The Power of Information: New Technologies for Philanthropy and Development (conference notes)

**blogs.lse.ac.uk**/polis/2011/09/15/what-use-are-new-media-technologies-for-development-giveandtec-live-notesh-conference/

You don't usually get this many smart suits at a development conference, but Indigo Trust's The Power of Information: New Technologies for Philanthropy and Development at trendy Kings Place was seeking to bring together money, technology and the developing world.

These are some notes written live during the day. [The Twitter hashtag with loads of good comments and links is #giveandtech]

Philip Thigo from the social media from development organisation SODNET in Kenya intelligently laid out the vast range of this issue, both technologically and demographically but also politically and ethically.

He stated a lot of what we all feel we know about how important new media has become, but it is also stuff that we have become blase about. The low barriers to and reach of new communications technology is historic – the amplification and viral nature of Internet and digital media gives it extraordinary scale. While from the citizen point of view, at a much more basic level, the lack of a need for technical knowledge means less training is needed and so there is much greater access to its power.
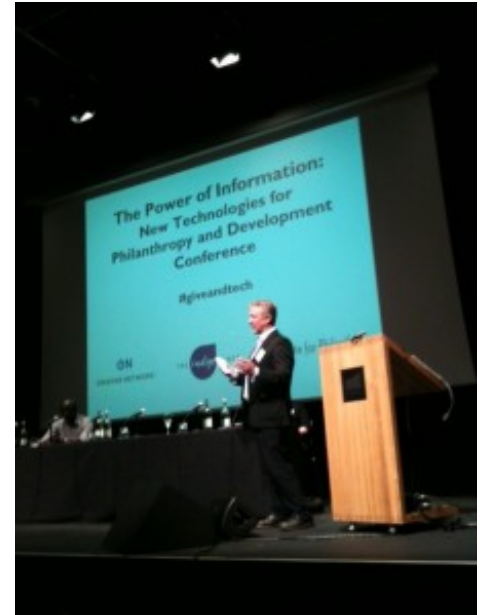
As Thigo put it: 'technology is a new strategic environment' not an option or choice. [As I put it elsewhere, 'media is now environmental'] The world is young and 90% live in developing countries. 750 million are on Facebook and 5.3 billion are on cellphones.

Thigo is ultimately interested in development not technology. He outlined some political benefits such as accountability and the integration marginalised groups. But he also raised the challenges it brings in terms of, for example, law and ethics – eg WikiLeaks. This is about connecting old with new and unexpected consequences such as the use of BBM in the UK riots – but, he said, it is worth the risk.

Richard Allan from Facebook sought to stress that Facebook is not just American and not just for kids and not just about Lady Gaga. [Have a listen to his boss' speech at Polis earlier this year and my take on Facebook] From small Italian towns to the Facebook global peace pages, Allan thinks FB can make connections for activists both locally and globally.

He also admitted that the academic research jury is still out on whether social expression makes people more or less open to new influences and connections beyond their own groups. But, meanwhile, Facebook is beavering away to improve the tools – such as good community translation services – to help bridge gaps and reduce barriers.

'There is a framework growing where people can radically reform the way they deliver educational material' he claimed. Allan points out this doesn't happen automatically. There is a lot of hard work needed to create these services and for Facebook to make it part of their business.

Development economist Owen Barder is a long-standing critic of the current aid orthodoxy and many of the institutions that attempt to deliver it. The key to greater effectiveness is accountability and the key to that is good information, he argued.

[I would agree. See my paper on social media and democratic governance]

Barder pointed out the disparities in perception of aid practice between the do-gooders in the global north and developing countries themselves. So for example, aid agencies are interested in the allocation of aid between different subjects such as education or water. Recipients are much more interested in the execution of aid, the information on how it is actually delivered. The actual aid information produced, says Barder, is all the stuff that interests the former, not the latter.

Those who provide services are not properly connected to the recipients he said. [I have written about media and NGOs here] Barder suggested much better open data standards for development organisations through initiatives such as IATI, that would provide the open information for innovation by civil society.

New media martyr?

Tom Steinberg from #mysociety the open information group put media technology in an historical context going right back to (my favourite) Bible translator William Tyndale, who was executed as a reward for his exploitation of the new printing technologies for ideological ends.

Tom's message was that someone who campaigns on an issue can always fail. You might not achieve your ends. But if you provide a tool for others to campaign you can never fail because that platform or channel will always have the potential to provide power to change for other people. That's a neat justification of the brilliant work #mysociety does but it still requires the people prepared to take the political risks (and in some countries that means risking Tyndale's fate).

So far, some great advice for those philanthropic/donor organisations about what to throw their money at. I know many will feel excited but uncomfortable because this kind of open, distributed, networked communications for change is not easy to measure. How do you plan for the viral? How do to you prove that SMS messages have made people's lives healthier? How do show a shift in power to people?

Philip Thigo from SODNET showed how the digital does provide a whole lot of data which gives a kind of evidence of networked communications working for development. You can count the clicks and see the websites. But how do you get beyond the 'suggestion box syndrome' asked Thigo? How do you show that the accountability channels are actually having impact?

Thigo pointed out that it is partly about the accountability organisations or donors becoming less competitive and more open and collaborative among themselves to share lessons and skills. Practitioners should talk about the problems as well as the possibilities of using new media for change.

Talking of problems, here's a quick list of critical thoughts from the Q&A/me:

- What about the digital divides? New tech can reinforce power for elites

- What about institutional resistance of NGOs etc – even nice people hate losing control

- What about need for skills – social media does not happen automatically

- information is not the same as action – how do you take data into real world

- what about the information that the powerful don't want to make public? The data that really matters is the stuff that authority hides – an iPhone app won't (necessarily) sort that.

- what about the boring, nitty gritty stuff that needs support from donors? Will philanthropy/social enterprise funders want to invest in that kind of long-term, unclear results work?

- what about the State? National governments and intergovernmental organisations can be corrupt, inefficient and backward – but can we ignore the biggest power broker, the most substantial bureaucracy in most

countries?

One thing that occurred to me is the idea of 'tools'. A lot of people here are referring to the new media technologies in a very instrumentalist way as if the platforms or devices are neutral. They do amazing things, people say, but they are 'just tools'. I am not so sure. I think one of the aspects we need to think through much more is how networked, interactive, participatory communications are different in the way they change – or can change – the relationship between citizen, power and organisations like donors and NGOs.