Background paper to Wilton Park conference:
'Digital Dignity in armed conflict: a roadmap for principled humanitarian action
in the age of digital transformation'
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Towards a common understanding of digital dignity

In order to understand digital dignity, it is critical to understand what dignity means in humanitarian responses and established protection standards. This will allow us to better understand the continuity between physical and digital dignity, and continuity between physical humanitarian responses and their digital aspects.

Dignity in the humanitarian endeavor

The right to life with dignity is integral to humanitarian response. The Humanitarian Charter of the Sphere Project outlines dignity as follows: 'right to life entails the duty to preserve life where it is threatened… Dignity entails more than physical well-being; it demands respect for the whole person, including the values and beliefs of individuals and affected communities, and respect for their human rights, including liberty, freedom of conscience and religious observance' (2018:29). Dignity is implied within existing frameworks for both data protection and minimum standards for humanitarian responses. As such, it is significant in a discussion of digital risks and the protection of affected persons in both the realm of armed conflict and other situations of violence and the digital transformation of humanitarian action.

Dignity is seen as an integral part to the overall humanitarian response and as a serious consideration for the specialised work of humanitarian protection actors, such as the ICRC, through their collaboration on the 'Professional Standards in Protection Work Handbook'. Standard 1.6 of these standards specifically outlines the importance of dignity as underpinning all protection responses. It asserts dignity is enacted by 'facilitating [persons at risk] access to accurate and reliable information, ensuring their inclusion and meaningful participation in decision-making processes that affect them, and supporting their independent capacities, notably those of making free and informed choices, and of asserting their rights'

(2018:28). Viewing dignity as the cornerstone of humanitarian responses justifies understanding what digital dignity means and how to achieve, safeguard and protect dignity in the digital realm.

Respecting dignity in humanitarian action

Respecting dignity in humanitarian action, however, is not a clear cut endeavor. 'Dignity is a frequently invoked concept in humanitarian action and human rights. Yet, despite its widespread appearance in humanitarian policy and programme documents, advocacy campaigns and donor requirements, it remains a word with positive connotations but little agreement as to what it exactly entails. Without a clear agreement on what dignity means, it is difficult to know whether a response will uphold or undermine someone's dignity' (Mosel and Holloway 2019:vi). Although the lack of a unified understanding of what constitutes a dignified responses makes it harder to conceptualise dignity, the term, when understood in conjunction with the core humanitarian principles, do no harm, and definitions of protection, emphasises the guarantee and promotion of fundamental rights and the centrality of the interests of affected populations in a given humanitarian response.

Dignity and the digital transformation of aid

As the digital footprint of humanitarian actors grows, responsible use of technology and ensuring the dignity of populations receiving assistance and protection, poses multiple challenges to the humanitarian community, especially during times of armed conflict. The use of digital technology in the provision of humanitarian assistance and protection can take many different forms, from the digitisation of routine collection of potentially sensitive information to the use of biometrics for identification systems. This increasing use of technology requires an understanding of how dignity can be respected and, ultimately, safeguarded in the digital realm.

Describing digital dignity - a proposal for discussion

Digital dignity represents an optimal state in which rights and duties are realised, although the concept of digital dignity can be understood in different ways. Still, it is important for the discussion in these coming days at Wilton Park to engage in working towards a common understanding of digital dignity. In recent discussions

leading up to the organisation of this symposium at Wilton Park, Nathaniel Raymond of the Jackson Institute for Global Affairs at the University of Yale proposed the following description of digital dignity which could help guide the discussions: 'the state when the agency, autonomy, and identity of individuals, as well as the communities they are a part of, is respected, enhanced, and empowered through how data that is both derived from them and pertaining to them (inclusive of any interventions that utilize this data) are collected, handled, and employed in ways that realize the human rights and enhance the human security of these individuals and their communities.'[1] What transpires is that a conflict affected person in today's age of the digital transformation of humanitarian action is not only a data *subject* with rights, but in fact also data *agent* with agency.

Such an understanding allows for discussions about digital dignity to revolve around both dignity in the provision of service, ensuring that the use of technology is safe, dignified, and incorporates meaningful informed consent for the individuals whose information is collected.

If we consider affected people requiring humanitarian assistance and protection in armed conflict as well as other situations of violence not only as data subjects, but in fact as *data agents*, digital dignity could thus be understood not only as the right to access technology services but also to access personal data concerning them, the right to rectify / correct their personal data, the right to delete their personal data, in fact have the right as much to own their data as well as to anonymise their data so that it is no longer possible to identify them. Otherwise put, digital dignity is both being the agent of one's own identity as well as one's anonymity as a core requirement of humanitarian actors providing assistance and protection to affected populations in today's age of digital transformation.

Digital dignity also requires an understanding of how to protect not just Personally Identifiable Information and data, but also Demographically Identifiable Information and data that pertains to groups, as humanitarian action works closely with group data. OCHA has underscored the importance of protecting group data in addition to personal data (OCHA 2019).

Our task at the Wilton Park Conference on digital dignity in armed conflict – making digital dignity a reality

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[1] Correspondence between Nathanial Raymond and Markus Geisser, 29 May, 2019

The multidimensional nature of digital dignity leaves room for responses for promoting digital dignity to be creative. The promotion of digital dignity requires standardisation of procedures and best practices on data collection and retention, as well as further interrogation into the digital rights individuals may have and how those rights can in turn impact the type of assistance communities receive from humanitarian actors during times of armed conflict. The armed conflict component necessitates understanding digital rights in the realm of legal frameworks that govern times of war. Achieving a common understand of digital dignity requires understanding of how the Geneva Conventions apply to cyber attacks and cyber warfare. A commentary on their application in these circumstances would reinforce a common approach to digital dignity.

Dignity itself does not simply require procedures and guidelines to be put in place, but also requires that core humanitarian imperatives and principles are applied in the digital realm. Digital dignity requires the robust engagement of affected populations in designing, testing, and piloting the use of technology in humanitarian settings. Digital dignity also requires informed consent be developed in a meaningful way that empowers communities to take control of their personal information.

In sum, the conversation around digital dignity that the Wilton Park conference aims to generate is just beginning and is willingly experimental too. It will need to evolve over time as the implications of the use of digital technologies by humanitarian actors or in armed conflict as well as other situations of violence is increasingly studied and understood. The Wilton Park conference on digital dignity also aims to be practical by creating components for a roadmap for principled humanitarian action in the age of the digital transformation where the affected person's dignity is respected, protected and guaranteed not only in the physical realm, but also the digital realm.

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