions. If the sector fails to adapt to technology, it will likely find itself, like the church, torn piecemeal by the realities of the changing world that it could not adapt to.

There is a sector-wide agreement that changes are needed to deal with the rapidly changing landscape being brought about by technology and globalization. The issue for the sector is determining what these changes should be and, perhaps more importantly, what ethical framework will be utilized to guide these changes.

The current humanitarian principles are excellent guides for a sector attempting to navigate the difficulties of politics and national interests, but their application to technology and technology companies may not be the best route forward. This paper suggests implementing consistency, maneuverability, transparency and failure as additional principles for navigating the sector's relationship with technology. However, the larger point being made behind this suggestion is that perhaps it is time to think outside the box and explore the ethical and moral questions of the Information Age through a new ethical lens. The sector's continued success is not guaranteed. The 21st century will continue to change the status quo. Any organization or sector that wishes to prosper will have to adjust to the new realities of a world defined by the rapid introduction of advanced technologies and a global political system undergoing a massive transition in uncharted waters.