The Unaccounted Effects of Digital Transformation: Participatory Accountability in a Humanitarian Organisation

Abstract

Purpose
This study explores the evolving dynamics of participatory accountability within humanitarian contexts, where digitally connected crisis-affected populations demand better accountability from aid organisations, and as a result, shift traditional hierarchies and relationships between humanitarian agencies and beneficiaries.

Design/Methodology/Approach:
This study employs a case study approach, focusing on the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), to investigate how participatory accountability manifests outside formal practices and re-emerges in social media spaces. The study analyses internal organisational challenges and explores the implications of digital platforms on humanitarian practices. We employ Chouliaraki and Georgiou's (2015, 2019, 2022) networks of mediation, particularly intermediation and transmediation, to understand how digital expressions translate to offline contexts and reshape meanings and actions.

Findings
The study reveals that social media platforms enable beneficiaries to demand participatory accountability beyond traditional practices, democratising humanitarian response and challenging power structures. These effects are multifaceted, introducing enhanced democratic and inclusive humanitarian aid as well as new vulnerabilities. Digital intermediaries and gatekeepers play pivotal roles in curating and disseminating crisis-affected voices, which, when transmediated, result in nuanced meanings and understandings. Positive effects include capturing the potential of digital networks for democratic aid, while negative effects give rise to moral responsibilities, necessitating proactive measures from the ICRC.

Originality
This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the impact of digital technology, particularly social media, on participatory accountability. It expands our understanding of the evolving landscape of accountability within the humanitarian sector and offers critical insights into the complexities and dual purposes of participatory accountability in contexts of resistance. Employing Chouliaraki and Georgiou's networks of mediation adds depth to the understanding of digital technology's role in shaping participatory practices and introduces the concept of transmediation as a bridge between digital expressions and tangible actions.

Introduction

> *The global digital transformation is changing the nature of humanitarian action, particularly in relation to the digital dimensions of protection, trust and privacy-related issues. While we may not be able to predict where technological progress will lead us, we know that we must equip ourselves to understand its exponentially increasing impact on our environment, so that we can exploit the opportunities it offers and mitigate the risks it carries.*
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> International Committee of the Red Cross – Strategy 2019-2024 (ICRC, 2022).

According to a survey by the Humanitarian Voice Index, seventy-five percent of crisis-affected people say that humanitarian aid does not meet their most pressing needs with fifty-seven percent claiming that aid is not distributed equitably (Ground Truth Solutions, 2019). Similarly, in the community consultations leading up to the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, ninety percent of Syrians in Jordan reported that they had received some humanitarian aid but only thirty percent found it helpful (Jones *et al.*, 2016). Such circumstances have led to situations such as the aftermath of Hurricane Matthew in Haiti where those most affected by it took to social media and pleaded with the world not to assist them through large humanitarian organisations but to channel resources to local Haitian relief effort directly (Holley, 2016).

Such instances are reflective of the fact that as more communities become globally connected, people affected by disasters and conflict are demanding better accountability from humanitarian agencies. In this sense, traditional accountability hierarchies and relationships between third sector organisations and crisis-affected people are shifting, and being disrupted and reformed. Importantly, this includes the dynamics of participatory accountability. During disasters like earthquakes and tsunamis, but also within situations of armed conflict and violence, social media, in particular, is a crucial component of the humanitarian response, allowing local and international actors involved in relief efforts to disseminate lifesaving messages. Smartphones offer affected communities a channel to reconnect with their families and seek help. They help them obtain crucial information to plan their own response to the crisis (Chouliaraki and Georgiou, 2019). For example, migrants frequently use smartphones to get information concerning refugee camps, medical facilities and refugee rights (Şanlier Yüksel, 2022). In addition, acts of counter-conduct have been granted considerable momentum by mobile technology and social media (Gallhofer *et al.,* 2006). Social media specifically has been shown to mobilise accountability forums in which beneficiaries can voice their dissatisfaction with NGO interventions, and provide feedback on assistance received (ICRC, 2017). Such accountability forums can raise public interest, allow affected populations to connect with other NGO stakeholders, and create a snowball effect that encourages institutional reconsiderations of NGO accountability (Goncharenko, 2021). This can manifest itself through campaigns by grassroots and activists NGO, local groups, online commentary by the general public and investigative journalism (Perkiss *et al.,* 2021).

Yet such circumstances have not come without significant concerns for safeguarding and protection. McDonald (2016), for example, explores the exploitative nature of experimentation with digital data practices by humanitarian organisations and social media platforms, highlighting the sharing of personal data by mobile networks during the Ebola crisis and Nepal earthquake. Such concerns for asymmetries between Global South and Northern contexts in relation to data and privacy safeguards have surfaced in different settings: for example, the biometric registration of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and the open admission by Chinese AI company Cloudwalk that the company had extracted and reused biometric registrations of Zimbabwean citizens to improve its facial recognition algorithms which are sold worldwide (Madianou, 2019).

Following this emerging field of research, we examine how such dynamics impact the practice of participatory accountability – a form of accountability that is said to empower crisis-affected people to make their own decisions within their unique crisis-laden lives (Edmonds, 2019). It is often presented as the antithesis to hierarchical forms of accountability which seek to respond to the concerns of powerful stakeholders such as donors (O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2008; O'Leary, 2017). Through a case study of the International Committee of the Red Cross (the ICRC), we examine how the participation of affected populations in helping to shape humanitarian initiatives occur *outside* the formal participatory practices of the ICRC and instead re-emerge in social media spaces. Our focus is on the repercussions of these interactions beyond the digital realm, specifically on how they influence the perception of participatory accountability within the ICRC and shape the subsequent responses and actions taken[1]. Specifically, we seek to understand how the fact that the voices of affected people are increasingly channelled through digital platforms, rather than traditional participatory accountability practice, is perceived by those within the ICRC and what the consequences of this are.

Our paper explores the implications of these findings through the theoretical lens of Chouliaraki and Georgiou's (2017, 2019, 2022) networks of mediation, in particular networks of intermediation in the humanitarian space and their translation to networks of transmediation. Intermediation involves the emergence of new intermediaries and gatekeepers, such as social media platforms, who play a role in the digital ecosystem in curating and disseminating the participatory accounts of crisis-affected people in humanitarian spaces. Transmediation relates to how these accounts translate to offline contexts, and take on new meanings and actions that transcend their original manifestation on social media. Transmediation bridges the gap between digital expressions and tangible actions, empowering crisis-affected individuals to renegotiate their role in the humanitarian arena. Specifically, we demonstrate within the ICRC how the effects of networks of intermediation were seen to be both positive and negative when they were transmediated into the creation of new meanings and understandings. On one hand, many effects flowed from a need to confront the unavoidable reality of digital networks and their use as a tool of resistance by crisis-affected people. This resulted in a perceived transmediation of these effects into new understandings of enhanced democratic and inclusive humanitarian aid, and corresponding institutional actions aimed at capturing the potential advantages this offered and seeking to capitalise on its benefits. On the other hand, the effects of networks of intermediation were also seen to give rise to new meanings of vulnerability and moral responsibilities of care and safeguarding, and the instigation of proactive measures by the ICRC to address them.

These findings – in highlighting the unaccounted for effects of digital transformation in a humanitarian context - expand the existing literature on accountability and participatory practices in NGOs in a number of important ways. First, they highlight the impact of digital platforms, particularly social media, and illustrate how they enable participatory accountability - beyond traditional organisational-led practices - by giving voice to beneficiaries, democratising humanitarian response, and challenging traditional power structures. These findings complement the literature on accountability in NGOs by delving into the complexities of beneficiary agency and the potential for contestation and resistance within participatory accountability frameworks. The analysis enhances our understanding of the evolving landscape of accountability within the humanitarian sector, and the role of digital technology in shaping participatory practices within it. Second, we add nuance to the literature on the complexity and situatedness of participatory accountability by drawing on Chouliaraki and Georgiou's networks of mediation. This offers a critical analysis of the perceived use of digital technology as a tool of participatory accountability that enhances democratisation and inclusiveness, but also the simultaneous perception that, by virtue of its use for purposes of accountability, it introduces new layers of vulnerability for users. In presenting these findings, we show that participatory accountability

[1] Rather than treating the activity of affected individuals on social media as the empirical phenomenon, we regard it as a tool for inquiry internally within the ICRC that allows us to pose pertinent questions regarding the overlooked and unaccounted for effects of digital transformation on participatory accountability within humanitarian organisations.

can have unintended consequences, contradictions, and dual purposes when introduced in fraught, precarious, and unsettled contexts. We also explore the problems that can arise when participatory accountability is used as a means of resisting and fighting structural systems of power yet inescapably, those that do so must situate themselves in the very structures and power they are trying to resist and bear witness to their ill effects.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: we first provide a review of the literature on participatory accountability and studies on social media in the NGO and humanitarian context. We then elaborate on our theoretical framework of networks of mediation (Chouliaraki and Georgiou, 2017, 2019, 2022) and provide insights on our research method and case study site. Our findings are presented along different themes that emerged through our interviews. In our final section, we conclude our study.

Participatory accountability and social media

Accountability, in an NGO setting, has received increased attention in both research and practice over the past twenty years. This has been primarily driven by an unprecedented growth in the numbers of NGOs worldwide which has led to concerns regarding their accountability coupled with waning confidence in the NGO sector brought about by several highly publicised scandals (Agyemang, O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2019; Gray *et al.*, 2006). Several studies have demonstrated that accountability can be burdensome within an NGO context (Goddard and Assad, 2006; O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2010). Of particular concern is the complex and diffuse nature of the multiple accountabilities NGOs are required to respond to. NGO accountability represents an intricate exercise of satisfying multiple stakeholders (donors, governments, oversight agencies, communities, beneficiaries, internal stakeholders) for a variety of different reasons (legal requirements, access to funding, adherence to organisational values, allowing community participation) and through a variety of different mechanisms (disclosure statements, codes of conduct, self-regulation, participatory monitoring and evaluation, social auditing) (Agyemang *et al.*, 2009; Kilby, 2006).

We concentrate here on accountability to beneficiaries. This has been conceptualised in the literature in a number of largely interrelated ways. On a broad level of analysis, it is said to constitute a form of social accountability and involve an "openness to involving beneficiaries in determining the nature of [NGO] work and its impact" (O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2007, p. 450). It has also been described as a reciprocal concept of being answerable to beneficiaries and minimising power differentials within grassroots communities (O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2010). It is said to encourage critical learning and sharing of local expertise and, as a result, enables NGOs to adapt aid delivery to meet the needs of those at the grassroots (O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2007; Agyemang *et al.*, 2009; Unerman and O'Dwyer, 2010). Therefore, accountability is mostly conceived as a participatory tool (Agyemang et al., 2009). It enables beneficiaries to determine and articulate their needs, assess NGO effectiveness, and design, develop and implement aid initiatives in conjunction with NGOs (O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2010). To this end, it is often referred to as *participatory accountability*.

Several studies have highlighted the accounting practices that have provided the material grounds for the implementation of participatory accountability. These include NGO consultations and dialogues with beneficiaries, participatory reviews, stakeholder focus groups and surveys, complaint and response mechanisms, social auditing practices, participatory planning meetings, needs analysis, and the active participation of beneficiaries in NGO budgeting, programme implementation, oversight, monitoring and audit (Agyemang *et al.*, 2009; Awio *et al.*, 2011; O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2008, 2010). Other studies have examined how participatory accountability plays out in practice (Frey-Heger and Barrett, 2021 Kingston *et al.*, 2019, 2020; Marini *et al.*, 2017, 2018, O'Leary, 2017; O'Leary *et al.*, 2023; Tanima *et al.*, 2020).

Numerous studies have examined the use of social media. It has been observed to impact stakeholder engagement (Manetti and Bellucci, 2016; Gómez-Carrasco *et al.,* 2021; She, 2022; Waters *et al.*, 2009) and shareholders' investment decisions (Gómez-Carrasco and Michelon, 2017; Dupire *et al.*, 2022). Social media here not only acts as a 'megaphone' for certain issues but also increasingly becomes a noisy information environment driving the attention that a particular organisation gains (Guo and Saxton, 2018). In addition, several studies have demonstrated how accountability plays out on online discourses (Arnaboldi and Diaz Lema, 2021; Duval and Gendron, 2020; Finau and Scobie, 2022; Jeacle and Carter, 2011, 2014; Neu *et al.*, 2018; Neu *et al.* 2019). In particular, several studies have demonstrated the role of social media in contexts of civil engagement and political protest (Ekström and Shehata, 2018; Kahne *et al.*, 2011; Macafee, 2018). Within these studies, social media is said to not only allow the public to react to certain issues but also creates the possibility for individual reactions to coalesce into a shared or collective understanding or movement towards a certain issue. Goncharenko (2021), for example, describes 'hashtag activism' in which digital accountability forums are created which empower previously unheard others to hold organisations to account and, in doing so, shift discourse surrounding accountability from its technical and pragmatic attributes to its more moral and ethical core. In this sense, online interactions can be instrumental in constituting the identity of particular groups and driving them towards collective political and civic action (Gerbaudo and Treré, 2015; Kavada, 2015; Tufekci, 2017). Transformative dialogues that enable the voices of underrepresented groups to be heard have been shown to result in social change (Denedo *et al.*, 2019). Here, social media can encourage a "polylogic conversation" that supports dialogic accounting in an NGO context (Bellucci and Manetti, 2017; Saxton and Waters, 2014; Thomson *et al.*, 2015). During the COVID-19 pandemic, digitalisation played a major role in society in general, but also in the activities and services provided by NGOs. This was well illustrated by Adhikari *et al.* (2023) who conclude that not only day-to-day practices were influenced by the use of technology but also that the relationship towards beneficiairies was transformed. Kingston *et al.* (2023) further show that during physical lock-downs participatory accountability could be maintained through the use of digital technologies including social media, despite beneficiaries' social isolation at the time.

An enthusiasm for digital innovation also pervades within humanitarianism. This can be partly understood as a response to the ongoing demand for humanitarian reform and accountability. Humanitarianism has often been criticised for reproducing asymmetrical power relationships (Terry, 2002), disrupting local solidarities and creating new dependencies (Rieff, 2002). Digital platforms are seen as contributing to democratising humanitarian response: their interactive nature is assumed to give voice to displaced and marginalised people and enable their participation with an aim to ultimately correct power asymmetries and strengthen accountability (Dekker *et al.*, 2018; Diminescu, 2008; Gillespie *et al.*, 2018). For example, studies on digital diasporas illustrate that information and communication technologies create – especially for highly politicised refugee diasporas (Van Hear, 2006) – new public spheres that "might enable migrant voices to be heard where political participation is otherwise scarce" (Kissau and Hunger 2008, p. 6).

As highlighted by Goncharenko (2021), linking this and the literature on digital social movements to that of NGOs is difficult as they often constitute the organisations themselves who are seeking to hold others to account. For example a key element of the ICRC's mandate is to 'remind' other institutions of their obligations under international human rights law and such calls are often found on their social media sites. Yet organisations such as the ICRC often find themselves under the spotlight in this respect too. With regards to participatory accountability, social media sites have presented new opportunities for beneficiaries to raise their voice, make demands, compare organisations and articulate any concerns with humanitarian aid. It also gives them an important opportunity to control the narratives that powerful institutions traditionally present of them (Goncharenko, 2021; Marino, 2021). In this sense, it is said to democratise processes of accountability by bypassing the formal avenues of participatory accountability offered by powerful institutions (Neu *et al*., 2019).

Perkiss *et al.* (2021) consider acts such as these to be a form of counter-account, which through the enabling of alternative voices, challenges the primary account or 'frontstage performance' of organisations. Social media empowers those at the margin to judge and comment on whether such performances are authentic, credible and believable (Dunne *et al.*, 2021). Here beneficiaries become agentive participants in humanitarian aid spaces. Their participation occurs outside the formal participatory practices of NGOs and re-emerge in grassroots social media spaces. Accountability becomes a site of contestation and, at times, resistance. This is more than just being dissatisfied by food, blankets and so forth. It is a political statement of not being treated as the other, the subaltern, the victim or the vulnerable (Harju, 2020). It is a politics of recognition in showing a digital representation of being crisis-affected and a reflection of the asymmetrical histories of speaking and hearing within western and global public spaces (Chouliaraki and Georgiou, 2022).

We believe that this presents a powerful contribution to the participatory accountability literature as it demonstrates the extra-institutional spaces in which this form of accountability manifests and the intricate and complex ways in which this can play out. The objective of our study is to examine the various and complex tensions between the emancipatory practices of accountability enabled by social media, and the internal concerns and altered practices this necessitates on behalf of humanitarian organisations[2]. To explore these unaccounted effects we draw on Chouliaraki and Georgiou's (2017, 2019, 2022) networks of mediation, as described in the next section.

Networks of mediation

We draw on the work of Chouliaraki and Georgiou (2017, 2019, 2022) to explore the implications of crisis-affected people using social media platforms on the internal understandings of participatory accountability within humanitarian organisations. Chouliaraki and Georgiou's work is profoundly influenced by the European migration crisis. Viewed mostly through the lens of refuge, migration, and power, they explore the concept of the "digital border" and its implications for understanding mobility in contemporary society. They argue that borders are not only physical and symbolic markers of territorial boundaries but have also become digitally mediated spaces that shape the experiences and practices of mobility. Within their work, they concentrate on how the digital border wields a defining influence in shaping various delineations of national sovereignty and borders, fluid and ever-evolving geopolitical orders, data-driven landscapes and environments, and everyday endeavours of activists, civil societies, and NGOs seeking to dismantle borders and establish havens of sanctuary. In navigating the intricate terrain of digital borders, they unravel the complexities embedded within their various iterations, for example in practices of migrant registration (including the now notorious Eurodac system) and digital platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook groups.

Chouliaraki and Georgiou's study of the digital border is rooted in how traditional border procedures of division and separation have been revitalised through digitisation and data utilisation. However, they also challenge prevailing narratives surrounding the study of borders where refugees are reduced to a state of "bare life", devoid of political agency and seen as mere bodies in need, effectively disconnecting them from their personal contexts. In countering this, Chouliaraki and Georgiou (2022, p. 35, emphasis added) shift the:

[2] In this sense, our level of analysis is the organisation. We do not analyse social media posts by affected people or the ICRC. Instead, we seek to understand internally the challenges posed by participatory accountability playing out on social media. We leave the analysis of social media posts to future research with different research agendas.

> "…focus from the epistemological gaze privileging the power effects of the datafied border to a grounded approach that grasps the inner workings of the border as a dialectical *space of struggle* over who controls the networks of mediation and who speaks in the narratives of its assemblages."

Therefore, by challenging the view of migrants as a "disembodied matrix of computerised data patterns", Chouliaraki and Georgiou effectively open "up the possibility to read the…. border also as a space for tactical self-expression, political agency, and resistance" (Chouliaraki and Georgiou, 2022, p. 35). They demonstrate empirically throughout their work several instances of migrants being able to articulate their own narratives on social media platforms. They claim that such examples hold substantial significance as they demonstrate how migrants are able to counter established narratives that have been constructed about them. While instances of resistance voiced through these channels might not be as prevalent as those in mainstream media, they provide a counterbalance, offering a way of recognising the intricate facets of migrant challenges. They illustrate that the border is a dynamic construct subject to continuous redefinition through diverse communication avenues and narrative threads.

When considering the implications of Chouliaraki and Georgiou's work for our understanding of participatory accountability, it becomes evident that the influence of digital transformation on it has the potential to be significantly more intricate than what the existing literature might have led us to assume, and like the border in Chouliaraki and Georgiou's empirical work, participatory accountability is subject to continuous redefinition. Prior literature, as discussed in the previous section, consists of studies that promote the virtues of a participatory form of accountability, while simultaneously cautioning against its shortcomings in environments dominated by power dynamics that hinder its evolution into a significant organisational mode. Other literature, although not exclusively within humanitarian contexts, offers glimpses of potential for heightened participation facilitated by digital tools. However, it simultaneously advises against excessive optimism, recognising that these tools themselves can fall prey to the same hegemonic tendencies that marginalise, stifle, and overlook certain voices. Drawing from the insights of Chouliaraki and Georgiou, our understanding of participatory accountability emerges as notably more complex and nuanced. Specifically, the mediation of participatory accountability through digital tools can encompass the practices in which hegemonic forces classify and render silent voices from the margins, but at the same time, can encapsulate diverse ways through which these voices may disrupt established power dynamics, voice their perspectives, and assert their agency within humanitarian spaces.

Consequently, this paper seeks to present a more nuanced understanding of participatory accountability compared to prior literature. It does so by shedding light on these inherent tensions and their intersections by considering how humanitarian organisations perceive, interpret, and implement participatory accountability practices. Precisely how such nuances and tensions play out will be explored using Chouliaraki and Georgiou's concepts of networks of mediation, in particular the translation of networks of intermediation into networks of transmediation. This allows us to trace through how the digital transformation of humanitarian spaces are translated and transmediated into new intersecting and tension-laden meanings and outcomes.

Networks of intermediation, as described by Chouliaraki and Georgiou, are ways in which digital media can be used to facilitate participation in humanitarian processes. These networks involve the use of third-party platforms, such as social media, to connect beneficiaries with humanitarian organisations. Intermediation encompasses data processes involving tracking and surveillance, while also facilitating horizontal connectivities within digital media platforms such as WhatsApp and Twitter. These digital connections serve as virtual meeting points, bringing together beneficiaries and humanitarian organisations, often enabling interactions that might not have occurred without the presence of digital media or beyond the confines of the intermediation network. The networks of intermediation organise and amplify the voices of various actors within distinct spaces, for example, crisis

communication networks which focus on efficiently managing emergency situations. Digital connectivity here plays a pivotal role in mediating the flow of information across digital platforms.

The move from intermediation to transmediation has been heralded as important by Chouliaraki and Georgiou, where transmediated encounters hold immense potential in translating digital voices from the virtual realm into new realms of meaning and experience, culminating in tangible real-world actions. This shift towards transmediation entails moving beyond the limitations of digital encounters alone and venturing into corporeal interactions. Through transmediation, technologies employed for intermediation purposes can serve as avenues for crisis-affected individuals to renegotiate their place and role in the humanitarian arena. Digital media, in particular, can be used to facilitate new forms of participation that go beyond the traditional boundaries of a single medium. However, as highlighted by Chouliaraki and Georgiou, the manifestation of participatory accountability within these intricate networks of mediation can encompass complex and intersecting outcomes. These outcomes do not conform strictly to a dichotomy of entirely positive or entirely negative effects; rather, they possess a significance that contributes to our understanding of participatory accountability in fragile and contentious contexts, such as those encountered within humanitarian crises. In this paper, we study precisely one of these contexts – the humanitarian space of the ICRC. This is detailed in the following sections.

Research method

The period of our field study of the ICRC spans January 2017 to April 2020. In 2017, we conducted twelve interviews with the initial purpose of studying the professionalisation of humanitarian organisations (Müller-Stewens *et al*., 2018; O'Leary *et al*., 2023). Access to the ICRC was given through an interdisciplinary university-wide project of one of the author's universities. There have been traditionally close links between the university and the ICRC, which facilitated identifying appropriate interviewees for our study. When analysing these interviews, interesting unforeseen patterns evolved. In particular, we saw intriguing interactions of the ICRC with affected people that have so far remained unobserved in the participatory accountability literature. In September 2017, the ICRC published a guide for humanitarian organisations on "How to use social media to better engage people affected by crises". As such, our timespan comprises a period during which the ICRC started to more strategically engage with the use of social media beyond mere dissemination of information regarding crisis-affected individuals to a proactive approach of fostering direct dialogue and engagement with the very individuals it serves through social media (ICRC, 2017).

Therefore, in 2019 and 2020 we conducted seven additional interviews deliberately approaching staff with in-depth insights on accountability to affected people, making it a total of 19 semi-structured interviews for our study. The objective of the additional interviews was to both sharpen and broaden our initial 2017 empirical observations and to keep up with the ongoing developments in the humanitarian sphere. The duration of our recorded interviews was between 30 and 80 minutes with subsequent transcription. Table A shows that our interviewees represented both staff at Geneva headquarters and those with operational field work responsibilities. The interviews took place primarily in Geneva except for those interviews with staff working in the field for which video calls were set up. Table B shows our semi-structured interview guide.

We enriched our empirical data by making use of multifaceted ICRC documentation as well as blogs that provided valuable insights into guidelines, protocols and processes for participatory practices with affected people. This additional material was pointed to us by several of our interviewees to help us understand the content of the interviews better. Furthermore, the ICRC resource centre website provided a plethora of highly detailed documents that also extended and complemented our data.

The range of additional material included but was not limited to annual reports, blogs, opinion pieces, manuals, and policy frameworks. All this documentation was helpful to fully grasp the context of the different participatory accountability practices in place, to complement interviewee views and to identify challenges.

During the entire span of data collection, we employed an analytic approach of *problematisation* (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011). This involved a continuous interplay between theory, literature, and empirical data. This methodology aims to unravel theoretically grounded explanations that challenge established assumptions within the prior literature. Specifically, our analysis was directed at identifying 'breakdowns' in the comprehension of participatory accountability within the context of our empirical data. These breakdowns arose when certain thematic threads within our empirical findings defied explanation within existing literature. A pivotal juncture emerged when we observed discernible disparities in the ICRC's articulation and implementation of accountability relationships with crisis-affected individuals, juxtaposed against prior discussions of participatory accountability in the accounting literature. This catalysed in the formation of initial themes surrounding this divergence through an abductive theorising approach (Dubois and Gadde, 2002, 2014), specifically relating to the construction of sites of struggle for more democratic and inclusive aid and dealing with new layers of vulnerability.

This iterative process allowed us to progressively refine our findings, drawing from insights within extant literature and addressing the 'breakdowns' evident in our empirical material. The incorporation of Chouliaraki and Georgiou's networks of mediation facilitated a deeper comprehension of how the ICRC conceptualised accountability as mediated by social media platforms (Jackson and Mazzei, 2017). These nuanced understandings were subsequently woven into a narrative structure which involved presenting the findings in a logical and meaningful manner that explains how the theoretical constructs unfold within the context of the data (Pagan *et al.,* 2022).

Case study context: The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

The ICRC was founded in 1863, making it the world's oldest humanitarian organisation. Unlike others, the ICRC's mandate is rooted in international humanitarian law (IHL) going back to the first Geneva Convention of 1949. This means that their mission is to "protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance" (ICRC, 2018b, p. 6). Neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action are the principles upon which all ICRC interventions are based (Schmale, 2012). Neutrality stems from a desire to counter a natural tendency to side with those who one perceives to be the victims of a conflict rather than the perpetrators (Apthorpe, 2012). It prevents the organisation from taking sides in hostilities or engaging in any kind of political controversy. The principle of impartiality ensures that there is no discrimination regarding nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions when helping and protecting people at risk. Independence ensures the ICRC does not succumb to interference by external parties (ICRC and IFRC, 2015). Finally, accompanying these principles is the 'do no harm' principle, i.e. caring for people at risk is the top priority (Anderson, 1999). Adherence to principles of these kind is said to "especially highlight the people-centric approach of the ICRC" (ICRC, 2019a, p. 1).

Protection, assistance, and prevention represent the three main areas the ICRC is involved in. Protection refers to measures taken to prevent attacks on civilian populations and to shield people deprived of their freedom from armed combat. Assistance helps affected people satisfy their basic requirements, such as food, clothing, hygiene supplies, etc., as a result of armed conflict and other acts of violence. Prevention comprises efforts to raise IHL awareness and compliance on a global, regional, and local level (ICRC, 2018a, 2020).

The organisation's structure mainly follows its global operations that are run through a multitude of delegations in different regions. A delegation may refer to an individual country but also several ones (regional delegations). Delegations bear a large responsibility as they decide on strategy, processes and practices that are most apt to their contextual setting and combine aforementioned protection, assistance and prevention work as they see fit. In the Geneva headquarters in Switzerland, all these field operations are supervised and supported e.g., through guidance, training and technical expertise (ICRC, 2020a).

Findings

Our findings highlight how participation of affected populations occur outside the formal participatory practices of the ICRC and re-emerge in social media spaces. We demonstrate how this was seen by the ICRC to give affected populations new levels and types of input into the nature of aid dissemination. We further show how this created changes internally within the ICRC relating to the embrace of certain technological tools to increase participatory practices and an increased concern for safeguarding and protection. Each of these findings are now discussed in turn.

Changing relationship with beneficiaries

As recounted by many interviewees when reflecting on the ICRC's relationship with its beneficiaries, the basic needs of beneficiaries have not changed dramatically over the organisation's lifetime. Given its focus on assisting victims of armed conflict and violence, beneficiaries today still require water, sanitation and health the same as, for example, during the First World War:

> …yes, the world keeps changing, but there is one thing in our business that hasn't changed, which is that the victims of war… continue to have the same needs: food, water and toilets. That's what we need. To eat, to drink and to - you know - the rest. And this hasn't changed. I don't care if you are telling me about the First World War, [or] talking about the latest war in Syria...we are responding to the same needs that we were responding [to] in 1863, when the ICRC was founded: water, sanitation, health [Interviewee 9].

However, while the basic needs have not changed, the relationship between the ICRC and its beneficiaries has evolved significantly. Up until quite recently, the ICRC was used to assessing the situation beneficiaries found themselves within and supplying them with, what they believed to be, necessary and appropriate goods and services. This relationship had an element of take it or leave it for the beneficiaries:

> Before, basically, it was a relatively simple world...you work in Afghanistan…you assess the situation. We decided what they need and then we would do the plan and then we would go back to the donor, ask for funds and we would give them. Full stop [Interviewee 3].

Yet there was an accepted perception amongst interviewees that this had to change and indeed was changing:

> In our new strategy - and I would say for the past 3 to 5 years - we've tried to put the people back at the centre…And this is quite new I have to say in the humanitarian world….So, don't misunderstand me, not that they were not at the centre in the past. But there is this tendency in humanitarian organisations and in any emergency operations to…think on behalf of people. We think we know what they need. We think we know what they want.…There is an arrogant tendency to think that if you ask the people what they want, they will tell you: I want a car, I want a mobile phone, I want a house…And now this is changing [Interviewee 18].

This change was seen to come about as a further extension of and support for the core mandate of protection and assistance of the ICRC, but with new understandings of what 'vulnerable people' means:

> The ICRC mandate is to protect and assist the most vulnerable people affected by conflict and situation[s] of violence. So, you see it's very much at the heart of the mandate. Why the most vulnerable? Because it's impossible to assist everybody and we want to assist the people who need us most….I don't see it as passive…Vulnerable does not mean passive in the sense that whenever you reach out to them, they are quite active. They have a lot to say. The problem is again to get access to them and to give them a voice...But I wouldn't consider them as passive [Interviewee 6]

In this sense, the ICRC saw affected people as vulnerable but not necessarily passive. They perceived that beneficiaries want to be part of the process of humanitarian assistance and provide feedback to the ICRC in order to improve the goods and services delivered to them:

> I think that [beneficiaries] do play a role. I think that they are much more aware. They know exactly what they can ask for and they know exactly the role that they can play. And I'm saying that because I was surprised…I think that is something the communities want. I think that is something that people are asking more and more for…it makes sense. You want to participate in/on what affects you [Interviewee 14].

To this end, the ICRC was beginning to grapple with how to balance this growing need and want for a clear articulation of needs amongst its beneficiaries.

Increasing power of beneficiaries

Many interviewees explained how beneficiaries today have an increasing amount of power and agency in relation to the humanitarian activities of the ICRC:

> They [beneficiaries today] will have more power, they will be able to challenge. It's not just the humanitarian organisations telling: I know what's best for you, and this is what you need. They [beneficiaries] will tell you, no, no, no, I don't need this [Interviewee 6].

Beneficiaries are now in a position to make demands, asking the ICRC for more accountability or transparency (ICRC, 2019a). This development was recognised by several interviewees as a move by beneficiaries to make specific demands by clearly voicing their needs to the ICRC as well as any displeasure with the ICRC's goods and services. For example, one interviewee provided an account of how beneficiaries questioned the ICRC and its work in Lebanon:

> We delivered to Lebanese families, blankets, food and stuff like this and the Lebanese families told us, this is not comfortable blankets, this is not pleasant food for us. We want something else. And by the way, Worldvision and Médecins Sans Frontières is doing this, you are not doing this. Why? So, they start to be a kind of accountability mechanism, where I'm an affected population, so in the Western logic we deliver you goods and you should be happy. No - me as affected population, I start questioning you, I start basically making you almost accountable. Why do you do this in this manner? And if they don't get the answer, then it goes into the public sphere, so [social] media and then it becomes almost unmanageable for the organisation. So you certainly have a kind of pressure mechanism that absolutely did not exist previously [Interviewee 3].

A further example took place in Syria where, after months of being besieged, the ICRC was finally able to help the people in the besieged areas. To the surprise of the ICRC, one of the main priorities of the beneficiaries was to provide their children with education. Subsequently, the ICRC adapted the parcels provided to beneficiaries:

> In Syria, when we were able to cross front-lines for those besieged areas, where people for two years didn't have access to clean water, they didn't have bread for 6 or 7 month[s], no electricity, no provision of health care. Women were dying, because they couldn't have a c-section in good conditions. People were dying because no dialysis session [was] available. And we get there with our food parcels and what people were telling you: our priority is education…it's important. And then you need to adapt this. So we were including kits for kids who were taking some lessons in the basement to avoid the direct

> impact of the conflict. So we need to listen more to what the people need and adapt and shape your response to better match to the needs of the people [Interviewee 6].

Overall, several interviewees highlighted a growing empowerment of beneficiaries within the ICRC's humanitarian activities. This shift is marked by beneficiaries exercising greater influence and asserting their agency by being in a position to articulate specific demands, holding the ICRC accountable for transparency and responsiveness. This change is exemplified in instances where beneficiaries challenged the ICRC's approaches and offerings, such as in Lebanon and Syria. This evolving dynamic was seen to underscore a significant departure from the traditional humanitarian paradigm of the ICRC.

Use of social media

The development of new information and communication technologies, such as smartphones played an important role in this increased beneficiary power within the ICRC as it allowed them to become more connected. Of particular relevance within the ICRC, was the use of social media. According to the ICRC (2017) “online communication platforms have become a lifeline for millions of people affected by natural disasters and armed conflicts: social media and messaging apps help maintain contact with family and friends, and provide access to information, such as where to find food, shelter or medical assistance”. These platforms are also becoming an important way in which affected populations can share their experiences of humanitarian aid, their perceptions on the quality, appropriateness and timeliness of that aid and any potential shortcomings in its offering. This is described by Interviewee 8:

> Beneficiaries today have access to mobile phones, and not just mobile phones but smartphones. So they can take pictures, they can interact on social media, they can tell the story themselves. If you continue in the traditional way of taking a lot of time to process a certain decision, by that time, you will be already out of time, because the beneficiaries express their need differently.

Social media, therefore, allows ICRC beneficiaries to not only be more connected with each other, but also able to interact directly and in real time with the ICRC, and hold them accountable for decisions and actions in the field: “*we get real-time challenges from people, saying: OK, you are distributing food here but there are needs there and we have to answer this”* [Interviewee 6].

If beneficiaries are not involved sufficiently or early enough, therefore, they take to social media as a means to be heard. Throughout our field study, we heard of several examples in which beneficiaries were able to almost instantly voice their pleasure or displeasure regarding the aid provided by the ICRC:

> …you can be challenged by the beneficiaries you want to serve. They will rate what you do for them to say if it's good or not good. They will be more open about their needs…The normal channel of aid is: you go with food and water and you restore electricity, which are critical in times of war. But today, you have everyone who is connected in real time [Interviewee 5].

Social media allowed for an efficient exchange of information amongst beneficiaries and an increasing awareness of the activities of different NGOs. Therefore, they are in a position where they can hold the ICRC accountable and challenge them regarding the goods and services they provide:

> ….more and more they'll be asking. Because, in besieged areas in Syria, where people don't have access to food, water and medical supply, they have this...(pointing at a mobile phone)… one of the biggest challenges for humanitarians is to factor in, more and more, what the beneficiaries think. Because, they have now means to express it. And they have means to challenge us on the services we offer them [Interviewee 6].

In this sense, beneficiaries can compare different NGOs with one another and decide which goods and services they want to receive. Furthermore, they can voice their displeasure with a NGO, and its goods and services, which can then act as a decision basis for other beneficiaries:

> Now, I think the "Uber-concept" [is] going to be in the humanitarian world. Because now the beneficiaries have the ability at the relatively marginal cost to assess or to get the information about: this organisation deliver[s] this, this organisation deliver[s] that. So they start to…compare, to be…a semi-consumer. They don't pay for the service but at least they can select and they can even challenge the organisation [Interviewee 3].

The implications of this in terms of beneficiary engagement was very palpable to many interviewees, particularly in terms of shifting power dynamics:

> There is clearly a power-shift. The same power shift that we see in the private sector, where clients have increasingly the capacity to compare prices via internet and what have you…Our beneficiaries, they are also increasingly connected. So they will compare, they will… increasingly request services, humanitarian services, on digital platforms… People are connected. People can compare. People know, they get information. This is also for us a different situation as the one 20 years ago… where we were almost the only organisation and there was no information available except the one that we provided [Interviewee 12].

In this sense, therefore, the increased ability and propensity for affected people to voice their concerns represented a real and important challenge for the ICRC in terms of how participatory accountability practices would be implemented within the humanitarian contexts in which it operates. As a result of this changing relationship between beneficiaries and the ICRC, the ICRC has adapted a number of their core practices. They are related to how the ICRC facilitates participation with beneficiaries and places increased focus on safeguarding concerns. These are described in the following sections.

Changing nature of participation

Digital disruption caused by social media meant that how the ICRC engaged with beneficiaries and were accountable to them was changing. Offering digital services directly to beneficiaries became the core of the ICRC Information Environment Strategy and an important component of the ICRC Strategy 2019-2024 (ICRC, 2022). Both strategies identified the importance of “digital proximity and services for beneficiaries” and “ICT [information and communication technology) and information as aid” (ICRC, 2022). An important objective of this is linked to leveraging data, both data generated as part of its digital growth, but also data generated, acquired and/or available externally:

> In contexts affected by violence and instability, digital technologies can be leveraged to support humanitarian programs, for instance by capturing and using information to inform and adjust responses or by facilitating two-way communication between humanitarian staff and affected people… [this is done by] progressively integrat[ing] tools and methods provided by digital technologies to improve situational awareness and actionable information with the view to better protect and assist crisis-affected populations [ICRC, 2019b].

This was seen to be fundamentally in-line with the ICRC’s mandate to be as close as possible to the communities it seeks to help:

> Proximity to affected people as well as trust are at the heart of all Red Cross…activities, before, during and after an emergency. This includes digital activities and the ability to be present remotely and virtually [ICRC, 2017].

In this sense, several interviewees identified that through social media the ICRC is able to communicate to beneficiaries what they are trying to accomplish on their behalf:

> We need to communicate publicly, we need to engage in…social media and…answer the people. Yes, they will blame us. Yes, they will accuse us. I had a tweet two weeks ago with one guy telling me: you teach IHL [International humanitarian law] because you are preparing for civil war…You need to engage, you need to explain, why it's not exactly this way [Interviewee 18].

At the same time, social media also provides beneficiaries with increased opportunity for participation by allowing them a means of communicating their needs, struggles and issues that need the ICRC's attention:

> …for instance in Aleppo, in Syria…various parties to the conflict were using water as a means of war. Which means: cutting the water for two million or 1.5 million inhabitants…we invested…in the traditional water system of the city….we digitalise on Facebook in such a way, that the inhabitants of Aleppo had an overview of all the water points… we were in contact with the civil society and the beneficiaries, telling us: "this well is now out of order" and we were able to organise together with Syrian Red Crescent and the water boards teams to go and repair this. So at a time where everything was extremely difficult, we were in conversation with beneficiaries, which is interesting. And I think the trend going forward is going more and more like this. Because, even in Africa, people will get access and are getting access and more and more people will have [a] mobile [Interviewee 6].

Therefore, data collection and the use of information and communication technology had become a key tool in operational planning and aid dissemination at the ICRC. Information that had been traditionally collected through paper questionnaires, direct observation and focus-group discussions, were now being supplanted. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were considered to be crucial components of the ICRC's humanitarian response in terms of coordinating relief efforts, disseminating lifesaving messages and enabling affected communities to reconnect with relatives and seek help. For example, by engaging with social media as standard practice in the aftermath of an emergency, the ICRC considered itself better placed to understand what people are worried about, see the news they are sharing, and responding decisively, accurately and collaboratively (ICRC, 2017). Yet such trends come with significant safeguarding and protection concerns:

> Technology is crucial if we want to engage with and better serve the needs of people we can't physically access. But using these platforms means creating an information trail we neither own nor control, and that's something we must get better at anticipating [ICRC, 2018c].

These concerns are discussed in the next section.

Increased safeguarding concerns

Concerns regarding the intrusion of communication technology have been present within the ICRC for quite a while:

> 10 years ago when our colleagues were in the field, they would actually not use phones to call …PCP [Protection of Civilian Population] cases, when there is a report of actual violation and we had to interview somebody, [we] would actually not use phones because phones, at the time…could be hacked or…there was listening going on. So [we] would actually only do…face to face [Interviewee 19].

In this sense, there is nothing new regarding the intrusion of communication technology on humanitarian work and on beneficiaries. However, the ICRC had got to grips with such intrusions through several safeguarding mechanisms but now felt that these were not as manageable:

> There used to be existing security modalities that enabled protection and confidentiality…the ICRC modality is confidentiality…[when] community members ask if we can guarantee protection…you do it face to face, we don't send out an e-mail, it only goes to one very secure platform…But [this was] a different time when technology wasn't used in the same way. Now community members are on [social media] tools. Community members try to hold us accountable through these tools [Interviewee 19].

The fact that the concerns expressed above had become more pronounced coincides directly with the rise of concerns over digital media, particularly third-party social media platforms such as Twitter. Their increased usage by beneficiaries surfaced significant safeguarding concerns over the privacy and nefarious use of affected populations' data, along with concerns on an over-reliance operationally on it:

> Now the conversation we are having is around third-party platforms. So, let's take an example ….we use Twitter to communicate to communities who obviously have said they use Twitter…we use it as an essential tool to disseminate information about our operations or services. But Twitter has a functionality on it which allows someone to reply and it also has a functionality that you can, if you're open for direct messages…people can also contact us…and even though we might say please do not send your personal data here, people could still just contact us and say: I need help, can you help me? And send their personal data like photos, phone numbers, etc. [Interviewee 19].

> You can't really avoid it…people reach out to you on WhatsApp…"it's flooding here or there is fighting there or we are in danger can you help us or we need this, we need that"… you have different places where…we've been using social media and technology in general for this…I am afraid…that somehow we…get so used to this, that whenever you don't have it, you don't know what other means to engage with people…and this happens. I mean the first thing when you have a war, when you have a conflict, is to cut the communication… And if we rely hundred percent on this when we really need to engage with people, you may not know the means [Interviewee 14].

The propensity for beneficiaries to contact the ICRC in this way and to hold them to account through social media, prompted the ICRC to consider the risks of over-relying on this technology and extra dimensions of their protection mandate. In particular, "the humanitarian principle of 'do no harm' to crisis-affected people must extend today to 'do no digital harm'" (ICRC, 2020b). To this end, the ICRC began to question what data protection looks like in the field:

> A challenge for protection….by being on Twitter itself, are we creating some kind of push or pull factor for community members to have to be on these platforms which are not controlled by us?…Community members can contact us, not fully understanding [it] might cause them harm…there is a violent risk of causing harm down the road [Interviewee 19].

This concern regarding the use of beneficiary data reflected a persistent worry over 'function creep' or 'scope creep' in which:

> [Social media] apps are not immune to cyber-attacks and data leakages which could expose the privacy and security of their users...[this] could lead to intrusive surveillance or unsolicited and undesirable commercial use. In contexts affected by armed conflict, violence or disaster, such practices can have severe humanitarian consequences…The consequences of the exposure of private and personal data in a polarised environment, based on ethnic or communal tensions or on economic inequalities, would be of great concern [ICRC, 2020b].

In addition, the ICRC had significant concern for the level of trust beneficiaries would have in the organisation if it were seen to misuse their data or not have concern for its security and confidentiality; "*data protection is an issue…it depends on what kind of information…you are collecting or you're receiving*" [Interviewee 14]. This is described succinctly as follows:

> The ICRC, unlike humanitarian organisations that operate through implementing partners, requires direct proximity with populations affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence, as well as a physical presence in the areas where those affected populations are located. An essential precondition for this level of access is trust, from people affected by violence and from parties to the conflict or actors in other situations of violence. Trust is established with affected people by guaranteeing that any engagement between them and the ICRC will be exclusively humanitarian, and

> that information gathered about them and stored digitally will only be used for humanitarian purposes and not shared with or accessible to third parties [ICRC, 2020c]

Specifically, there was a potential that by using data that beneficiaries shared to third-party platforms to improve services offered, they could be seen as encouraging beneficiaries to subject themselves to a system which could extract their data for other use, a use that could cause harm:

> The very presence [of beneficiaries] on the platform could be then shared by the platforms themselves to governments…Although there are some encryptions, we don't know if there is a backdoor…How could [beneficiary data] be used by an organisation or a party like Cambridge Analytica to create models that then allows governments to use data further to target them in different ways. Like if there is an incident here, then they predict that there will be a flow of migrants over there and they're going to close the borders. So how are we enabling that kind of data collection and modelling? [Interviewee 19]

This is further perpetueated by the prevalence of "fake news" and "alternative facts" in the online world where there is often an intentional effort to erode confidence in the accuracy of information. This impinges on much of the work safeguarding work that the ICRC does in very real and damaging ways:

> "…one job…of the ICRC is to get first-hand information about violation[s] of IHL [International Humanitarian Law], and to have a dialogue with the perpetrators. And because of security constraints, very often we are not there ourselves…we don't have a team [on the ground]…so, you have big data...out there and you need to make the best use of it in order to have solid information and enable you maybe to make representation or to have a dialogue with the [perpetrators] on a specific incident, where we didn't have somebody on the ground but we have a spectrum or an array of information, that will enable us to discuss about an issue with full confidence and have a conversation...this is also something that is a challenge… you have to rely on what you see and this is a bit difficult because sometime[s] you have fake news...or alternative facts.

We see here the challenges the ICRC faces when relying on information from social media to present a strong and credible case for their role in engaging with governments and other parties responsible for IHL violations. Therefore, this potential for the "*weaponization of information*" (ICRC, 2021) leads many to conclude that:

> There is a need for balancing that responsibility for accountability and transparency versus balancing that need [using digital platforms in aid planning and dissemination, and addressing IHL violations] in case there is a problem down the road in which community members could contact us…not fully understanding [that this] might cause them harm [Interviewee 19].

As a result, the ICRC follows, what it terms as a "*humanitarian purpose-driven approach*" to the use of data concerning individuals affected by crises while also *"emphasizing that the collection and use of data on individuals is a risk factor in their safety, i.e. it stresses the importance of 'doing no digital harm'*" (ICRC, 2022). In 2018, the ICRC held a symposium on digital risk which aimed to understand how the usage of digital technologies affects civilian populations during armed conflicts, and what it means for protection and humanitarian activities (ICRC, 2019c). Following this, the ICRC has now adopted a number of specific safeguards in its Rules on Personal Data Protection. Across the organisation, data protection standards have been established as well as requirements for data processing. Specifically, where new technologies or riskier data processing operations are considered, a Data Protection Impact Assessment must be conducted to identify and mitigate the risks of harm (ICRC, 2021): "*the challenge is to say: Ok, this tool is here, it's available. How can I apply it to my job for the benefit of the victims that I am trying to help*" [Interviewee 9]. The Rules also require the ICRC to follow a "data protection by design" approach to minimise the collection of personal data to that which is necessary for the operation and ensure that data subjects' rights are respected. An example

of this was a decision in 2019 to forgo the centralisation of biometric data to reduce surveillance risks (ICRC, 2019d).

In summary, therefore, our findings show how the ongoing rise of information and communication technology as a powerful communication tool resulted in increasing instances in which beneficiaries themselves were able to hold the ICRC to account for the direction of humanitarian interventions. We found this to be significantly aided by social media as a communication medium. Furthermore, this rise in beneficiary agency over humanitarian work led to the ICRC instituting several internal changes. These related to increased avenues for participatory accountability *and* a focus on enhanced safeguarding and protection concerns. These findings are discussed more in the next section.

Discussion

In this paper, we investigate ever more frequent instances in which those affected by humanitarian crises are able to exercise agency and resistance to the work of humanitarian organisations, and in turn alter the nature of participatory accountability relationships between them and such organisations. The intention of the study is to further unravel the complexities of this shift in terms of the ways organisations seek to be accountable to their beneficiaries. We conducted the study within the ICRC, investigating the use of social media spaces by affected populations in their reactions to ICRC activities and service offerings. We examined the internal perception of this use of social media by those working in the ICRC and the various complexities, tensions and opportunities this presented.

The beneficiary-centric mind-set had been in existence within the ICRC since its inception in 1863. In the past this has been associated with servicing the needs of beneficiaries, with those needs being very much organisationally-defined. In recent years, there have been several efforts by the ICRC to move away from the perception of the ‘passive beneficiary’ towards assisting affected populations to become agents of change in their own lives. In this discussion section, we highlight how increased engagement on social media by those that consume or use the offerings of the ICRC have prompted not only on-the-spot pragmatic and procedural changes to the organisation’s humanitarian interventions, but also changes to key internal processes within the ICRC and, in some instances, its overall strategy.

To understand this, we used insights from Chouliaraki and Georgiou’s (2017, 2019, 2022) networks of intermediation and transmediation on how digital media can be used to create new forms of sociality, political participation, meaning and experience. In particular, we show how the ICRC, in the emerging reality of networks of intermediation were keen to translate and move these to networks of transmediation for two main reasons. First, they wanted to capitalise on the benefits of digital media in terms of their humanitarian offerings. Second, they were concerned about the effects of surveillance capitalism embedded in networks of intermediation on beneficiaries and the implications this would have for vulnerability and trust between the ICRC and beneficiaries. Our findings show how networks of transmediation were used by the ICRC to first, facilitate new forms of participation, and more democratic and inclusive processes of meaning-making in the humanitarian space and second, build trust between humanitarian organisations and beneficiaries by being transparent and responsible with their data. We discuss each of these now in turn.

Sites of struggle for more democratic and inclusive aid

Our findings demonstrate how those within the ICRC perceived digital platforms, particularly social media, as becoming pivotal channels for beneficiaries to share their experiences and offer critical feedback on humanitarian aid received. In doing so, these platforms create what Chouliaraki and Georgiou (2022, p. 35) describe as “sites of struggle”. Our findings showed how the rapid

dissemination of information through social media networks led to a perception of the ICRC's affected populations being able to directly interact and engage in real-time conversations with the ICRC. Here, they could voice their perspectives, communicate their specific needs, advocate for tailored assistance that aligned more closely with their individual circumstances, express satisfaction or dissatisfaction with aid delivery, and identify potential shortcomings in humanitarian response.

We found several instances in which the accounts of ICRC aid provision, provided by affected populations on social media, were perceived internally as being able to alter the course of a particular humanitarian intervention. These were seen to enhance the ICRC's situational awareness by being more aligned with beneficiaries' perceived needs at a particular point in time, enabling the organisation to adapt its interventions promptly. For example, when the ICRC reached besieged areas in Syria, they discovered residents were more interested in educational assistance than traditional aid like food, water, and clothing. This led the ICRC to adjust their intervention. The significance of such a finding lies not in the simple fact that affected populations were able to articulate their needs and that the ICRC responded to them. Rather we see here a situation in which people within the dire circumstances of the Syrian conflict were strategic and determined in pursuit of their needs.

In addition, the increasing access to digital platforms, particularly smartphones and social media, and the new forms of intermediation and transmediation (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2022) they created, were seen to empower beneficiaries to make more informed decisions regarding the goods and services offered by different humanitarian organisations. Through digital platforms, many interviewees recounted examples of beneficiaries comparing the performances and reputations of various aid providers. This emerging "Uber-concept" in humanitarian aid Digital platforms were seen to provide beneficiaries with access to a wealth of information, enabling them to understand the diversity of aid offerings and the extent of services available, and transforming them into informed and discerning recipients. As beneficiaries gained more insights into the aid landscape, the ICRC saw them as becoming active participants in determining the course of their assistance.

In this sense digital platforms, especially social media, were seen by our interviewees to play a transformative role in enhancing beneficiary interactions with the ICRC. The immediacy and widespread reach of social media platforms were thought to foster transparency and accountability, as the ICRC saw itself as more accessible to beneficiaries with an enhanced ability to promptly respond to their queries, concerns, or complaints. By engaging in a continuous feedback loop with beneficiaries, the ICRC felt it could adapt and refine their assistance strategies. Consequently, this pressure for greater transparency and responsiveness in aid interventions was seen to promote a more adaptive, participatory and inclusive humanitarian practice. Emphasising participatory accountability practices through digital platforms was perceived as strengthening beneficiaries' ownership of aid processes and foster an environment of trust and collaboration between the ICRC and affected populations. In this sense, we see manifestations of Chouliaraki and Georgiou's (2022) digital border in our findings in terms of highlighting the potential for digital technologies to enable new connectivities and interactivities for previously relatively powerless border actors. Specifically, we see that social media platforms are not neutral spaces, but rather are shaped by power dynamics and struggles over representation, meaning and alternative forms of inclusion and belonging.

We relate these findings to the notion of 'counter-account' by Perkiss *et al.* (2021), which challenges the primary account or 'frontstage performance' of organisations like the ICRC. This concept aligns with the idea of participatory accountability being a site of contestation and resistance (Chouliaraki and Georgiou, 2022). The dynamic nature of digital platforms challenges the traditional hierarchical structures that have historically characterised participatory accountability within the humanitarian sector. Beneficiaries' participation here occurs outside formal participatory practices of NGOs, re-emerging in social media spaces. When beneficiaries share their stories on networks of intermediation – mainly social media – they are not simply passive actors on these platforms – they create new forms of meaning and experience that are transmediated beyond the traditional boundaries of that single

medium. In the case of the ICRC, affected people actively participated in the humanitarian aid conversation by sharing their own experiences and perspectives, and in doing so, such encounters were seen to be transmediated into a more democratic and inclusive form of humanitarian aid. A discourse of humanitarian care informed the ICRC's practices of using this network of transmediation, in that the speed and efficiency of getting real-time information on humanitarian crisis as they infolded and feedback on humanitarian assistance as it was disseminated, was highly valued.

These findings acknowledge that beneficiary actions on social media may confound implicit assumptions held regarding the agency of crisis-affected people. First, our findings are in line with literature that shows the unexpected behaviours of people in situations of conflict and violence in which they construct their own sense of vulnerability in a variety of different ways (Barrios, 2014). They suggest that networks of transmediation as a vehicle particularly for accountability, are ideally placed to capture the fleeting ever-changing nature of people's needs, hopes and desires (Postigo, 2015). We believe this to be an important contribution to knowledge on participatory accountability where previous literature has frequently spoken of the conduct consultation meetings, baseline surveys and the like to support a participatory ethos within NGO practice (Agyemang *et al.*, 2009;). Not only do we show such (often accounting-based) practices to be redundant in humanitarian contexts such as the siege in Syria, we also propose that they often do not align with the more instantaneous nature of contemporary communication and engagement practices of both NGOs and affected people in general. The long drawn-out processes of participatory planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, while impossible in contexts in which the ICRC operates, also potentially lack the ability to capture perspectives of affected populations and priorities as they occur and change in dynamic and ever-changing circumstances. To the extent that NGOs in fact do listen to beneficiaries' voices on social media and respond to their account, social media has the potential to fill this void.

Secondly, we contextualise our findings within the literature that explores the shift in perceiving affected populations as more than passive aid recipients. Similar to findings in our study, studies of this kind show beneficiaries to be strategic and determined in pursuit of their needs and demonstrate extraordinary ingenuity and resourcefulness (Andrews, 2014). Third we believe our study confounds the notion that beneficiaries are simply in a 'take it or leave it' relationship with humanitarian organisations or that they are simply grateful for the assistance they receive (Gray *et al.*, 2006; Unerman and O'Dwyer, 2010). Our study demonstrates technology-driven actualisations of and disruptions to participatory accountability practice and an associated increase in beneficiary agency and resistance. While humanitarian organisations may expect grateful acceptance of aid, social media empowers affected populations to express indifference or dissent, challenging traditional power dynamics.

Dealing with new layers of vulnerability

Chouliaraki and Georgiou (2022) contend that the transformation of digital borders is reshaping communication and interactions among individuals in contested terrains, a development often viewed as emancipatory. However, they assert that the ethical dimensions of communication networks and the possibility of concealed negative implications of these evolving borders should not be disregarded or dismissed. The ICRC had been long aware of the vulnerabilities associated with communication technology. Yet while it had implemented safeguarding mechanisms that enabled protection and confidentiality – for example, the organisation refrains from using phones for sensitive cases due to security risks and concerns – the increasing use of social media by affected people posed new challenges for protecting beneficiary data and ensuring their privacy. As shown above, social media platforms like Twitter were seen to open new channels for affected people to contact the ICRC and to engage in a form of counter-conduct as a reaction to and dissatisfaction with the services offered. However, as a result, the ICRC perceives a dilemma in balancing the benefits of using digital platforms

for communication and accountability with the potential risks of data exposure and misuse. A key concern of the ICRC was that in the implementation of these acts of participatory accountability by affected individuals on third-party digital platforms, this inadvertently implicates them within the ongoing reconstruction of the political sphere, driven by the dynamics of surveillance capitalism. Surveillance capitalism pertains to an economic system wherein companies accumulate substantial user data for commercial purposes, often without explicit user consent (Zuboff, 2015).

The ICRC's unease arises from the reliance on third-party platforms for enacting participatory accountability. Active – yet perhaps unreflective – complicity with digital capitalism has perhaps become a necessary condition for the production of counter-accounts of humanitarian intervention. By associating their efforts with corporations like Twitter and Facebook, whose underlying technologies are deeply intertwined with surveillance capitalist practices, these online accounts were seen to risk becoming significantly dependent on the tools and mechanisms of digital capitalism. Consequently, the functionality and accessibility of these accounts become intricately linked to the operations and interests of these corporate entities. Of particular concern for the ICRC were the methods employed by these platforms to collect, analyse, and utilise user data, as they may have potential implications for privacy, data security, and the overall integrity of humanitarian endeavours (Borradaile and Reeves, 2020). In this sense, we see the digital border – and the networks of intermediation and transmediation that arise from it – as a contested space where different actors are vying for control and influence but some ultimately prevail in dangerous yet covert ways (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2022).

The ICRC saw this as a 'second-order disaster' which further traps vulnerable people into further cycles of precarity (Madianou, 2020). The ICRC expresses persistent worries about 'function creep' or 'scope creep' concerning the use of social media platforms. Its continued reliance on traditional offline forms of action stems from its historical commitment to on-the-ground mobilisation. The organisation has never solely relied on networks of mediation, but rather on diverse forms of situated and embodied actions. Yet the increased use of social media platforms – which potentially exposes beneficiary data to intrusive surveillance or unsolicited commercial use – was seen to heighten the need to extend these sorts of actions. In conflict-affected contexts, this was a concern for the ICRC as such privacy violations could have severe humanitarian consequences, particularly when related to ethnic tensions or economic inequalities.

Trust was seen to be a critical aspect of the ICRC's work, particularly when engaging with populations affected by violence and conflict. However, the sense of surveillance embedded within the apparatus of social media can make it difficult to build relationships and trust (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2022). In this context, building and maintaining trust with beneficiaries was seen by interviewees to require assuring them that any engagement with the ICRC is purely humanitarian and that their data will be used solely for humanitarian purposes and not shared with third parties. As a result, the ICRC had to reconsider its approach to data protection in the digital age and find ways to mitigate potential harm that could arise from the use of networks of intermediation. It responded by emphasising the necessity for a meticulous examination of the broader implications and ethical considerations surrounding the utilisation of digital technologies in the context of humanitarian response. It became wary of encouraging beneficiaries to share data on such platforms, as it could lead to their data being used for harmful purposes. In addition, to protect beneficiary data, the ICRC adopted specific safeguards and data protection measures and adopted a 'humanitarian purpose-driven approach' to the use of data meaning that the data can only be used for humanitarian purposes. In this sense the ICRC's traditional mandate of 'do no harm' to crisis-affected populations expanded to 'do no digital harm'. This means that while networks of intermediation remain significant for increasing avenues of participatory accountability for the ICRC, their ultimate value lies in their ability to translate into offline mobilisation of assistance.

Overall, the ICRC employs what Chouliaraki and Gerorgiou (2022) would describe as a necessary balancing of the benefits of digital communication with its potential risks. This involves carefully selecting the most suitable combination of media technologies, formats, and infrastructure to maintain a careful balance between seeking the participation of beneficiaries through the affordances of social media and being aware of the implications this has for their digital safety. The ICRC maintains a critical engagement with corporate social media platforms while also intentionally disengaging from them when deemed necessary by offering avenues for private online and offline participation also (Natale and Treré, 2020). By operating in this manner, the ICRC navigates a delicate balance between digital and physical interactions and between the visible aspects of intermediation, facilitated through specific tools or methods, and the less visible aspects of its on-the-ground actions, which materialise through transmediated encounters between the organisation and the affected people it assists. This approach allows the ICRC to leverage the advantages of digital communication while also preserving the importance of embodied encounters and the material realities of their humanitarian efforts. In this sense, networks of transmediation can play a crucial role in building trust between humanitarian organisations and beneficiaries. By being transparent about data usage and empowering beneficiaries to have a voice, these networks can foster trust, which was seen as vital for the success of humanitarian interventions.

In conclusion, we see in this discussion an investigation of the increasing rise of beneficiary agency and resistance in humanitarian aid spaces and the corresponding impacts on the practice of participatory accountability. In doing so we bring attention to Chouliaraki and Georgiou's (2022) insights into the complexity of digital transformation in terms of how it can both enhance *and* undermine trust and participatory practice in contested terrains. We contribute, in this respect, to the current literature on participatory accountability by demonstrating how the participation of affected populations occurs outside the formal participatory practices of the ICRC – previously thought to be the hallmarks of participatory accountability exercises – and instead re-emerge in social media spaces. We further demonstrated the tensions this created internally within the ICRC.

Conclusion

The rapid advancement of digital technology has ushered in a new era of humanitarian aid transforming the landscape of humanitarian assistance, empowering beneficiaries, fostering inclusivity, and facilitating more democratic engagement in aid processes. In this paper, we sought to unravel the complexity of participatory accountability by showing affected populations as individuals marked by fragmentary lives and circumstances. In these circumstances, the often-held assumptions about participatory accountability within prior literature do not play out simply in practice. By using the ICRC as a research site, we identified and discussed instances where beneficiaries were successful in exerting agency and resistance to humanitarian work. In doing so, we were able to show how participatory mechanisms can turn out differently when disrupted by the use of social media and how they can affect interaction between humanitarian organisations and affected populations. In particular, we explore the implication of networks of intermediation within the humanitarian space and how they translate to networks of transmediation to create new forms of meaning, experience and practice including moving to offline practices and actions.

In doing so, we demonstrated the emergence of both novel layers of empowerment *and* vulnerability as a result of mediated practices of participatory accountability. Our study of the ICRC shows that, at least initially, networks of transmediation can confound the image of affected people as subjects of humanitarian assistance and instead enable them to communicate and connect with humanitarian organisations on social media. When beneficiaries share their stories on social media, they are not simply passive sharers of information. They are actively participating in the humanitarian conversation by sharing their own experiences and perspectives. This can help to create a more democratic and

inclusive form of humanitarian aid, as it gives beneficiaries a voice and allows them to be heard. This can help to improve the quality of communication between beneficiaries and humanitarian organisations, and it can also help to ensure that beneficiaries' voices are heard.

However, our study also highlights that humanitarian organisations need to be aware of the risks associated with networks of intermediation. These risks include the potential for surveillance capitalism, the spread of misinformation, and the commodification of humanitarian aid. Here, traditional humanitarian hierarchies persist and indeed become amplified and more pronounced, creating new layers of vulnerability. In this paper, we demonstrate how the ICRC was keen to translate networks of intermediation into networks of transmediation for two main reasons. First, they wanted to capitalise on the benefits of digital media in terms of their humanitarian offerings. Second, they were concerned about these effects of surveillance capitalism embedded in networks of intermediation and the new layers of vulnerability and harm that this produces. By translating networks of intermediation into networks of transmediation, they could use more privacy-preserving technologies and give beneficiaries more control over their data.

Focusing our study on participatory accountability in this manner, therefore, allowed us to provide new insights into what we traditionally know about accountability in the context of humanitarian organisations. While it is commonly understood that participatory accountability is both needed yet lacking in many contexts, these discussions stop short of considering the actual consequences of increasing agency and empowerment on behalf of affected populations. In particular, we believe that our empirical study shows the salience of social media as a more contemporary tool of participatory accountability practice, particularly as it enables affected populations to articulate their humanity and vulnerability through a more viable medium of communication.

At the same time, we acknowledge some areas that our analysis did not unravel. In particular, while the voices of affected people are increasingly integrated into networks of intermediation and translated to networks of transmediation, they are often done so in an unequal manner. As highlighted by Perkiss et al. (2021) counter-accounts by those in relatively less powerful – and often vulnerable – positions tend to not engender much change beyond a temporary heightened awareness and mobilisation around an issue. Such problematics reflect significant critiques in the literature surrounding the epistemological, ontological, and ethical limitations of crisis data (Crawford and Finn, 2015), which have culminated under various banners including 'data colonialism' (Couldry and Mejias, 2019) and 'techno-colonialism' (Madianou, 2019). In addition, in areas impacted by crises, it is likely that not all beneficiaries would have similar access to social media, thus unable to make their voices heard through this particular channel. Notably this study, in focusing on the internal challenges that humanitarian organisations face in view of the increasing use of social media, we were unable to fully attend to or capture such dynamics, particularly as our analysis was not at the level of affected populations. Therefore, we call for further studies to investigate the perception of affected populations in relation to what organisations like the ICRC perceive to be a new humanitarian accountability landscape mediated by digital tools and platforms.

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