Photo by Alex Irvin

"A key question is whether or not digital networks are inherently so distributed and decentralized that they cannot form centralized leadership the way that physically organizing does. Digital revolutions or Twitter revolutions can have a lot of impact but people need to know how to organize and have hierarchies on the ground in order to translate their efforts into real change."

— Walter Isaacson @WalterIsaacson
President and Chief Executive Officer, The Aspen Institute

4 Translating information into power

Technology can serve as a powerful vehicle for connecting citizens and generating and sharing information. Countless new Web and cell phone applications are sprouting up across the developing world that combine communication, digitalization and data processing technologies in innovative ways in pursuit of humanitarian and development goals. A key objective is to narrow or eliminate the "information asymmetry" between the world's poorest people and better-off individuals, corporations or the state. A pursuant and arguably more ambitious objective is to translate information gains into greater accountability and performance from the institutions that serve the poor. The Brookings Blum Roundtable's discussion assessed the challenges for meeting these two goals.

Technology can reduce barriers to information flows in at least seven ways. First, it can provide convenient, low- or zero-cost platforms for search and exchange. Second, it can help overcome geographical constraints by bringing information to populations in remote areas. Third, it can anonymize individuals seeking information, thereby reducing the scope for discrimination. Fourth, it can expand the volume of information that can be transferred, allowing more frequent information exchanges and the sharing of more detailed information. Fifth, it can facilitate common information solutions—such as gap-filling, aggregation and analysis—whether through social networking, crowdsourcing or the processing of Big Data. Sixth, it can generate information systems and platforms (often open source) that can be easily replicated and brought to scale, such as the Janaagraha's I Paid A Bribe portal. And seventh, it can enable information to move more quickly, increasing the scope for real-time analysis and feedback.

Participants in the roundtable noted that simply unleashing more information into the public domain or within poor communities provides little guarantee that information will be consumed and put to use. In this respect, technology-driven information solutions face many of the same problems as do traditional solutions. A critical, and often ignored, criterion for success is the presence of sufficient demand for information among members of the target group. Factors such as literacy rates and the capacity to organize for collective action are important determinants of the uptake of information. On the other hand, the supply of information can vary in important ways that affect whether information is utilized. The quality, relevance, digestibility and complexity of information all matter, as does the form in which it is presented.

This can be illustrated by the experience of Kenya's Open Data Initiative. In July 2011, the Kenyan government released 160 data sets on a publicly accessible online portal. Despite much fanfare from the international press, the initiative found only modest resonance among Kenyan citizens. After an initial flurry of traffic, the number of Web visitors slowed to fewer than 120 page views a day. The sheet volume and complexity of data were seen as a constraint on the portal's usability. Another was the readiness of its audience; only a third of Kenyans have access to the Internet, and more than a third of the country's adults are illiterate.[16]

Even where market forces for information operate well, there is no guarantee that better information will be acted upon without recognition of the broader environment in

"It seems that we are in between eras, using 20th century tools to respond to 21st century development challenges. One of the things that we're seeing is a lack of faith in institutions where people ask for something and the right institution is not there to respond to them."

— Madeleine Albright
Chair, The Albright Stonebridge Group; U.S. Secretary of State, 1997–2001

Photo by Alex Irvin

Photo by Alex Irvin

"Technology can be terrific, and there are many examples we have where technology is working. But in this case we learnt that technology does not trump politics. If you have an accountability chain underpinned by expectations and decades of experience that tells you that certain types of accountability work and others don't, simply introducing technology will not change that dynamic."

— Rakesh Rajani @rakeshrajani
Head, Twaweza

Photo by Alex Irvin

"Governments are only beginning to figure out how to fully engage their citizens through these new communications technologies in a way that creates a reciprocal dialogue. At the moment, we're more in receivership mode than we are in participatory mode, but that will continue to change."

— Michael Froman
Deputy National Security Adviser for International Economic Affairs, National Security Council and National Economic Council

which that information is introduced. This includes factors such as the responsiveness and cooperation of the state and freedom of the press. For example, in September 2008 four Jordanian technologists developed the Web site Ishki.com to serve as a complaint brokerage to collect and organize citizen complaints about their country's public and private sectors. After a year of growing activity, the site's number of new users and submitted complaints began to drop off. The site's developers attribute this to the hesitancy of Jordanians to publicly complain about powerful institutions and individuals, and the fear that their IP addresses would be tracked by the authorities.[17]

This example serves as a reminder that information does not guarantee accountability. Bringing to light an institution's failings or corruption does not, by itself, imply any penalties or consequences. The roundtable's discussion highlighted the tension this poses for those seeking to use connectivity and information to deliver systemic change in a poor institutional environment: Should technology be used to demand change from institutions or to help the poor become more self-sufficient and their own change agents? In other words, are information solutions best employed as a substitute, as a complement, or as a catalyst for good institutions?

Technology provides a tool for citizens to both disintermediate and mediate vis-à-vis institutions. Participants in the roundtable hypothesized that institutional failings may be most effectively addressed by a combination of the two: disintermediation where institutions are not crucial or are beyond repair; and mediation where institutions play a pivotal role and respond constructively to public pressure. Without the right balance, information solutions may do more harm than good. For instance, amplifying people's demands without a clear grasp of choices or without the institutions to channel those demands may lead to worse policy decisions.

Best use of tech for dev will not be created by us but by people on the ground who are closer to the problem; able to id solutions **#blum2012**

Photo by Alex Irvin

"Mass networks, by definition, start with scale, so getting big is not the challenge. But to make them maximally effective you have to go from big back down to small by forging convergence and coalescence around a smaller number of nodes that then feed into regular channels of communication and accountability."

— **Anne Marie Slaughter** @SlaughterAM
Bert G. Kerstetter '66 University Professor of Politics and International Affairs, Princeton University

An example of this tension is provided by the use of social media tools to support the transition to democracy in Guinea following the Bloody Monday massacre in September 2009. The civil society group Alliance Guinea set up the Ushahidi open source mapping software to support citizens' reporting during the 2010 presidential election. This initiative was carried out in partnership with the African Elections Project (an independent elections monitoring and information group), the National Independent Election Committee and a number of mobile phone operators.

The Ushahidi platform had a strong response from citizens, but was handicapped by its limited authority: citizens' reports could not be verified and were vulnerable to deliberate false reporting; Alliance Guinea lacked the capacity and authority to respond to reports of malpractice; and during postelection violence, the government temporarily blocked access to the text services upon which the platform depended. Citizens' reporting may well have succeeded at deterring fraud at the margin, but it was no substitute for formal election monitoring. The integration of election monitoring and informal citizen monitoring, as has been attempted in other countries, would appear to offer the potential for better results. This could include uploading reports from election monitors on the mapping software alongside crowdsourced information and using independent election monitors to inform the design of Alliance Guinea's interventions and advocacy campaigns.[18]

Photo by Alex Irvin

"We're swimming in an ocean of real-time digital data being generated for free, everyday, by populations around the world. The data out there are immense. There were more data created in 2011 than in all of the rest of human history combined back to the invention of the Phoenician alphabet."

— **Robert Kirkpatrick** @rgkirkpatrick
Director, UN Global Pulse, Executive Office of the Secretary-General

Electrical Student Jean Louis Thomas writes a text message to a friend while in downtown Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

Photo: © Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation/Natasha Fillion