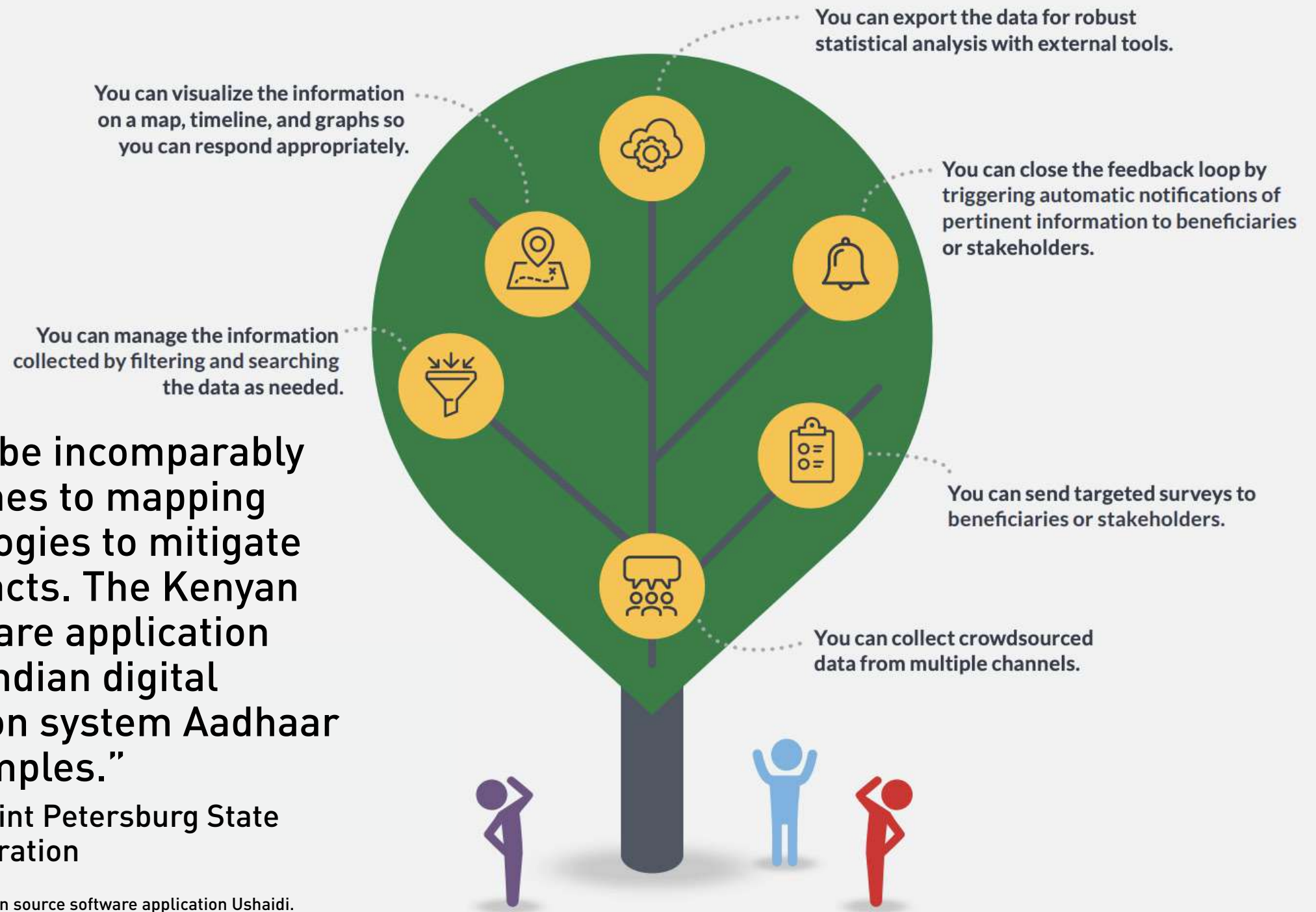


“Social media can be incomparably useful when it comes to mapping and urban technologies to mitigate the COVID-19 impacts. The Kenyan open source software application Ushahidi and the Indian digital citizen identification system Aadhaar are very good examples.”

– Nikolay RODOSSKY, Saint Petersburg State University, Russian Federation

Image Source: Illustration of the Kenyan open source software application Ushaidi.





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SOCIAL MEDIA AS A PHARMAKON

Social media became a large part of our everyday life. There is no doubt that in a situation as dangerous and unpredictable as the COVID-19 pandemic situation social media might play a very significant role — either positive or negative. Our goal here is to estimate what are the most notable aspects of social media which can be crucial during the pandemic.

To start with let us address the dark side of social media which is fraught with danger. Social media became a very effective tool for spreading fake news and misinformation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. The official website of Europol states it clear that misinformation regardless of its origins and objectives “only gains traction if the public share it through social media.” The reason why fake news spread so quickly can be traced up to search algorithms and page ranking. Geert Lovink mentioned that “nowadays an altogether new phenomenon is causing alarm: search

engines rank according to popularity, not truth.”¹ Moreover, MIT professor Sinan Aral states that “false news were 70 percent more likely to be retweeted and false news travel about six times faster than true news online.”²

In September 2020, one of the recent and alarming fake publications is the so-called “Letter from Belgian Doctors” which was posted on the docs4opendebate platform and has been immediately translated into several languages, including Russian. In a month, more than 15 thousand signatures supporting the letter were collected. In the letter, people claiming to be Belgian medical doctors criticize the quarantine measures and suggest to treat the COVID-19 infection like a simple seasonal flu, since mortality statistics (as they say) are allegedly overstated by the governments. This misinformation is particularly dangerous as it implies a lot of scientific terms and links to numerous medical papers (for example to “The Lancet”, one of the most respected medical journals). Thankfully, the arguments of the letter were investigated by a group of Russian journalists from “Meduza” and scientists and were declared insolvent.³

As for the fake news originated from Russia, we may recall the case of Polina Golovushkina who claims to be a Russian living in Lombardy, Italy. In March 2020, an alarming letter presumably written by Polina emerged in Russian social media. According to its text, elderly patients in Italy are denied treatment, as the government prefers to spend resources on young people, and medical workers “die like

flies". This kind of fake news can be extremely dangerous and misleading, as reliable data, mostly gleaned from the media, is intertwined there with obvious exaggeration and fraud. Even "Lenta.ru" which is one of the most popular Russian language online resources with over 600 thousand visitors daily took "Polina's letter" at face value.⁴ These two fake letters were distributed via social media such as Facebook and may be seen as perfect examples of a collective mind (or "hive mind" as it is sometimes called) acting in a self-destructive manner. We may recall Jaron Lanier here stating that "the information system which informs the collective [should be] filtered by a quality control mechanism that relies on individuals to a high degree."⁵

Whether we like it or not but it is up to us to somehow find a perfect balance between multiple times proven thesis that hushing up the problem leads to disaster⁶ and the warning that an excess of information can be just as harmful as a lack of it.⁷

Social media also can be incomparably useful when it comes to mapping and urban technologies. We may recall such projects like Kenyan open source software application Ushahidi and Indian digital citizen identification system Aadhaar. Ushahidi, which is used to collect large amounts of information and visualize data, have been creating more than 200 interactive maps on its hosted service to collect and share information about the virus spreading in the area, to organize local communities, and to make sure

that those who need supplies, food, or help are connected to those who can give it. Aadhaar technology on the other hand is believed to be enormously helpful in the distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine to each and every Indian citizen.⁸

In Russia, the largest IT-corporation Yandex took certain steps meant to overcome the pandemic crisis. For example, in Yandex.Maps application, the "City" section was drastically changed. Also, Yandex.Maps created a map indicating the foci of the spread of the virus in real time. It also has developed a constantly updating statistics web page showing infestations, recoveries, and deaths in the area. From now on Yandex collects and shares here different solutions that should help in the situation of social distancing.⁹ Yandex.Food, which is a delivery service started to remind to wash one's hands to each customer.¹⁰ Moreover, Yandex is forming a fund for financial support of drivers and couriers of its services. The money will go to those who have contracted the coronavirus or are quarantined due to contact with patients.¹¹

We can conclude that during the pandemic situation "social media is providing life-giving connection as well as kindness and compassion at a time when there are almost no other means to communicate."¹²

