

Promoting humanitarian action in a digital worlds

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Humanitarianism is changing in the 21st century and so is the profile of those who respond to people in need. Credit: Swinburne University of Technology

A Swinburne and Red Cross collaboration is shedding new light on the forms and drivers of humanitarian behavior in a modern, digital context.

Three interlocking projects that consider the past, present and future of voluntary humanitarian action are at the heart of this collaboration.

The first of these is a scoping review, led by Swinburne researcher Dr. Sam Wilson, exploring the last twenty years of research into the drivers of voluntary humanitarian action.

"Humanitarianism is going through a bit of an identity crisis," says Dr. Wilson.

"Classic humanitarian action occurred in the context of disaster. In this context, it was very clear who was suffering and what suffering needed to be alleviated. Another classic form of humanitarian action, albeit in more peaceful contexts, is blood donation, where the link between problem cause and solution is so well understood that the problem of can be professionally managed.

"However, now, alongside these critical and tame problems, there are more complex humanitarian problems that have multiple causes and no easy answers. Consider, for example, complex problems like loneliness or biodiversity loss, which affect individual and collective welfare and well-being in ways that are often not obvious. With problems like these, it's not always clear if people are suffering. These problems are often so psychologically distant from us that people's suffering is effectively invisible."

"Our review of the peer-reviewed literature reveals that we know vanishingly little about the nature and drivers of voluntary humanitarian action in the context of complex humanitarian problems."

Mapping humanitarian action

Understanding what voluntary humanitarian action looks like in a

modern context was the aim of the second project of the Swinburne and Red Cross collaboration: the humanitarian mapping project.

Led by Swinburne researcher Associate Professor Anthony McCosker, the humanitarian mapping project analyses Instagram posts for how people talk about doing good in their communities.

Multiple factors are included in the analysis, including what kind of activities people tag as volunteering or charitable and where these activities are taking place.

By mapping the humanitarian activities discussed in contemporary communications, Swinburne and Red Cross aim to understand what "doing good" looks like in a modern, digital [context](#), as well as what motivates people to do good in the community.

"This project is an initial step for us to see how people are talking about it online," says Ms Ebony Gaylor, Head of Red Cross' Mobilisation and Social Change team.

Understanding why people reach out

Ms Gaylor notes that in recent decades, the notion of volunteering has become "professionalized," with training and resourcing setting the bar for engagement too high for easy involvement.

"For a long time, we've been thinking that doing good is this extra thing. We say, we'll do that when I have more time or when I'm not so tired or stressed. What we're trying to do is say that's fine. We're going to meet you right where you're at, to present opportunities for you to do good or help you do more, in the most bespoke, relevant, personally meaningful way possible."

Working out how to achieve this goal of helping people do more good, more easily, is the aim of the third project of the Swinburne and Red Cross collaboration: the efficiently doing good project.

Led by Swinburne researchers Dr. Wilson and Associate Professor Diane Sivasubramaniam, this project takes a deep dive into the myriad simple and complex actions that can be taken to address complex humanitarian problems.

The results of this project will shed new light onto the drivers of simple and more complicated voluntary humanitarian actions, making it easier to tailor opportunities to do good for Australians young and old.

People are responding differently

If the nature of what we see as humanitarianism is changing in the 21st century, the profile of who responds to people in need, and how, are also changing.

People have been volunteering with the Red Cross more than 100 years. In 2018, most of these are older people. Younger people are not participating in humanitarian actions in the same way as these long-standing volunteers.

"Red Cross knows that they need to transition with contemporary society," says Director of Swinburne's Social Innovation Research Institute, Professor Jane Farmer.

"They have to appeal to other generations and diverse people. These projects are helping us to understand people's motivation for doing humanitarian actions, what people think humanitarian actions look like, and how people use humanitarian action as part of their identity building."

Provided by Swinburne University of Technology

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