

## COMMUNICATIONS AS A TOOL FOR HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE BASED ON THE CASE OF YEMEN

## КОМУНІКАЦІЇ ЯК ІНСТРУМЕНТ ГУМАНІТАРНОГО РЕАГУВАННЯ НА ПРИКЛАДІ ЄМЕНУ

### Shevchenko Olena

Doctor of Political Sciences, Associate Professor of the Department of International Media Communications and Communication Technologies of the Educational and Scientific Institute of International Relations, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv,

e-mail: [shevchenko\\_olena@knu.ua](mailto:shevchenko_olena@knu.ua)

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3119-9193>

### Pasichnyk Anastasia

Master of the Education Program 'International Communications', Educational and Scientific Institute of International Relations, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv,

e-mail: [mk24m.pasichnyk@clouds.iir.edu.ua](mailto:mk24m.pasichnyk@clouds.iir.edu.ua)

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-9465-940X>

### Шевченко Олена

Доктор політичних наук, доцент кафедри міжнародних медіакомунікацій та комунікативних технологій Навчально-наукового інституту міжнародних відносин, Київського національного університету імені Тараса Шевченка,

e-mail: [shevchenko\\_olena@knu.ua](mailto:shevchenko_olena@knu.ua)

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3119-9193>

### Пасічник Анастасія

Магістр освітньої програми «Міжнародні комунікації» Навчально-наукового інституту міжнародних відносин Київського національного університету імені Тараса Шевченка,

e-mail: [mk24m.pasichnyk@clouds.iir.edu.ua](mailto:mk24m.pasichnyk@clouds.iir.edu.ua)

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-9465-940X>

**Abstract.** *This article explores how communication functions as a strategic tool within the operations of international organizations during the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen. The authors explore how modern communication tools – digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and fact-checking platforms – enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian operations, foster coordination among donors, governments, and local communities, and influence public trust in international aid. Particular focus is given to the ethical dimensions of humanitarian communication, including information transparency, data protection, and the “do no harm” principle. Using the case of Yemen, the study demonstrates how information asymmetry, political fragmentation, and digital inequality complicate access to affected populations and undermine humanitarian neutrality. The research underscores the need to establish new standards of humanitarian ethics in the digital age, where the boundaries between reliable information and manipulation have become increasingly blurred. It concludes that effective communication functions not only as an operational tool of humanitarian response, but also as a crucial element for maintaining trust, legitimacy, and resilience across the humanitarian system.*

**Keywords:** *humanitarian communication; Yemen; artificial intelligence; ethical standards; disinformation; humanitarian diplomacy.*

**Анотація.** *Стаття присвячена аналізу ролі комунікацій у діяльності міжнародних організацій в умовах затяжної гуманітарної кризи в Ємені. Автори досліджують, як сучасні комунікаційні інструменти – цифрові технології, штучний інтелект і фактчекінгові платформи – підвищують ефективність гуманітарних операцій, сприяють координації між донорами, урядами та місцевими громадами, а також впливають на рівень довіри до*

міжнародної допомоги. Особливу увагу приділено етичним аспектам гуманітарних комунікацій, включно з прозорістю інформаційних потоків, захистом даних і принципом «do no harm». На прикладі Ємену показано, як інформаційна асиметрія, політична фрагментація та цифрова нерівність ускладнюють доступ до постраждалих і підривають гуманітарну нейтральність. Дослідження окреслює необхідність формування нових стандартів гуманітарної етики у цифрову добу, де межі між достовірною інформацією та маніпуляцією дедалі більше розмиваються. Зроблено висновок, що ефективні комунікації є не лише технічним інструментом реагування, а й важливим чинником підтримки довіри, легітимності та стійкості гуманітарної системи.

**Ключові слова:** гуманітарна комунікація; Ємен; штучний інтелект; етичні стандарти; дезінформація; гуманітарна дипломатія.

**Introduction.** In modern crisis settings, the work of international organizations is increasingly shaped by the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and interconnected digital media. These instruments facilitate swift information flow, real-time coordination, and more effective resource allocation; however, they also introduce significant challenges, including the circulation of disinformation, information overload, the politicization of humanitarian assistance, digital divides, and limited access for the very populations in need. As Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp observe, modern communication practices in humanitarian contexts go far beyond the simple transfer of information; they shape the social relations that influence how crises are understood and how responses to them are formed (*Couldry & Hepp, 2013*).

These challenges are inherently multidimensional, encompassing technical issues (infrastructure, data management, cybersecurity), ethical dilemmas (privacy, representation of affected populations, politicization of aid), and regulatory concerns (accountability of digital sphere and the preservation of humanitarian space). In Yemen, these problems acquire particular urgency given that a high level of fragmentation, political polarization, and limited access to independent sources of information are inherent to the country's information ecosystem (*ACAPS, 2024*).

Globally, the urgency of this issue is driven by the rapid expansion of humanitarian needs coupled with a contraction of available resources. By 2025, the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide had surpassed 122 million, and rising geopolitical instability continued to undermine both the funding base and the overall effectiveness of humanitarian operations (*UNHCR, 2025*). In Yemen, these global dynamics are amplified. Following the Houthi takeover of Sana'a in 2014 and the outbreak of large-scale hostilities in 2015, the country descended into one of the deepest humanitarian crises of the modern era (*Council on Foreign Relations, 2025*). The destruction of infrastructure, mass displacement, and chronic food and health insecurity have become defining features of the humanitarian landscape.

Today, Yemen is described as the epicenter of the world's most severe humanitarian catastrophe. Approximately 24.1 million people – around 80% of the population – are in need of assistance and protection, around 4.5 million have been internally displaced, and the risk of famine remains critical. According to United Nations data, an estimated 233,000 people have died since the onset of the war, more than half of them due to indirect causes such as hunger, lack of medical care, and the collapse of essential infrastructure (*United Nations in Yemen, 2024; USA for UNHCR, 2024*). Under such conditions, effective communication becomes a decisive factor in ensuring access to affected populations, coordinating actions among donors, governments, and humanitarian actors, and sustaining public trust in international aid efforts.

**The purpose of the article** is to analyze the role of communication in the activities of international organizations as an instrument of humanitarian response amid the protracted crisis in Yemen. The study seeks to examine how contemporary communication instruments – including digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and fact-checking platforms – affect the efficiency of humanitarian interventions, the transparency of information flows, and the establishment of ethical standards in crisis settings. Particular attention is given to countering disinformation, managing digital ecosystems, and exploring the role of humanitarian diplomacy in fostering trust among international organizations, donors, and crisis-affected communities.

**Literature review.** In contemporary studies on humanitarian response, communication is increasingly understood as a strategic instrument that builds trust among stakeholders, legitimizes the activities of international organizations, and enables effective access to crisis-affected populations. It shapes humanitarian management – both informational and ethical dimensions of response.

The notion of information lies at the core of any understanding of communication processes. Information can be viewed as a structured reflection of reality – messages about the nature, society, human thought – employed in processes of cognition, communication, governance, production, and education. In modern society, the function of information has expanded dramatically, as rapid technological change continues to transform how it is produced, processed, and applied (*Makarenko et al., 2022*).

Classical models conceptualize communication primarily as the transmission and interpretation of messages. However, J. Carey offers a broader understanding of communication – as a symbolic process of creating and sustaining a shared reality (*Carey, 2002*). Within humanitarian operations, this perspective implies that effective communication goes well beyond the mere dissemination of information; it involves constructing a shared framework of meaning between international organizations and local communities, thereby fostering trust, solidarity, and social responsibility.

European researchers Nathaniel Raymond, Brittany Card, and Ziad al-Achkar, in their work “What is Humanitarian Communication?” define humanitarian communication as using information and communication technologies to preserve the lives and dignity of affected populations in line with the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. They identify three key criteria – Population, Principles, and Purpose – which determine who communicates, on what basis, and to what end. The authors emphasize that access to reliable information becomes as essential as access to food or water, enabling individuals to navigate uncertainty, seek assistance, and make informed choices. Yet, the growing digitalization within the humanitarian sector brings forward new risks, ranging from cyberattacks and privacy breaches to data manipulation (*Raymond et al., 2015*).

Daniel Gilman, an expert with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, suggests the notion of “humanitarian cyberspace” – a novel informational domain that warrants protection equivalent to that afforded to traditional humanitarian areas. He emphasizes the necessity to develop global regulations that would prohibit cyberattacks on humanitarian infrastructure, ensure the secure circulation of data, and protect affected populations from digital exploitation (*Gilman, 2020*).

Ukrainian scholars O. Kuchmii and O. Frolova have also contributed to the theoretical foundations of the field by examining how humanitarian cooperation is evolving under hybrid threats. They argue that, in response to these challenges, international humanitarian collaboration necessitates new coordination mechanisms among states, international organizations, and civil society actors to prevent conflicts and uphold international stability. Trust within the humanitarian system is undermined by information asymmetries, reliance on donors, and competition between international and local actors (*Kuchmii&Frolova, 2018*). Under such conditions, ethical, transparent, and locally sensitive communication acquires particular importance, as it reinforces trust and enhances the cultural relevance of humanitarian initiatives.

It should be noted that the effectiveness of international initiatives relies primarily on public trust and awareness. Much like in the field of climate communications, humanitarian organizations must remain proactive in countering disinformation, ensuring transparency, and sustaining open dialogue with affected communities (*Shevchenko, 2023*).

The study by Danish researchers Gry Høngsmark Knudsen and Domen Bajde illustrates how social media are reshaping the models of humanitarian engagement. Drawing on the concept of the mediatization of humanitarian action, the authors show that online activity can generate tangible offline outcomes, creating new opportunities for resource mobilization while simultaneously introducing complex ethical dilemmas. Social networks construct a “quasi-public space” in which the boundaries between the real and the digital become increasingly blurred, thereby transforming the very notion of social responsibility. Media thus cease to function merely as channels for message transmission and instead become active participants in the social processes that shape institutional

logic, communicative strategies, and public perceptions of humanitarian assistance (Høngsmark&Bajde, 2016).

In “The Crucial Role of Humanitarian Communication in the Fake News and Infoglut Era” L.Gosp-Server analyzes the challenges faced by humanitarian communication amid disinformation and infoglut. The author notes that “humanitarian organisations must adopt strategic and principled communication measures to safeguard their credibility and mission”. The author also observes that humanitarian organizations are currently confronting such problems as declining public trust, shrinking financial support, and reduced public engagement. The study proposes multilevel communication strategies that include enhancing staff competencies, fostering collaboration with local communities, utilizing emerging media platforms (such as TikTok, Threads, and WhatsApp), and employing storytelling and visual communication practices that preserve the human involvement and uphold ethical standards (Gosp-Server, 2025).

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into humanitarian operations has increasingly attracted scholarly attention. David Miliband identifies AI as a transformative means to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian response – from forecasting natural disasters to providing personalized education for children in crisis zones. He also emphasizes the necessity of upholding ethical standards and transparency, which aligns closely with the concept of integrated humanitarian communications (Miliband, 2024).

The ethical dimension of digital humanitarian activity is comprehensively outlined in the “Guidance Note: Humanitarian Data Ethics”. The document defines the key principles of security, fairness, transparency, privacy protection, and the “do no harm” standard, emphasizing the necessity of conducting an ethical audit prior to the implementation of any information campaign (OCHA, 2020).

**Main results of research.** Yemen remains the epicenter of one of the world’s most severe and protracted humanitarian crises. The ongoing conflict and the collapse of state institutions have deepened structural vulnerabilities that long predated the 2014 escalation, when Yemen was already among the poorest nations in the Arab world, characterized by low human development indicators and chronic food insecurity. The economic situation has deteriorated dramatically due to trade blockades, currency devaluation, and soaring inflation, forcing households to adopt harmful coping strategies – ranging from child marriage and human trafficking to precarious and unsafe forms of labor, particularly among children, including recruitment into armed groups. Food and medical insecurity persist as major challenges, with rising prices of essential goods, the deterioration of healthcare services, and restricted educational opportunities exacerbating the humanitarian crisis (*The World Bank in Yemen, 2024; USAID, 2024; UNICEF Yemen, 2024*). In addition, gender inequality, limited access to education and employment for women, widespread gender-based violence, and prevalence of early marriage increase the vulnerability and significantly hinder prospects for national recovery (OCHA, 2024; UN Women, 2024).

Within the conditions of armed conflict and restricted territorial access, humanitarian organizations take on a central role in collecting, validating, and interpreting information. With the decline of state institutions and independent monitoring becoming nearly impossible, humanitarian personnel remain among the limited trustworthy sources of information regarding the impacts of warfare, large-scale displacement, and associated crises. Their work includes conducting needs assessments, facilitating focus-group discussions, gathering testimonies from affected communities, and documenting living conditions in areas that are difficult to reach. Humanitarian organizations in Yemen coordinate information flows, systematically track key indicators, and adjust their interventions in response to the dynamics of the crisis. Nevertheless, the impact of such communication is limited due to censorship, control over digital platforms, restricted access to independent information, and algorithmic filtering. Key terms and narratives are often suppressed when they contradict official policies, reducing the visibility of pressing humanitarian concerns. This particularly affects reporting on gender-related and climate-sensitive dimensions of the crisis – both essential for effective response planning and vulnerability assessment. A telling example of Yemen’s restricted digital environment occurred in September 2023, when the state telecommunications company YemenNet, controlled by the Houthis (Ansar Allah), blocked access to communication platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Signal, resulting in the detention of peaceful

demonstrators. Such restrictions undermine humanitarian initiatives – especially programs supporting women and combating gender-based violence – and delaying the dissemination of life-saving information about urgent population needs (*Article 19, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024*).

Alongside censorship and control over the digital environment, the spread of fake news has severely undermined the efficiency of humanitarian communication. Disinformation campaigns deliberately distort the realities faced by affected populations and misrepresent the operational purpose of humanitarian institutions. Increasingly, these organizations themselves have become targets of coordinated disinformation attacks. For instance, in September 2023, humanitarian workers in Yemen were subjected to social media campaigns and public incitement to distrust and hostility: during Friday sermons, clerics spread messages eroding confidence in aid workers, while online campaigns created an atmosphere of fear among humanitarian personnel (*The Media Line, 2023*). In the post-truth era, disinformation shapes a distorted perception of humanitarian realities, militarizes public communication, and undermines the neutrality of humanitarian organizations. This phenomenon became especially evident in 2024, when the Houthis circulated manipulated videos depicting alleged attacks on ships in the Red Sea, discrediting international efforts and eroding the perceived impartiality of humanitarian actors (*IJNet, 2024*).

Fake news fosters a hostile environment toward humanitarian workers and increases security risks for both aid providers and recipients, compelling organizations to adapt their operational strategies. These adaptations include stricter planning of aid distribution and a shift toward cash-based assistance to mitigate risks. In 2025, the United Nations was compelled to halt its operations in Saada Province following the detention of eight staff members, resulting in the suspension of essential humanitarian aid in the areas most acutely impacted by the crisis (*AP News, 2025*).

As the contemporary humanitarian landscape demonstrates, the combined effects of declining funding and rampant disinformation erode public trust in humanitarian aid and shift political priorities from international assistance toward domestic agendas. In 2023, the United Nations appealed for \$4.3 billion to support humanitarian operations in Yemen, yet only \$1.2 billion was pledged at the donor conference – far below the required amount. The shortfall coincided with the disinformation surge that eroded trust in humanitarian organizations, leading to severe consequences for aid operations. By 2025, the situation in Yemen's western coastal regions, particularly Hodeidah, had reached catastrophic levels, with child malnutrition rates rising to 33%. Reduced assistance from the United States and other donors, combined with inefficient food distribution throughout 2024, deepened the crisis. UNICEF reports that one in two children under the age of five, along with approximately 1.4 million pregnant and breastfeeding women, are affected by malnutrition. Years of ongoing conflict have pushed more than half of the country's population into reliance on humanitarian support. Meanwhile, the deepening malnutrition emergency and shrinking financial resources have made the provision of aid increasingly challenging (*Reuters, 2025*).

In contemporary humanitarian contexts, the efficiency of communication is largely determined by organizations' ability to counter disinformation and maintain transparency. Humanitarian workers must invest in communication competencies, clearly define communication objectives, select appropriate tools, identify target audiences, and craft key messages, all while adhering to established "red lines" and the principles of neutrality. Designing a strategic communication policy enables organizations to balance the timely dissemination of public information with adherence to humanitarian standards (*Gosp-Server, 2025*).

This prioritization is particularly significant within the framework of the "Humanitarian Reset" initiative launched by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) to enhance the effectiveness and legitimacy of the humanitarian system. The initiative aims to optimize crisis response, reform internal processes, decentralize decision-making, and empower affected communities to participate directly in decision-making. These measures enable humanitarian organizations to better coordinate operations in complex environments and respond more effectively to the local needs. The implementation of the Humanitarian Reset principles is aligned with the "Grand Bargain" reforms, which emphasize decentralized coordination, data democratization, and the prioritization of local and national actors in both funding and decision-making (*ICVA, 2025*). Integrating these approaches within communication strategies allows humanitarian organizations to maintain relevance in the public sphere, counter disinformation and infoglut (information overload),

and enhance community participation in grassroots and collective initiatives. Ultimately, these efforts strengthen the overall effectiveness of humanitarian responses and reinforce public trust in humanitarian actors. In this context, in 2025, responding to reduced funding and growing humanitarian needs, Yemen launched the first phase of standard funding through the Yemen Humanitarian Fund (YHF) amounting to USD 20.6 million. This reflects a commitment to more efficient, localized humanitarian action – particularly through enhancing assistance to local and national organizations (*ReliefWeb, 2025*).

A principal step in tackling state control over the digital space, disinformation, and fake news has been the establishment of fact-checking platforms such as Hakikah, which verify the authenticity of materials and debunk disinformation, including through the analysis of images and videos. Launched in 2021, the platform employs a three-step methodology: identifying the original sources of information, collecting details about the roots of fabricated materials, and verifying authenticity using tools such as YouTube DataViewer, Fake News Debunker by InVID, and WeVerify. In August 2024, several Yemeni accounts on the social media platform X posted claims that the U.S. aircraft carrier *Eisenhower*, previously stationed in the Red Sea, had been targeted by a Yemeni missile strike. However, Hakikah traced official U.S. Navy press releases, which clarified that the *Eisenhower* had actually left the Red Sea in June. Similarly, in October, Yemeni news sites and social media accounts circulated photographs allegedly showing U.S. and British fighter jets striking the Yemeni capital, Sana'a. Using Google Reverse Image Search, Hakikah determined that the image in question actually depicted an Israeli airstrike on Beirut, Lebanon (*IJNet, 2024*).

When integrated with external communications and advocacy, humanitarian diplomacy enables organizations to influence political decision-making and secure access to affected populations in crisis areas, even when online discourse and public politicization complicate response efforts (*Gosp-Server, 2025*). In Yemen, the practical dimension of humanitarian diplomacy includes negotiations over access and staff security (for instance, the UN's diplomatic efforts following the 2025 detention of humanitarian workers in Saada Province), advocacy with donors through public appeals and reports on the effects of reduced funding for food security, and the application of localized financing mechanisms, including the Yemen Humanitarian Fund (YHF), to ensure rapid and community-driven responses. This dual strategy, combining public advocacy with confidential negotiations, aligns with OCHA's conceptualization of humanitarian diplomacy as a balance between high-level lobbying and ensuring operational access to affected populations (*OCHA, 2023*).

In contemporary humanitarian operations, artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly employed to forecast food security trends and enhance the efficiency of communication processes. A study published in December 2023 introduced a methodology for predicting food consumption levels up to 60 days in advance at the subnational level in Yemen, utilizing Reservoir Computing machine learning models to analyze time-series data. This approach enables a faster response of humanitarian organizations to famine risks, optimize resource allocation, and prevent disruptions in humanitarian supply chains (*Zavalishin et.al., 2023*).

AI technologies are also being scaled to protect communities affected by extreme weather events. The Flood Hub platform, developed by Google in partnership with the UN and NGOs, forecasts floods in over 80 countries, including parts of Yemen, and provides online mapping tools for use by humanitarian organizations and local populations (*Haridy, 2024*). To enhance coordination and real-time data analysis, platforms such as DEEP (Data Entry and Exploration Platform) are employed. They allow for the semi-automated processing of extensive textual datasets and provide rapid access to information needed for humanitarian decision-making. This functionality is applied, in particular, within Yemen's Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) and Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) processes (*The DEEP, 2023*).

The integration of artificial intelligence in humanitarian operations requires adherence to high ethical standards. According to the Alan Turing Institute, AI ethics is defined as “a set of values, principles, and techniques that employ widely accepted standards of right and wrong to guide moral conduct in the development and use of AI technologies” (*HDSEG, 2020*). Key considerations include informed consent from aid recipients, algorithmic transparency, digital inclusivity, and accountability. This is particularly critical in crisis contexts such as Yemen, where limited access to electricity and the Internet requires the combination of digital tools with traditional communication

channels – including radio broadcasting, the work of field personnel, and direct engagement with local communities. The insufficient involvement of local humanitarian organizations in global discussions on AI ethics may further exacerbate existing imbalances within the humanitarian system, particularly in terms of resource distribution and access to information.

The topic of ethical communication becomes particularly acute in situations where political decisions directly affect humanitarian response. In March 2025, Amnesty International published a report documenting the consequences of a sharp reduction in humanitarian aid by the U.S. government. Following a decision by Donald Trump's administration, most programs run by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) – including food assistance, medical services, shelters for survivors of gender-based violence, and child protection initiatives – were suspended. The communication dimension of this process revealed a profound ethical crisis: humanitarian organizations received contradictory or incomplete messages from government structures, leading to the chaotic termination of projects. As one international organization staff member noted: "...We were forced to make decisions that literally determined who would live and who would die, with minimal information" (*Amnesty International*, 2025).

This case demonstrates how the absence of transparent communication and incoherence between political decisions and humanitarian structures can erode trust within the international aid system. The political rhetoric accompanying the announcement of funding cuts also affected the public perception of humanitarian organizations, placing them in a position of forced political alignment, which contradicts the principle of neutrality in humanitarian diplomacy. Amnesty International reports that the consequences were most severe for women and girls: the suspension of funding led to the closure of dozens of support centers for survivors of gender-based violence. Consequently, the ethical dilemma between "donor transparency" and "accountability to beneficiaries" acquired a tangible dimension – a communication gap that placed human lives at risk. A Yemeni human rights defender emphasized that "funding cuts do not just end projects, funding cuts silence victims' voices and weaken justice in Yemen" (*Amnesty International*, 2025).

Moreover, the U.S. decision to label Ansar Allah (the Houthis) as a terrorist group further complicated the communication environment: because the associated legal procedures became too complex to manage, humanitarian organizations were forced to halt their operations in the northern regions, where the majority of the population in need resides. This demonstrates that the absence of effective communication between political and humanitarian actors severely impedes access to affected populations and ultimately erodes fundamental humanitarian norms, including humanity, impartiality, and neutrality.

Ultimately, the ethics of humanitarian communication extend beyond accuracy and transparency to encompass the responsible use of communication as a tool for protecting life rather than advancing political agendas. The failure to uphold these principles – through opacity, delays, or politicization – immediate and devastating consequences for millions. Yemen has become a striking example of how the ethical degradation of communication exacerbates a humanitarian catastrophe, undermining trust in the international aid system.

**Conclusion.** The findings confirm that communication serves not merely as a technical tool of humanitarian response, but as a pivotal factor in building trust, upholding ethical standards, and strengthening the effectiveness of international operations in crisis environments. The case of Yemen demonstrates that information exchange between international organizations, donors, government institutions, and local communities occurs under conditions of profound political fragmentation, digital inequality, and pervasive information manipulation.

The challenge of balancing humanitarian neutrality with the imperative to publicly counter disinformation remains a subject of continued discussion. Proactive communication is indispensable for safeguarding the legitimacy and credibility of humanitarian missions. However, excessive public engagement risks being interpreted as political alignment, thereby undermining the foundational principle of neutrality. This highlights the need to develop new standards of the ethics of humanitarian action in a digital environment, where the boundary between information and manipulation is becoming increasingly blurred.

Humanitarian diplomacy, when integrated with public advocacy, continues to serve as a vital instrument for securing access to affected populations and mediating between political and



humanitarian objectives. Within this context, the Humanitarian Reset initiative represents a paradigm shift from centralized to localized humanitarian governance, positioning communication as a central mechanism for promoting local participation and democratizing decision-making processes.

The application of artificial intelligence in humanitarian operations opens new possibilities for crisis forecasting, data monitoring, and communication efficiency. However, it simultaneously raises critical ethical concerns regarding algorithmic transparency, data protection, and the inclusion of local communities in decision-making. Without adequate safeguards, technological innovation risks reinforcing existing asymmetries of power and information between global and local actors.

In conclusion, humanitarian communication in Yemen operates both as a mechanism for delivering aid and as a contested sphere for the shaping of narratives. It represents a multidimensional space where ethics, technology, and diplomacy intersect. The ongoing development of these communicative practices will critically influence the efficacy of crisis management, as well as the credibility and ethical legitimacy of international humanitarian assistance in the twenty-first century.

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