

Techno-Humanitarianism and the Accountability Paradox

Journal:	<i>Social Media and Society</i>
Manuscript ID	Draft
Manuscript Type:	Original Research Article
Topic:	techno-humanitarianism, technocolonialism, platform governance, humanitarian communication, accountability
Abstract:	Corporate technology companies increasingly present their interventions in crisis as humanitarian action. Platform scholarship explains the power of these companies, and humanitarian communication theory explains the mediation of suffering, yet neither examines the communication through which corporate technology acquires humanitarian standing. This article examines that communication through 116 documents covering twelve interventions in the platform, financial, connectivity, and data and AI sectors between 2012 and 2025. The analysis identifies a second communicative relationship operating beside the witnessing relationship between spectators and sufferers. Within it, corporations address UN agencies and INGOs directly, and suffering functions as the condition of institutional partnership rather than as the object of empathic response. The article terms the two relationships the economy of empathy and the economy of suffering and treats them as coexisting rather than successive. Techno-humanitarianism names the constitutive discourse of the second relationship, and this discourse operates as the instrument of platformization, because institutional partnership rather than user adoption admits corporate technology into crisis response. Two arguments follow. The constitutive accountability paradox establishes that the conditions producing corporate humanitarian authority are structurally identical to the conditions preventing accountability, so the deficit cannot be corrected without dissolving the authority. A typology of foreclosure then specifies the positions produced for affected communities. Some positions remain open to counter-discourse and others can be contested only by leaving the aid relationship. Ontological erasure marks those who never register in the system's moral field. The arguments explain why accurate, sustained testimony altered none of the arrangements examined.



Techno-Humanitarianism and the Accountability Paradox

In February 2022, Airbnb pledged free temporary accommodation for up to 100,000 people fleeing Ukraine, and within months the company reported tens of thousands housed at a speed it presented as beyond the reach of established humanitarian institutions (Airbnb, 2022). The case exemplifies corporate intervention through platform infrastructure, in which a company repurposes its marketplace as crisis response. The self-presentation is familiar from platform scholarship. The claim to merely enable and connect has long allowed platform companies to occupy governing positions while deflecting the responsibilities that attach to them (Gillespie, 2010), and platforms have steadily absorbed functions once held by public institutions (van Dijck et al., 2018). What is new is the field in which that claim now operates. Displaced people enter such a response not as rights-bearing subjects under international protection law but in the position the marketplace supplies, that of the service user. Their entitlements derive from corporate terms and continue at the discretion of individual hosts rather than by institutional obligation (Latonero and Kift, 2018). A corporation intervening in this way performs a humanitarian function without producing the humanitarian subject that function presupposes.

A year later, Mastercard's CEO described digital cash programs to the United Nations Security Council as "a fast, transparent, secure and more effective way to deliver life-saving assistance at the last mile" (Miebach, 2023, para. 23). He framed the company's humanitarian role as "putting the whole of our businesses into service" (Miebach, 2023, para. 14), and through the Mastercard Aid Network the company deployed its payment network across refugee settlements in Jordan and Lebanon. Yet World Bank research documented that communities enrolled in these systems had no mechanism to contest decisions made about their accounts, including the suspension of assistance (Zimmerman et al., 2020). The case exemplifies corporate intervention through payment infrastructure, in which assistance takes

the form of an account and the person assisted holds the position of the customer. Critical work on financial inclusion has already shown that incorporating poor and displaced people into commercial payment systems serves the providers as much as the included (Gabor and Brooks, 2017). The deficit the World Bank documented follows from that design rather than from one failed program. The same deployment that delivers assistance extends the corporation's payment system into settings it had not reached. A corporation intervening in this way uses the humanitarian register to present market development as humanitarian action.

Although the two cases occupy different sectors and run on different infrastructures, they share a single communicative process. In each, a corporate actor claimed a humanitarian role through public communication while the communities governed through the deployment gained no means of holding the corporation accountable. This article asks how that process operates, and what it produces for the communities subjected to it.

The critical literature on digital humanitarianism has developed along four lines, and none of them reaches the communication through which corporate actors claim a humanitarian role. The first line concerns the experience of distant publics. The post-humanitarian critique argues that digital media reorganize the encounter with suffering around the spectator's own gratification, so that low-effort gestures of liking and sharing come to stand in for solidarity (Chouliaraki, 2013). Audience research has given this concern an empirical base, identifying how Western publics respond to mediated suffering across "affective, ecstatic, politicised and detached" forms of engagement (Kyriakidou, 2015, pp. 219–220). Research inside humanitarian organizations examines the production side of the same relation, showing how professionals navigate ethical and instrumental pressures in producing these appeals (Orgad, 2013; Wright, 2018).

A second line concerns the fit between digital tools and material need. Archival work has traced a durable technophilia, an "imaginative framework" within which contemporary digital tools remediate earlier paper-based technologies of colonial population management (Seuferling and Leurs, 2021, p. 670). Single-case studies have examined the newest of these tools in deployment, including blockchain pilots in Jordanian refugee camps (Jutel, 2022) and refugee storytelling on TikTok (Marino, 2024).

A third line concerns structure. Platform scholarship has shown how a small number of companies have acquired the scale and indispensability of infrastructure (Plantin et al., 2018) while running it on an extractive business model (Srnicek, 2017). Humanitarian agencies now operate on that infrastructure, from cloud hosting to payment systems, and this dependency moves decisions about the governance of displaced people into commercial architectures that the agencies themselves do not control (Madianou, 2019).

The last of these lines is the only one that examines corporations as communicators, and it examines them as producers of consumer appeals. Brand aid scholarship has shown how corporations attach humanitarian causes to consumer products, recruiting Western publics as ethical shoppers whose purchases become a mode of helping (Richey and Ponte, 2011). The closest precedent for treating institutional communicative material as primary data analyzed UNRWA's internal communications during US funding cuts (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2019), but the institution examined is a UN agency rather than a corporate actor.

The four lines therefore stop, in pairs, at the edge of the same object. The experiential and consumer-facing critiques study how publics are addressed, and the material and structural critiques study corporate technology already inside the humanitarian field. None examines how corporate actors address the humanitarian system itself, in the documents where partnership is proposed and humanitarian standing is claimed. They stop there because they share a model, one in which humanitarian communication runs from organizations to

publics and concerns the mediation of suffering. Within that model, further research can multiply cases and sharpen critique, but it cannot register a humanitarian relationship that publics never enter, and it cannot explain an accountability deficit that arises between corporations and institutions. Platform scholarship, on which the structural line draws, approaches this edge from the other side. It supplies an account of these companies and their power, but not of the humanitarian register through which that power enters crisis settings. Closing the gap therefore requires revising the model of humanitarian communication rather than extending its evidence, and that revision is the contribution this article makes.

The theoretical literature supplies a vocabulary for this object without having examined it. Techno-humanitarianism was coined for technological solutionism in humanitarian governance and developed to examine the technologizing of humanitarian space (Morozov, 2012; Tazzioli, 2020). This article uses the term for the communication through which corporations present technological intervention in crisis as humanitarian action. Technocolonialism, introduced by Madianou (2019, 2025), gives the structural line its most developed form, arguing that the convergence of digital development with humanitarian and market structures reworks colonial relationships of dependency. The two terms occupy different levels, since one names a communicative practice and the other explains the transformation of the field in which that practice occurs. The technocolonial claim about accountability is that datafication shifts it from affected people to donors, so that feedback technologies serve audit rather than voice (Madianou, 2019, p. 10). The claim rests on evidence drawn from practice, from interviews and ethnographic observation inside the aid encounter. What corporations say when they propose the partnerships in the first place, across press releases, CEO addresses, partnership announcements, and corporate responsibility reports, has not been part of that evidence.

This article argues that corporate actors sustain a second communicative relationship beside the one that humanitarian communication theory has taken as its object, the relationship between spectators and distant sufferers. The post-humanitarian account diagnosed a change in the spectator's moral orientation within that relationship (Chouliaraki, 2013), and the technocolonial account identified humanitarian and commercial logics converging within it (Madianou, 2019, 2025). Both retained the spectator-sufferer relationship as the organizing structure of humanitarian communication. The corporate actors examined here do not address publics positioned at "the difficult juncture between experience and discourse" (Peters, 2001, p. 710). They address UN agencies and INGOs directly, and in their communication suffering functions as the condition of institutional partnership rather than as the object of empathic response. The article terms these two relationships the economy of empathy and the economy of suffering and treats them as coexisting rather than successive.

The argument is demonstrated through an analysis of how twelve corporate interventions across four sectors (platform, financial, connectivity, data and AI) were presented as humanitarian action. The analysis draws on a corpus of 116 documents collected between 2012 and 2025 and deposited at Harvard Dataverse.

From the coexistence of these two relationships, the article advances two arguments about how the corporation-institution relationship produces authority and forecloses contestation. The first is the constitutive accountability paradox, so named because the absence of accountability is part of what produces corporate humanitarian authority rather than a side effect of it. The conditions that generate that authority (speed and scale of deployment, bypass of institutional gatekeeping) are structurally identical to the conditions that prevent accountability. The Mastercard case already shows the identity, since the same account architecture that delivered assistance at speed left enrolled communities no procedure

through which to contest suspension (Zimmerman et al., 2020). The deficit cannot be repaired, because repairing it would mean reintroducing the processes whose absence is the source of the authority claim.

The paradox therefore revises the technocolonial account of accountability. An account in which humanitarian and commercial logics converge leaves open the possibility that reform within either logic could reduce the deficit (Madianou, 2019). The paradox rules that possibility out, because the deficit and the authority have a single source.

The second argument is a typology of three forms of foreclosure through which corporations position affected communities, and the forms differ in the contestation they leave available. Discursive foreclosure constitutes positions through language that can in principle be contested through counter-discourse. Affordance foreclosure embeds positions in platform design (Hutchby, 2001; Gillespie, 2018), contestable only through system exit, which in humanitarian settings means leaving the aid relationship. Ontological erasure, a concept this article develops, identifies the prior condition in which affected communities do not register within the system's moral field at all. Together, these arguments specify why accurate, sustained public testimony failed to alter any of the corporate arrangements examined in this study, and why the failure is structural rather than contingent.

Theoretical Framework

The introduction identified a gap with two sides. Humanitarian communication theory cannot register a relationship publics never enter, and platform scholarship has yet to examine the humanitarian register through which corporate power enters crisis settings. This section closes the gap from both sides, moving from constitutive discourse through capital conversion and relational address to the typology of foreclosure.

Techno-Humanitarianism as Constitutive Discourse

Techno-humanitarianism entered the vocabulary as a name for technological solutionism in humanitarian governance and was later extended to the technologizing of humanitarian space (Morozov, 2012; Tazzioli, 2020). The introduction reserved the term for the communication through which corporations present technological intervention in crisis as humanitarian action. Two theoretical accounts have analyzed this object from adjacent positions without specifying its communicative mechanism. The post-humanitarian framework traced a shift from solidarity-based engagement to a "self-oriented morality" (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 3) in which the "subordination of the other-oriented aims" to "the self-oriented imperative of profitable performance" (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 6) restructured the moral grammar of humanitarian communication. The technocolonialism thesis identified how the "convergence of digital developments with humanitarian structures and market forces" (Madianou, 2019, p. 1) produces systems in which the framing of intervention as "technology for good" forecloses critical questions regarding the asymmetries" it produces (Madianou, 2025, pp. 16–17).

Both accounts treat humanitarian discourse as one element within a broader configuration. The convergence thesis distributes explanatory weight across five intersecting logics of accountability, audit, capitalism, solutionism, and securitization (Madianou, 2019, pp. 4–7). The distribution implies that reform of any single logic might in principle reduce the accountability deficit.

Platform scholarship reaches the same object from the structural side, and its starting point is that corporate self-presentation does consequential work. The category of the platform presents the company as a neutral intermediary that merely hosts and connects, while the company makes decisions about visibility and use that govern what its users can do (Gillespie, 2010). Research on platformization has traced how the platform became "the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web" (Helmond, 2015, p. 1).

Platform infrastructures and business models then penetrated one sector after another, and governance arrangements and everyday practices reorganized around them (Poell et al., 2019). The platform society thesis documents the outcome, with public functions migrating onto platforms oriented to private benefit (van Dijck et al., 2018). On this reading, humanitarian response is a further sector undergoing platformization.

The reading is incomplete, however, in one respect that matters here. In the sectors this research has examined, entry ran through markets and user adoption, and discourse accompanied the expansion. Entry into humanitarian settings runs through institutional partnership, because UN agencies and INGOs hold the access that markets cannot supply. The humanitarian register is what secures that partnership, and discourse therefore operates in this field as the instrument of platformization rather than as its accompaniment.

The postcolonial critique supports a stronger reading than convergence. The argument that "Western cultural/institutional representations of, and benevolence towards, the Third World can conceal a range of complicities" (Kapoor, 2008, p. 4) treats benevolence as a concealment mechanism. The intellectual history of digital colonialism pushes this further, identifying that the system "relies on a discourse of 'benevolence' meant to tamper, if not obfuscate, the violence of this system" (Nothias, 2025, p. 388), where the verb "relies on" designates dependency rather than co-occurrence. Benevolence, on this reading, operates as the mechanism through which the colonial relationship is rendered acceptable. Techno-humanitarianism accordingly operates as a constitutive discourse through which corporate technological governance over vulnerable communities is legitimated as care, and this constitutive sense exceeds any descriptive use of the term.

If convergence and precondition compete as explanations, they generate different expectations about the corpus. Under a convergence reading, a corporate text announcing a technology deployment in a refugee settlement would contain separable registers operating in

parallel. If humanitarian discourse functions as a precondition, the registers should not be separable, because the humanitarian vocabulary is what secures the institutional partnerships that make the technology deployable. The concept of "infrastructural violence" that is "normalized and legitimated by the practices of digital consent and feedback mechanisms" (Madianou, 2025, pp. 25–26) approaches this second reading by treating legitimation as a mechanism rather than a by-product. The convergence framework, however, places that mechanism alongside other logics rather than recognizing it as the condition that makes the others operate.

Capital Conversion and Constitutive Communication

The precondition claim requires a mechanism. In the standard field-theoretic account, capital conversion between institutional domains is temporally extended. Actors entering a new field acquire its dominant capital form through sustained engagement and progressive accumulation (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 252; 1993). The humanitarian field has historically operated through this temporality, with organizations accumulating mandate, proximity, expertise, and accountability relationships over decades.

The constitutive communication tradition suggests a different temporality. Communication is "the primary, constitutive social process" (Craig, 1999, p. 126) through which institutional reality is produced, and authority is produced and reproduced through communicative acts that are ratified or contested by the audiences they address (Cooren, 2010). The sense of constitutive at work here is communication-theoretic, and it differs from the argument that data practices become constitutive of humanitarian crises themselves (Madianou, 2019, p. 1). If institutional reality is communicatively constituted, then a single public communication can produce institutional ratification without the temporally extended credentialing that field theory assumes. An announcement that frames a commercial payment system as an instrument of humanitarian relief is such an act.

The evidence from humanitarian communication research supports the constitutive reading. In humanitarian visual communication, "the most useful images are those that validate such intervention and invest the actions of NGOs with authority, whether or not such images depict actual situations with any accuracy or truth" (Manzo, 2008, p. 638). The brand functions as the institutional form through which conversion is accomplished. Brands organize "the conditions under which meaning circulates and power is distributed" (Kornberger, 2010, p. 17). The account of the brand as an "institutional embodiment of the logic of a new form of informational capital" (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 1) identifies it as a mechanism for capital transformation rather than merely a vehicle for communication. Platform companies have practiced this form of strategic self-characterization from the start, since the vocabulary through which they described themselves was crafted to hold advantageous positions before end users, advertisers, content partners, and policymakers at once (Gillespie, 2010). The humanitarian register extends this repertoire to UN agencies and INGOs and converts operational capacity into humanitarian standing.

Business communication scholarship has recognized that corporations construct moral authority through strategic positioning. It has analyzed the process through intent-oriented studies evaluating whether corporate moral claims are sincere (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020) or through impact-oriented studies measuring material consequences (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Sibai et al., 2021). The consumer-facing forms it examines address publics as ethical consumers (Richey and Ponte, 2011). Both approaches presuppose that the communicative act represents a corporate position that exists prior to and independently of the communication. The constitutive tradition reframes the relationship. An expressive account would predict that insincere humanitarian framing is less effective than sincere framing, whereas a constitutive account predicts that the institutional effects operate regardless of intent because the communicative act itself produces them. The speed of capital

conversion under crisis conditions belongs to the mechanism itself. The temporal compression that makes the conversion possible is the same compression that prevents institutional oversight from engaging before the deployment is operational. The conditions that produce humanitarian authority and the conditions that prevent accountability are structurally identical.

Communicative Authority and Relational Address

The speed of capital conversion explains how corporate humanitarian authority is produced, but not what this authority does to the communicative relationship between the corporation and the publics who encounter it. The politics of pity establishes a communicative relationship between a spectator who observes suffering and a sufferer who is observed (Boltanski, 1999, pp. 3–19). The concept of "proper distance" specifies the degree of proximity these relationships require to sustain "a duty of care, obligation and responsibility" (Silverstone, 2007, p. 47). When corporate actors enter humanitarian settings, they announce technological deployments as humanitarian accomplishments already achieved instead of soliciting a response from the spectator. The "theatrical arrangement" separating "safe spectators from vulnerable others" (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 27) is not dismantled by these announcements but bypassed. Within them, the spectator stands at a juncture between corporate performance and public ratification rather than at the juncture of experience and discourse where witnessing occurs (Peters, 2001).

This positioning removes the communicative conditions under which an accountability claim could arise. Irony presupposes an appeal to be ironic about, and the "consumer-savvy bystander" equipped "with sophisticated analytical tools to assess and critique the style, function and effects of the appeal" (Seu, 2010, p. 452) has no object to assess when the communication presents an accomplished fact rather than a solicitation. The

technologies through which this accomplished fact is communicated compound the problem, since they "disconnect as well as connect" (Silverstone, 2007, p. 23).

The institutional conditions that made corporate entry possible are well documented. Public-private partnerships and impact investment frameworks progressively repositioned corporate actors as legitimate humanitarian participants, while rights-based criteria gave way to efficiency-based criteria (Barnett, 2011; Hopgood, 2013). The humanitarian sector's orientation toward a practice that "deals with the world as it is" with "no ambition to remake the world" (Barnett, 2020, pp. 11–12) privileged the capacities that technology corporations possess over those that traditional humanitarian actors accumulated over decades. Aid agencies moved from being "sources of news to being co-producers of it" (Wright, 2018, p. 86), and accountability became "directed primarily towards news organizations and audiences, rather than towards their supposed beneficiaries" (Wright, 2018, p. 87). Within the same field, feedback technologies produced an appearance of accountability that redirected it from affected people toward donors (Madianou et al., 2016).

These considerations yield the central theoretical expectation of this article. Humanitarian communication operates through two coexisting communicative relationships rather than through successive stages of a single one. The economy of empathy is organized around the relationship between spectator and sufferer, sustained through witnessing, and it continues to structure public appeals and fundraising. The economy of suffering is organized around the relationship between corporation and institution, sustained through partnership, and it produces authority without soliciting any public response. Platform governance research describes accountability around platform companies as configured among firms, governments, users, and civil society organizations, with the governed rarely party to the terms that govern them (Gorwa, 2019). The economy of suffering is the humanitarian instance of that configuration, with authority ratified by the institutions that control access to

crisis settings and the public holding no position in the transaction. Because contestation is a practice of the first relationship, testimony formed within the economy of empathy has no structural point of entry into arrangements constituted within the second. Whether the corpus bears out this expectation is the question the analysis addresses.

Subject Positions and Foreclosure

Because the corporation-institution relationship contains no position from which a spectator can generate an accountability claim, the question that follows is what positions corporate techno-humanitarian systems produce for the communities they govern. The framework of justificatory registers provides one specification. The argument that legitimate social orders depend on a plurality of registers, each with its own internal logic (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006), implies that accountability requires the availability of multiple registers through which a claim can be evaluated. Corporate techno-humanitarian communication reduces this plurality to a single admissible register, humanitarian concern. The only legitimate evaluative question becomes whether the technology alleviates suffering, while the questions that other registers would generate (whether it concentrates power, whether it creates dependencies) become inadmissible. The analysis terms this reduction depoliticization, the rendering of political questions as technical ones (Ferguson, 1994; Madianou, 2019, p. 5).

Recognition, under these conditions, encourages "the reification of group identities and the displacement of redistribution" (Fraser, 2000, p. 109). Affected communities are recognized as beneficiaries, but the recognition is allocated on terms that affirm identity while precluding demands for redistribution or political standing.

The structure of witnessing intensifies this problem. Witnessing involves a chain of mediated relay in which "the witness (speech-act) of the witness (person) was witnessed (by an audience)" (Peters, 2001, p. 709). Publics engage with mediated suffering across affective,

ecstatic, politicized, and detached forms shaped by "the combination of the sense of involvement" with "the sense of powerlessness that distance perpetuates" (Kyriakidou, 2015, pp. 217, 219–220). All four forms assume that the spectator is responding to the condition of the affected community. Corporate techno-humanitarian communication redirects the object of witnessing from the condition of the affected community to the technological capacity of the corporate actor. Recent work shows what happens when technological systems do the witnessing. Sensor networks produce positions in which "uncertain bodies were swiftly fixed as 'military-aged males' and thus subject to potential elimination" (Richardson, 2024, p. 2). The witnessing apparatus constitutes the category through which the person is acted upon, so that classification and observation are the same act.

The subject positions produced through traditional humanitarian communication are discursive. A refugee positioned as a "beneficiary" occupies a position constituted through language, and such a position can in principle be contested through counter-discourse. Corporate techno-humanitarian intervention produces positions through a different mechanism. Platforms govern those inside them through terms of service, default settings, design decisions, and moderation rules, instruments that bind users although no public authority enacted them (Gillespie, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018). When the terms of the humanitarian relationship are embedded in terms of service or in algorithmic categorization, the position is produced at the level of system design. It lies in what the system affords and withholds (Hutchby, 2001). The service user produced by the Airbnb deployment and the customer produced by the Mastercard network are positions of this kind. Biometric registration requirements operate the same way. Contesting such a position requires exit from the system rather than counter-discourse, and in humanitarian settings exit means leaving the aid relationship entirely. The article gathers these positions into a typology of foreclosure, a

term that extends the verb already at work in the technocolonial critique (Madianou, 2025, pp. 16–17).

A third form operates prior to both of these. The concept of ontological erasure, developed in this article to complement the preceding two forms, identifies the condition in which subjects are not positioned within the system's moral field at all. The problem at this level arises before any question of misrepresentation, in the failure to register as a legible existence within the communicative relationship that the technology establishes. The condition differs from the symbolic erasure documented in biometric registration, where an enrolled group is denied its own category within a system that still counts it (Madianou, 2019, p. 9). Ontological erasure concerns those whom the system never counts. In humanitarian deployments this condition covers communities whose situation does not fit the platform's operational categories and those never enrolled in the registration system that mediates access.

The typology emerges from the limits of both the politics of pity and the witnessing framework. The politics of pity assumes the spectator can shift from pity to justice, but the depoliticization of the evaluative frame preempts that shift. The witnessing framework assumes that experience can be connected to discourse in ways that generate moral claims. When the witnessing apparatus itself produces the categories through which people are classified and acted upon (Richardson, 2024, p. 2; Madianou, 2025, pp. 25–26), the connection runs through a technological layer that prevents contestation at the point of design. For those who fall outside the system's categories entirely, neither mechanism can generate accountability. The typology also marks what the framework adds to platform governance scholarship, which has concentrated on where platform rules are made and by whom (Gillespie, 2010, 2018; Gorwa, 2019). It follows those rules to the people they govern and specifies the contestation each position leaves available.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Methodology

Research Design and Case Selection

The study adopts a qualitative multiple case study design (Yin, 2018; Stake, 1995) with discourse-analytic coding conducted through framework analysis (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). The unit of analysis is the communicative process through which a corporate technological actor constitutes itself as a humanitarian authority and positions crisis-affected communities as subjects of that authority. The design is structural and comparative rather than diachronic. Although the corpus spans 2012 to 2025, the analysis compares how the two communicative relationships operate across cases rather than tracing a process of change, because the argument makes no succession claim. Framework analysis is preferred over critical discourse analysis because the research question concerns how communicative acts constitute institutional relationships across multiple cases, not how ideological positions are reproduced within individual texts. The coding dimensions are discourse-analytic instruments that specify communicative mechanisms (capital conversion, depoliticization, witnessing redirection, foreclosure) rather than themes in the content. The study's vocabulary distinguishes levels accordingly. Documents are the collected items and the discourse is the patterned vocabulary and framing they share, while communicative acts are what that discourse performs. Framework analysis permits deductive coding from these theoretically prior dimensions while remaining open to inductive patterns (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Twelve cases were selected across four sectors, following replication logic within sectors and maximum variation logic across them (Yin, 2018; Patton, 2002). The four sectors (platform, financial, connectivity, data and AI) function as a sampling range rather than an analytical typology. Their purpose is to test whether the same communicative pattern appears across different technologies. In each sector, the technology itself is the medium through

which the corporate actor communicates humanitarian authority and simultaneously encodes the governance position of affected communities. Within each sector, an anchor case and two secondary cases introduce variation in crisis type and organizational scale. They also vary in institutional partnership structure. Three cases are retained as structural contrasts rather than primary cases. Amazon logistics and Dyson ventilators deploy material capacity without producing digitally encoded subject positions. Tesla's emergency microgrids performed a humanitarian function without documented institutional ratification, marking the outer boundary of the corporation-institution relationship the article analyzes.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Corpus, Coding, and Analytical Focus

The corpus comprises 116 documents collected between 2012 and 2025 across the twelve cases, deposited at Harvard Dataverse. The deposited dataset also contains material for the contrast cases, retained for transparency. Documents are cited in the text by shortened identifiers, mapped to the deposited identifiers in an accompanying concordance. For each case, three document classes were collected. Organizational communications (56 documents) include press releases, corporate responsibility reports, partnership announcements, and executive addresses. Media coverage (42 documents) includes news reporting and investigations as well as editorial commentary from English-language outlets, treated as a record of public reception rather than factual verification. Civil society reports (18 documents) include advocacy publications and open letters, together with legal filings from organizations contesting the corporate intervention. Collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached for each sector (Glaser and Strauss, 2017).

The coding procedure applies five discourse-analytic dimensions developed in the theoretical framework. Communicative capital conversion identifies lexical register shifts from commercial to humanitarian vocabulary, operational capacity framed as a humanitarian

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3 credential, and partnership announcements that ratify the humanitarian identity. The
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5 constitutive accountability paradox identifies features in which the condition producing
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7 authority is also the condition preventing oversight, including crisis rhetoric that suspends
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9 institutional process and speed presented as a credential. Depoliticization identifies whether
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11 the text admits evaluation of power and dependency through multiple justificatory registers
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13 or recontextualizes the intervention as a matter of humanitarian concern alone (Chouliaraki
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15 and Fairclough, 1999). It also identifies whether recognition contains rather than advances
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17 claims for redistribution (Fraser, 2000, p. 109). Witnessing redirection identifies whether the
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19 text positions the spectator to witness the condition of the affected community or the
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21 technological performance of the corporate actor. The three forms of foreclosure distinguish
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23 positions constituted through language (discursive) from positions embedded in platform
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25 design (affordance). Ontological erasure marks the absence of communities from the system's
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27 moral field entirely. The analysis proceeded in three stages. The first pass applied these
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29 dimensions deductively to the full corpus. The second pass identified inductive patterns not
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31 anticipated by the framework, including the recurrence of temporal markers and the role of
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33 institutional occasion in authority accumulation. The third pass conducted cross-case
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35 comparison within and across sectors.
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42 Three cases receive close analytical treatment. The Airbnb case (platform sector, 13
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44 documents) presents the clearest instance of communicative capital conversion, where a
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46 marketplace technology is reconstituted as emergency shelter provision through a single
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48 public announcement. The Mastercard case (financial sector, 12 documents) contains the
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50 most extensive documentation of depoliticization, with humanitarian and commercial
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52 registers operating simultaneously in corporate addresses and trade coverage. The Palantir
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54 case (data and AI sector, 17 documents) presents the strongest evidence of affordance
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56 foreclosure and the most developed contestation record, with 65 civil society organizations
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3 contesting the WFP partnership. The remaining cases provide supporting evidence and cross-
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5 sector comparison.
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8 For each case, organizational communications were read against their reception in
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10 media coverage and civil society reports (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Where corporate framing
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12 and counter-discourse contested the same claims, the contestation served as a triangulation
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14 check. The study has limitations. The restriction to English-language sources privileges
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16 globally visible actors. The analysis examines the corporate documents and their public
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18 reception but does not include reception data from crisis-affected communities.
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22 **Findings**
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24 The introduction asked how the communicative process shared by the opening cases
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26 operates, and what it produces for the communities subjected to it. The corpus supports a
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28 direct answer, reported as two patterns and interpreted in the discussion that follows. Across
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30 the twelve cases, the communicative acts examined constitute a corporation-institution
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32 relationship in which suffering is presupposed as the condition of institutional partnership
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34 rather than represented in order to produce a public response. The first pattern concerns
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36 whom the texts address and the vocabulary through which they claim humanitarian authority.
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38 The second concerns the structural identity between the features that generate this authority
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40 and the features that prevent oversight.
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45 **Institutional Address**
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47 Coded for witnessing redirection, the documents across the anchor cases address
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49 institutional partners and publics rather than the affected communities. The Airbnb Ukraine
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51 announcement addressed hosts and publics (01a-OC-001). The Mastercard chief executive
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53 addressed the UN Security Council about operational capacity (Miebach, 2023). The Palantir-
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55 WFP joint announcement, presented as a partnership to "transform global humanitarian
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57 delivery," framed data governance over 90 million beneficiaries as a "moral imperative"
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(04a-OC-001). In each case the affected community is the occasion for the institutional transaction, not a party to it.

The same redirection governs how success is presented, since authority claims are measured in operational metrics rather than in the condition of the communities they concern. The Airbnb impact update reports 210,000 stays booked (01a-OC-003), and the Palantir-WFP impact page reports 100 million beneficiaries per year (04a-OC-004), while Mastercard materials count consumers reached (02a-OC-004). Where a spectating public is positioned at all, it is positioned to ratify an already accomplished fact.

Coded for capital conversion and depoliticization, the humanitarian vocabulary across the anchor cases simultaneously generates the authority claim and restricts evaluation to humanitarian concern. The Airbnb vocabulary of domesticity ("home, not shelter") substituted a market relationship for a protection relationship (01a-OC-005; 01a-OC-006). The Mastercard phrase "financial inclusion" redescribed enrollment in proprietary payment systems as a right. The framing of "seeding the market while delivering humanitarian aid," published openly by Mastercard staff in the Emergency Nutrition Network, records the humanitarian and commercial functions as a single activity (02a-OC-002). The vocabulary also predates any single crisis, since a legal analysis published in 2019 documented Airbnb's humanitarian branding through West Bank settlement donations, and the Ukraine deployment scaled a vocabulary already in operation (01a-CS-002). Table 3 summarizes the authority claims, institutional endorsements, counter-evidence, and subject positions across the anchor cases.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

The Paradox in the Evidence

Coding for the constitutive accountability paradox returned the same structure in every anchor case. The operational feature generating the authority claim is identical to the

feature preventing oversight. The speed of the Starlink deployment was the absence of consultation (03a-OC-001). The Airbnb deployment bypassed protection procedures and produced the service-user position, governed by the platform's commercial terms and requiring identity verification (01a-OC-006). The Mastercard Aid Network operated through commercial systems outside humanitarian governance, and World Bank research documented cards blocked for two months with no appeals mechanism (02a-MC-004). The Palantir partnership processed data at a scale requiring intelligence-grade systems (04a-OC-001).

The contestation record is most developed in the Palantir case, and it is a record of failure that the discussion interprets. Sixty-five organizations and individuals, convened through the Responsible Data community, signed an open letter warning that the partnership had "the potential to seriously undermine the rights of 90 million people the WFP serves" (04a-CS-001). Amnesty International documented that the company whose technology facilitated ICE operations, including workplace raids that separated children from their parents, was during the same period the data-analytics partner of the World Food Programme (04a-CS-003). The WFP chief information officer, launching the partnership, asked why humanitarians could not "take the models of companies that have been disrupted by technology," naming Netflix and Uber (04a-MC-001).

Contestation continued into the arrangement's seventh year. A Drop Site News investigation reported Palantir AI "already playing a major role in tracking Gaza aid deliveries," and in the same report the UN Special Rapporteur for the occupied Palestinian territory called the "profit-driven parallel system" of corporate aid delivery "a monstrosity" (04a-MC-006). The partnership was extended, and recent civil society reporting describes Palantir as "the cornerstone of the WFP data ecosystem" (04a-MC-005). Even the contestation sources evaluated data-processing arrangements rather than the conditions of the communities whose data was processed (04a-MC-003).

Each anchor case also produces a distinctive subject position for the affected community, from Airbnb's service user to Palantir's data subject, and the discussion examines these positions as foreclosure. Coding of the secondary cases reproduced both patterns within each sector, varying in scale and documentation rather than in structure.

No case in the corpus records a change produced by testimony. The Airbnb platform model was not altered (01a-MC-001), and neither were the Mastercard commercial systems (02a-CS-001). The Starlink connection was activated and later threatened with deactivation by the same unilateral authority, and the demand for Pentagon funding was reversed by a social media post (03a-CS-003). The discussion interprets what these two patterns establish.

Discussion

The two patterns bear directly on the debates the theoretical framework posed, and this section takes them in order. The first question is whether the humanitarian and commercial registers proved separable, which adjudicates between the convergence and precondition readings. The second concerns the temporality through which authority was produced. The third asks what became of the spectator whom the critical literature has assumed as a necessary participant. The fourth asks why testimony failed despite its accuracy and institutional support, which the typology of foreclosure answers. The first two debates engage the structural accounts drawn from technocolonialism and platform scholarship, and the last two engage humanitarian communication theory.

Precondition, Not Convergence

The framework derived competing expectations from the two readings. Convergence predicts separable registers in a corporate deployment announcement, and the precondition reading predicts inseparable registers, because on that reading the humanitarian vocabulary is what secures the partnership that makes deployment possible. The evidence supports the precondition reading. The Mastercard staff who published the framing of seeding the market

while delivering humanitarian aid described a single activity in which the humanitarian and commercial functions were inseparable (02a-OC-002). This is analytically distinct from the ethical-instrumental tension documented in humanitarian practitioner research (Nolan and Mikami, 2013), where professionals navigated a split between value rationality and pragmatic necessity that they experienced as a discomfort precisely because the two registers were understood as distinct. In corporate techno-humanitarian communication, there is no split to navigate, because the humanitarian vocabulary constitutes the commercial operation rather than competing with it.

The commercial register operating in these documents is not the promotional register that the post-humanitarian critique documented. Promotional communication, from branded solidarity campaigns to corporate brand activism (Chouliaraki, 2013; Vredenburg et al., 2020), addresses publics and solicits a response, which keeps it within the economy of empathy however marketized its form. The commercial register identified here transacts rather than promotes. Its addressee is institutional, and its function is market development rather than immediate revenue, which is what the seeding metaphor records. The initially pro bono terms of the Palantir partnership do not weaken the reading. A donated deployment that positions a proprietary system inside humanitarian operations performs the commercial function before any payment occurs.

The same inseparability explains the insulation observed in the Palantir case, where the humanitarian and enforcement deployments were public simultaneously yet assessable only within their own separate vocabularies, since depoliticization admits no register in which the comparison could be made. Techno-humanitarianism, on this evidence, operates as the constitutive discourse the framework proposed rather than as one logic among several converging within humanitarian structures.

The finding also bears on platformization research. In the sectors that research has examined, platform expansion ran through markets and user adoption, and discourse accompanied it. The corpus shows how expansion proceeds where a market path is missing. The humanitarian register accomplished Mastercard's entry into refugee settlements, because the register is what the partnership ratified, and the same holds for the WFP's adoption of Palantir's systems. Because the humanitarian and commercial registers form a single register, reform within either cannot reduce the deficit. This completes the revision of the technocolonial account that the introduction proposed, since an account of converging logics leaves reform available in principle (Madianou, 2019).

The Temporality of Conversion

The capital conversion this inseparability produces (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 252) operates through constitutive communicative acts (Craig, 1999, p. 126; Cooren, 2010, p. 42) that accumulate from the 2013 WFP e-card launch (02a-OC-005) through the 2016 White House summit (02a-OC-003) to the 2023 Security Council address, each sufficient to produce institutional ratification.

Crisis conditions add temporal compression to the announcement genre that platform companies refined long before they entered crisis response (Gillespie, 2010). The credentialing that field theory expects to unfold over decades completed in single communicative acts, because each crisis supplied an occasion for institutional ratification.

The Airbnb evidence confirms that this structure predates any single crisis, with humanitarian branding documented from 2019 and the Ukraine deployment scaling a vocabulary already in operation (01a-CS-002). Research on UNRWA showed how a specific funding crisis triggered a shift into neoliberal humanitarian logic within a UN agency (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2019). The evidence analyzed here extends that finding from a single

institutional crisis to a permanent condition. The economy of suffering is not produced by crisis, but crisis is the condition it requires.

The Absent Spectator

The findings reported that the documents position the spectating public, if at all, to ratify an accomplished fact. The operational metrics in these documents resemble the audit data that agencies produce for donors (Madianou, 2019, pp. 5–6), but audit answers a demand from a principal, while the corporate figures answer no demand and function as announcement rather than justification. Ratification of this kind differs from the ironic spectatorship the post-humanitarian framework diagnosed (Chouliaraki, 2013), because the ironic spectator still participated through consumption and occupied a position within the moral grammar of the relationship. The witnessing typology that audience research has produced, distinguishing affective, ecstatic, politicized, and detached forms of engagement with distant suffering (Kyriakidou, 2015, pp. 219–220), presupposes a communicative structure in which the spectator is addressed as a witness and asked, however imperfectly, to respond. The finding is not that the spectator has adopted a fifth form but that none of the four can be activated when the documents do not constitute the spectator as a witness at all.

The position of the public in these documents also matches what platform governance research describes. Users of platforms are governed by terms they had no part in setting (Gorwa, 2019), and the corpus shows publics in an equivalent position, affected by the arrangements while excluded from the relationship in which the arrangements are made.

The same structural absence is visible at the level of the communicative format. VR humanitarian films simulate proximity through gaze direction and spatial immersion, cultivating an emotional style that makes the encounter with crisis feel good for the viewer while obscuring its geopolitical causes (Gruenewald and Witteborn, 2022). The corporate

announcement rests on no comparable assumption, because it operates within institutional channels in which the spectating public is neither addressed nor required.

This represents a qualitative threshold that the post-humanitarian trajectory anticipated but did not specify, because the trajectory from solidarity through irony to self-orientation (Chouliaraki, 2006, 2013) still assumed an audience-oriented communicative structure. Research on public responses identified a tension between audiences desiring relational, long-term engagement and organizations relying on an emergency model of short-term emotional response (Seu and Orgad, 2017). The tension assumed a shared communicative field. Within the corporate relationship the tension dissolves, because the public is not the relevant audience and its desires cannot affect a system that does not depend on public engagement.

The distinction between seeing and testifying (Peters, 2001) clarifies the mechanism, and it confirms the coexistence expectation. In the economy of empathy, seeing distant suffering produced moral obligation because the witness entered a relationship with the sufferer. When the object of seeing is corporate performance, the witnessing relationship does not form, and institutional authority proceeds regardless of any response the spectator makes or withholds.

Foreclosure and the Limits of Testimony

The findings established that the testimony against the Palantir-WFP partnership was sustained and accurate, with institutional support, and that the partnership was extended. The testimony did not fail because it was inaccurate or insufficiently publicized but because the arrangements it contested are not constituted through communicative relationships that testimony can enter. The answer lies in the difference between discursive and affordance foreclosure. Research on humanitarian organizations found that efforts to help beneficiaries "tell their own stories" were constrained by organizational imperatives pointing

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accountability toward news organizations and audiences (Wright, 2018, p. 87). Those constraints were discursive. Voice was shaped and redirected, but its possibility was preserved, because the relationship between organization and beneficiary remained visible and could in principle be contested.

In the Palantir and Airbnb cases, the question of beneficiary voice has been structurally precluded rather than merely constrained, because the communicative relationship is between corporation and institution, and no position within it accommodates beneficiary testimony. The Palantir biometric system addresses the affected community as a data subject whose categories cannot be inspected or challenged without leaving the aid relationship entirely. The Airbnb eligibility page addresses the displaced person as a platform user whose terms of service constitute the relationship itself (01a-OC-006).

The difference between the Mastercard and Palantir cases makes the distinction empirical. The Mastercard operation could be renamed, as "surveillance humanitarianism" in ICRC commentary (02a-CS-001), because its accountability deficit was discursive and located in language that counter-discourse could engage. In the Palantir case, counter-discourse named the problem with equal accuracy and the partnership expanded, because the positions produced for affected communities were embedded in the system's design rather than in the language used to describe it. Archival research shows that even coercive paper-based systems constituted a visible relationship in which a governed subject presenting a ration card could address and challenge a human official (Seuferling and Leurs, 2021). The digital systems analyzed in this study constitute no such relationship. What changes between discursive and affordance foreclosure is not the degree of coercion but the availability of a position from which the governed subject can contest the categories applied to them, which is what the system's affordances withhold (Hutchby, 2001). The contrast also delivers what the framework claimed the typology adds to platform governance scholarship, which has

concentrated on where platform rules are made and by whom (Gillespie, 2018; Gorwa, 2019).

The two cases follow the rules to the people they govern, separating a position that counter-discourse could still reach from a position that only exit could contest.

The persistence of the arrangements despite sustained testimony indicates that testimony operates within the economy of empathy while the arrangements it contests are constituted within the economy of suffering. Research on blockchain humanitarian projects identified how such initiatives serve the broader crypto-economy through humanitarian deployments (Jutel, 2022), and the Mastercard and Palantir evidence supports that finding while specifying the mechanism, the humanitarian vocabulary as the condition of institutional access rather than as image management.

The Starlink case shows why the failure follows from the communicative relationship itself. The speed that made the deployment faster than any institutional alternative was the absence of the consultation and oversight through which accountability is produced. In each case, the deficit is not a gap that improved regulation could fill. Restoring accountability would require reinserting the spectator-sufferer relationship into arrangements that structurally bypass it, which is the condition this article terms the constitutive accountability paradox.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

The two arguments developed across this discussion return the answer the introduction promised. Techno-humanitarianism operates as the constitutive discourse of an economy of suffering, a communicative relationship in which corporations secure humanitarian authority through institutional transaction and in which suffering functions as the condition of access rather than the object of response. This relationship has not replaced the economy of empathy. The post-humanitarian and technocolonial accounts both described movements inside that economy (Chouliaraki, 2013; Madianou, 2019), and it persists

wherever publics are addressed as witnesses of suffering. What the corpus documents is a second relationship operating alongside it on the institutional axis, produced through partnership rather than spectatorship, in which the public's response, whatever its form, carries no structural weight. The coexistence of the two economies is what makes the accountability paradox durable, because authority is produced on the institutional axis while contestation remains a practice of the empathy axis. The question for humanitarian communication research is not how the spectator's morality is changing but which economy a given intervention belongs to, because the available forms of contestation differ accordingly. The coexistence carries a matching implication for platform scholarship. Humanitarian response shows how platformization proceeds where entry depends on institutions rather than on user adoption, and the humanitarian register serves there as the instrument of entry. The accountability question that follows belongs to the corporation-institution axis where the entry occurs.

Conclusion

This article asked how the communicative process through which corporate actors constitute humanitarian authority operates, and what it produces for the communities subjected to it. The answer to the first question is that techno-humanitarianism operates as a constitutive discourse. The humanitarian vocabulary in these documents is not a description of the technology's use but the condition of its deployment. That vocabulary secures the institutional partnerships through which platforms, payment systems, satellite connectivity, and data analytics enter crisis response. The answer to the second is that this discourse produces governance positions from which contestation is foreclosed, from the platform's service user to the biometric system's data subject. It sustains the economy of suffering beside the economy of empathy that humanitarian communication research has theorized.

The two economies coexist, and the article's contribution is to have specified the second and shown why contestation formed within the first cannot reach it.

Two arguments followed from this specification, the first identifying why the accountability deficit is structural and the second mapping the positions it produces. The constitutive accountability paradox establishes that the conditions generating corporate humanitarian authority, speed and scale achieved by bypassing institutional process, are identical to the conditions preventing accountability, so the deficit cannot be corrected without dissolving the authority. The typology of foreclosure specifies what this means for affected communities. Positions contestable through counter-discourse differ from positions contestable only through exit, and ontological erasure marks those who never register in the system's moral field. The typology is not confined to the cases examined, since any technological system that encodes the terms of a relationship in its design raises the same question of where contestation can occur.

The analysis has limitations that remain open for empirical investigation. The corpus is restricted to English-language documents and to corporate actors headquartered in the Global North, which may exclude communicative dynamics operating in other languages or through Southern-led technological initiatives. The four sectors do not claim exhaustiveness, and corporate humanitarian interventions without technological mediation, marked here by the structural contrast cases, may produce different communicative relationships. The study examines the corporate documents and their public reception, and reception research with affected communities is the most important next step.

If the accountability deficit documented here is constitutive rather than incidental, regulatory reform within the existing communicative relationship cannot resolve it, because that relationship is itself the mechanism producing the deficit. Restoring accountability would require structural change in how corporate actors enter the humanitarian field, reintroducing

the institutional gatekeeping and the public engagement that the speed of deployment bypasses, and extending in time what the announcement compresses. What the analysis establishes is that accountability in techno-humanitarian governance is not a matter of better oversight applied to an otherwise functional system. It is a question of who constitutes the relationship through which governance over crisis-affected communities is exercised, and whether those communities hold any position from which to contest it on their own terms.

AI Use Declaration

All theoretical arguments, analytical claims, and scholarly judgements in this article are entirely my own. I used AI tools to assist with initial coding and cataloguing of the case corpus, structural organisation of early drafts, and proofreading and prose refinement during the writing process. As a disabled and neurodivergent researcher, I employed AI as an assistive technology to address these specific barriers.

Supplementary Materials

The document corpus underlying this article, comprising 116 documents across the twelve primary cases and the three structural contrast cases, is openly available at Harvard Dataverse (<https://doi.org/ANONYMIZED>). The documents span organizational communications, media coverage, civil society reports, and legal filings collected between 2012 and 2025, all from publicly available sources. The deposit includes the corpus metadata and a concordance mapping the shortened document identifiers cited in the text to the full deposited identifiers. No human participant data were collected. The coding framework applied to the corpus is described in full in the Methodology section.

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Table 1

Case Selection Matrix by Sector, Organization, Initiative, Crisis Type, and Period (2012 to 2025)

Sector	Role	Organization	Initiative	Crisis type	Period
Platform	Anchor	Airbnb / Airbnb.org	Emergency housing program	Displacement / conflict	2012–2025
	Secondary	GoFundMe	Disaster and refugee crowdfunding	Multiple emergencies	2015–2025
	Secondary	Lyft	LyftUp disaster response	Natural disaster	2017–2025
Financial	Anchor	Mastercard	Aid Network	Displacement / aid delivery	2015–present
	Secondary	Visa	Humanitarian payments	Displacement / conflict	2015–present
	Secondary	Western Union	Refugee remittance program	Displacement	2016–present
Connectivity	Anchor	SpaceX	Starlink Ukraine deployment	Armed conflict	2022–2025
	Secondary	Cisco	Refugee connectivity program	Displacement	2015–present
	Secondary	Google	Project Shield	Human rights / civil society	2013–present
Data and AI	Anchor	Palantir	UNHCR and WFP data analytics	Displacement	2016–present
	Secondary	Google	Crisis Response / FireSat	Multiple emergencies	2017–present
	Secondary	Microsoft	AI for Humanitarian Action	Multiple emergencies	2018–present

Note. Each sector groups cases by the technology through which the communicative act operates; the sectors are a sampling range, not an analytical typology. The Lyft case carries reduced analytical weight because of limited documentation. Structural contrast cases (Tesla, Amazon, Dyson) are described in the text and excluded from this matrix.

Table 2

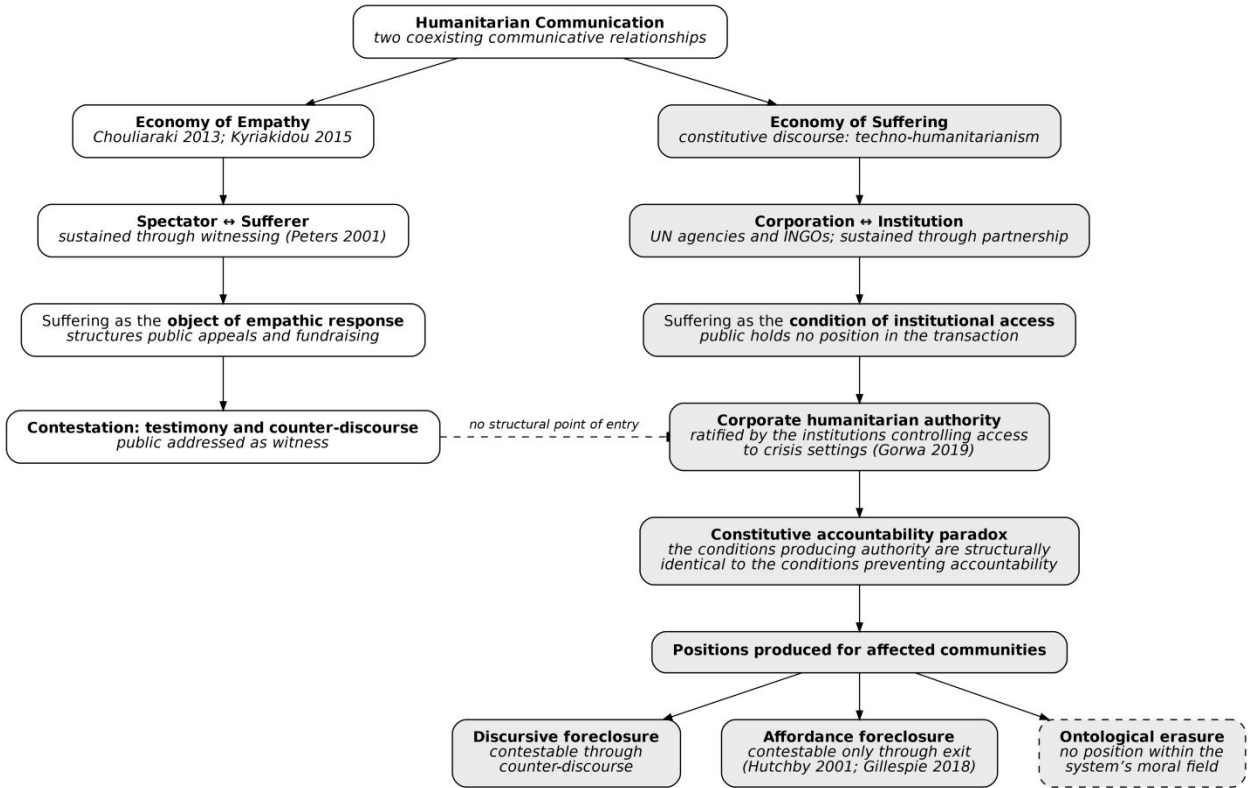
Analytical Concepts

Concept	Definition	Source
Economy of empathy	Humanitarian authority produced through spectator engagement with suffering	This article
Economy of suffering	Humanitarian authority produced through institutional transactions; spectator structurally irrelevant	This article
Communicative capital conversion	Market capital converted into humanitarian authority through a single communicative act	Bourdieu (1986); Craig (1999); Cooren (2010)
Constitutive accountability paradox	Conditions producing authority structurally identical to conditions preventing accountability	This article
Depoliticization	Evaluation of power and dependency rendered inadmissible; the intervention assessable through humanitarian concern alone	Boltanski and Thévenot (2006); Ferguson (1994); Madianou (2019)
Witnessing redirection	Object of witnessing shifts from the community's condition to the corporation's performance	Peters (2001); Kyriakidou (2015)
Discursive foreclosure	Positions constituted through language; contestable through counter-discourse	This article
Affordance foreclosure	Positions embedded in what the system affords and withholds; contestable only through system exit	This article; Hutchby (2001)
Ontological erasure	Communities absent from the system's moral field entirely	This article

Table 3*Corpus Evidence Across Anchor Cases*

Case	Authority claim	Institutional endorsement	Counter-evidence	Subject position	Accountability outcome
Airbnb (platform)	100,000 housed (01a-OC-002); 210,000 stays (01a-OC-003)	IOM partnership (01a-OC-005)	Platform exacerbates housing crisis (01a-MC-001); West Bank donations (01a-CS-002)	Service user; must create account, verify identity, accept commercial terms (01a-OC-006)	No change to platform model
Mastercard (financial)	“Life-saving assistance at the last mile” (Miebach, 2023); Peace Honors (02a-OC-004)	White House (02a-OC-003); WFP (02a-OC-005); UN Security Council	“Seeding the market” (02a-OC-002); “surveillance humanitarianism” (02a-CS-001)	Economic subject; cards blocked two months, no appeals (02a-MC-004)	No change to commercial systems
Palantir-WFP (data/AI)	“Transform global humanitarian delivery” (04a-OC-001); 100M beneficiaries/year (04a-OC-004)	WFP partnership	65 organizations and individuals: open letter (04a-CS-001); ICE abuses (04a-CS-003)	Data subject; algorithmic classification; no inspection or challenge	Partnership extended (04a-MC-005)
Starlink (connectivity)	“Starlink service is now active in Ukraine” (03a-OC-001); 150,000 daily users	None (unilateral)	“Privatized diplomacy” (03a-CS-003); volatility of CEO commitment	Connectivity dependent; same authority activated and deactivated the connection	Pentagon funding demanded; position reversed by social media post

Figure 1
The Economy of Empathy and the Economy of Suffering as Coexisting Communicative Relationships



Note. Grey fill marks the communicative relationship and concepts theorized in this article. The dashed border marks ontological erasure, the position outside the system's moral field.

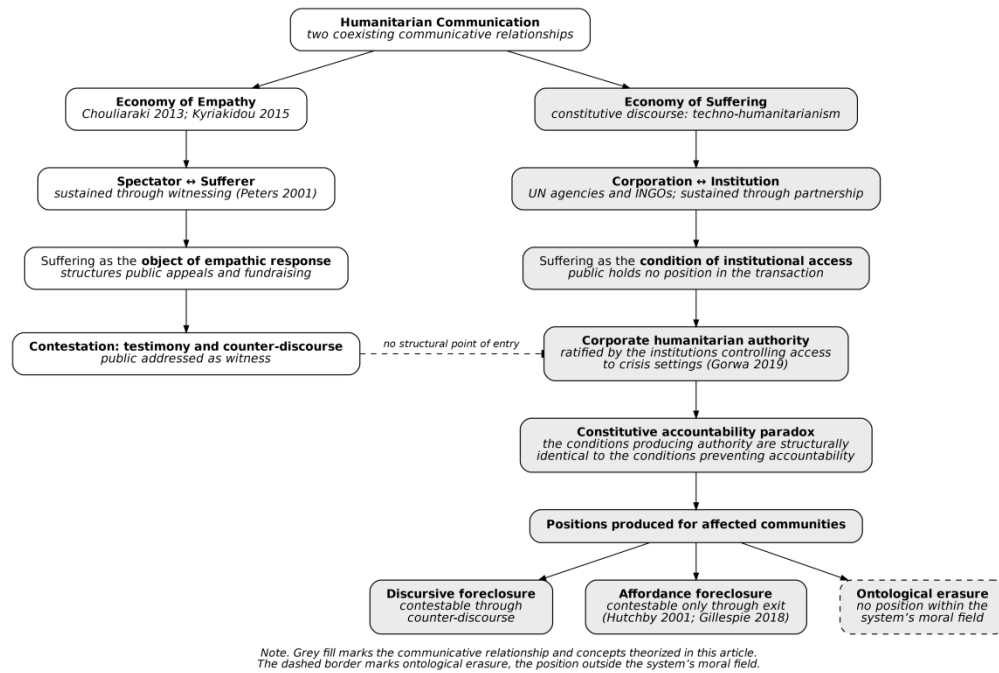


Figure 1

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