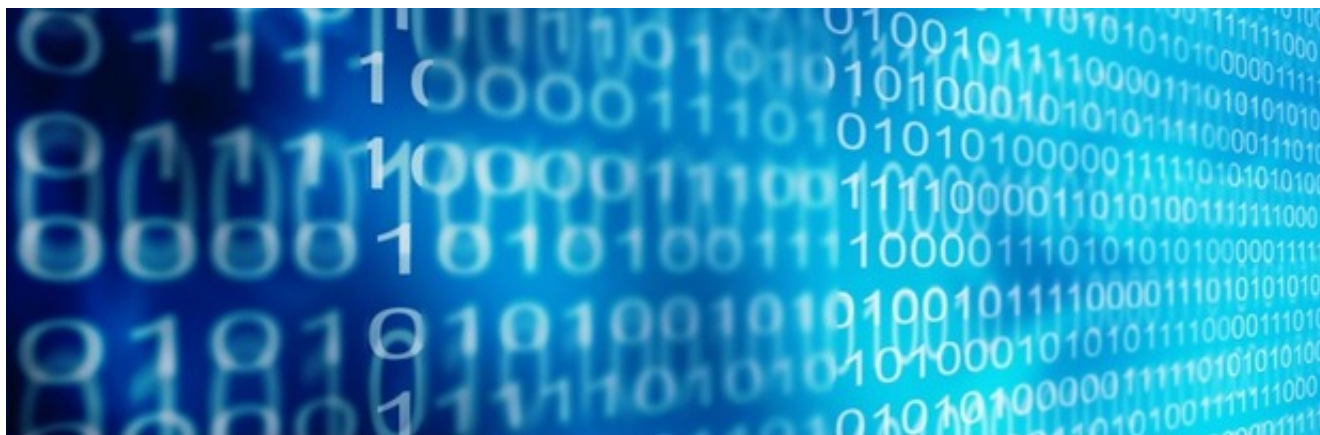# Aspen Ideas Festival: How data could help solve international crime

Summary: *"The use of data is extremely powerful when you have no way to compare situations,"says the CEO of the Thomson Reuters Foundation.*

By Rachel King for Between the Lines | July 1, 2013 -- 11:00 GMT (04:00 PDT)

ASPEN, COLO. — In the finance and technology markets, most of the focus around big data is extracting analytics for improving bottom lines.

But some key leaders within those same verticals are using big data for good, too — namely, fighting international crime.

Sitting down for a Q&A at the **2013 Aspen Ideas Festival** on Saturday, **Monique Villa**, CEO of the **Thomson Reuters Foundation**, explained to me about how the corporate charity group is using data to fight human trafficking, in particular.

"The use of data is extremely powerful when you have no way to compare situations," asserted Villa.

The Thomson Reuters Foundation, along with the Manhattan District Attorney office, recently launched a global initiative dedicated to fighting modern-day slavery.

Villa cited research from the International Labor Organization, estimating that there are as many as 22 million slaves worldwide — the highest number in recorded history. And that's just the reported cases on file.

"The use of data is extremely powerful when you have no way to compare

Villa defined these slaves as people who have been trafficked from one country to another without a passport and without being paid for work.

"To understand the world, you need to make sense of the world, you need stories," explained Villa. "When you can do stories with data, you're much stronger. This is what we try to do and help society by these means."

More from the 2013 Aspen Ideas Festival:

Zappos CEO suggests how startups can foster smarter, more productive cities

How tech, art intersect on the San Francisco Bay Bridge

Is Twitter bringing back the live TV experience?

The value of trust in tech, finance and government

How data could help solve international crime

Using apps, social

situations," asserted Villa.

Members of the international financial working group involved in the new initiative include some of the world's largest financial institutions (Bank of America, Citigroup, JPMorgan Chase, Wells Fargo, Barclays, TD Bank, American Express and Western Union) along with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the Human Trafficking Pro Bono Legal Center, and NGOs working with trafficking victims.

An initial round of talks was planned for last week in New York City to brainstorm strategies for sharing financial and technical expertise with the goal of improving the monitoring of financial transactions as well as identifying irregularities in transactions linked to traffickers. It has since been rescheduled for September.

Nevertheless, the goal remains to craft cross-border solutions to fight human trafficking.

"If you look at a number of different [types of] data on your credit card, you can follow the traffickers," Villa posited, acknowledging that data can help the culprits commit crimes — but it can also stop them.

However, sometimes the data needed to fuel these efforts relies more on manpower than only next-generation computers.

Villa noted violence against women is rampant in many countries, but there is a huge gap in the data because victims usually don't report these cases most of the time.

She highlighted India as an example, noting that rape victims usually don't run to the police there in fear of bringing dishonor to the family or even being forced to marry the rapist.

But Villa warned that the data gap isn't only a problem in India or even just the developing world.

In the United Kingdom, for example, Villa cited that the British government revealed data earlier this year finding that only 15 percent of women raped actually report the incident to the police.

The Thomson Reuters Foundation set out two years ago on the mission to patch up this data gap, starting with a simple but effective method: a poll.

The Foundation surveyed gender specialists worldwide in order to determine the five most dangerous countries for women to live in.

The top result was Afghanistan, followed by Congo, Pakistan, India and Somalia.

The Foundation followed up with a second poll last year (http://vimeo.com/25969922) , ranking the G20 nations in order of the best environments available for women.

Canada was voted the best country for women to live in, while the United States placed sixth.

India placed last after Saudi Arabia, where Villa pointed out that women can't even legally drive.

Clarifying that these reports were published ahead of the highly publicized assault in Delhi (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Delhi_gang_rape_case) at the end of 2012, Villa admitted that low rankings for India came as a huge surprise to analysts because it is the biggest

"By creating information and crunching data, we gave to activities the tool to be able to speak up and create change," said Villa.

democracy in the world.

But because it is a democracy, Villa continued, such a statement can be declared with certitude because "everything is in the open" as the Indian government publishes figures about child marriage, human trafficking and kidnappings.

Thus, Villa described that what has happened is that women's rights groups and activists in India have turned data into a strategy. But she admitted that she didn't expect it would be adopted by the activists so quickly.

"By creating information and crunching data, we gave to activities the tool to be able to speak up and create change," said Villa.

The Thomson Reuters Foundation is slated to publish results from another poll — this time about women's living conditions in the Middle East — this November.

Topics: *Big Data*, *Government*, *Legal*, *Privacy*, *Security*

About Rachel King

Rachel King is a staff writer for ZDNet based in San Francisco.

You may also like

Kickstarter Banned Trying to Take Advantage of ...
tomsguide.com

[i]

Talkback