"...making the wheel more efficient and more effective."

p.40

JARED COHEN

Tech *for* Change

Jared Cohen, Director of Google Ideas, explains how the think/do tank is using open technology solutions to help people tackle some of the world's toughest problems.

WORDS BY *Jared Cohen* | ILLUSTRATION BY *Parko Polo*

It's not often that a multinational corporation seeks out the company of arms dealers, drug traffickers, money launderers, and people smugglers. But that's exactly what happened in July this year at Illicit Networks: Forces in Opposition (INFO), a two-day summit convened by Google Ideas in Los Angeles.

On the agenda: Bringing together reformed criminals alongside former victims, survivors, and experts to find solutions to some of the world's toughest challenges. Google's role in all this? To bring a different skillset to the table in the shape of technologists.

Google Ideas is a think/do tank that aims to explore how technology can make a difference to people working on the front lines of global issues. With problems as far-reaching as these, we need to start by breaking down barriers and opening things up. That might mean making solutions to shared problems open source, making illicit networks' activities transparent, or simply opening lines of communication where none previously existed.

At INFO, it meant listening to people like Okello Sam. Okello was 16-years-old when the rebel army tore him from his village in northern Uganda. "When they capture you, you lose your humanity," Okello told the audience in LA. "They torture you, they get you involved in drugs, they make you kill people who are close to you."

Okello was lucky: He survived. Today, he runs Hope North, a secondary school which has helped educate more than 3,000 vulnerable youths. But as a child soldier, he witnessed the issues at the heart of the summit – drug trafficking, the illegal arms trade, sex slavery – and was able to share vital insights into the way technology can weaken warlords by empowering villagers.

At INFO, we were able to introduce people like Okello to innovators like Brazil's Igarapé Institute, with whom we're working on a project to map the global trade in AK-47s by crunching over a million data points on imports and exports of small arms, light weapons, and ammunition. That's when eye-witness testimony can become a platform for action – and change.

This is a collaborative model that we first developed last year for our Summit Against Violent Extremism, held in Dublin, Ireland. Working with reformed gang members, former jihadists, and ex-neo-Nazi skinheads who are now helping young people turn their lives around or protecting potential victims, we looked at how we could help them share best practices and find ways to improve their work.

But for all that technology is part of the solution, it's people, not technology, that get kids out of gangs and extremist groups. Technology simply helps them work more effectively and on a larger scale. Working with London's Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), we created the Against Violent Extremism Network, a platform to collaborate on ways to use technology to its full advantage. ISD now runs the network full-time.

"But for all that technology is part of the solution, it's people, not technology, that get kids out of gangs and extremist groups. Technology simply helps them work more effectively and on a larger scale."

Criminal networks often adopt new technology quickly, but we believe that same technology can help those combating them get one step ahead. One of the challenges in tracking illicit networks is their sheer scope – borders do not contain drug cartels, arms smugglers, or human tissue harvesters. At Google, our strength is finding trends and patterns in huge sets of data, then mapping the findings. It's how we provided tools for Al-Jazeera and the human rights group Movements.org to create a visualization tracking the defections of diplomats, senior military officials, and members of parliament from Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

We used the same approach to support Kate Willson, an investigative journalist whose reporting on black markets has taken her across the US, Europe, and East Asia. We matched the reporting techniques of Kate and her colleagues at the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists with Palantir Technologies, a software company that is radically changing how information is analyzed.

Their collaboration produced a four-part investigative series on the global trade and illegal trafficking of human tissue, published in July. The series explained how skin, bones, and tendons are sometimes taken illegally from the dead, moved through illicit networks, and used in medical procedures in ways that affect patient safety.

Palantir's analytic software helped the journalists map out the complicated networks. "These companies and their operations stitch an intricate network across the globe," Kate told attendees at the INFO summit. "But those connections are buried in paperwork and data sets. Ultimately, we uploaded more than one million companies, people, documents, and events into the system."

Projects like this show how we're helping groups make better use of technology in the work they're already doing. It's not about reinventing the wheel, but rather making the wheel more efficient and more effective.

Introducing technology in a new context can also have powerful effects. In Somalia, the voice of the people is rarely heard. We looked to change that by developing open-source software that made it possible to conduct Somalia's first public opinion poll. For the poll, Voice of America (VOA) asked more than 3,000 Somalis across the country, as well as in a refugee camp in Kenya, about the kind of constitution and government they wanted to see.

"Google is not a state and does not have a foreign policy, but as a company we do have values. We believe technology is an empowering force and that even when technology is part of the problem, it is also part of the solution."

The result gave the world a rare glimpse inside the fragile state, and also gave Somalis a snapshot of how they see themselves as a nation in the twenty-first century. For instance, 87 percent strongly agreed that Sharia law should be the basis of the civil and criminal code. But on the status of women, Somalis veered away from strict interpretations of Sharia – 77 percent of women and 58 percent of men agreed that women should be involved in the political process.

"Conducting a poll in a country like Somalia is an incredible challenge," admitted Gwen Dillard, VOA Africa Division Director. But the challenge is also part of the appeal. Introducing technology into a nation that collapsed in 1991 was an opportunity to gauge how empowering people to communicate and share information more effectively might help prevent violent conflict and promote stability.

Google is not a state and does not have a foreign policy, but as a company we do have values. We believe technology is an empowering force and that even when technology is part of the problem, it is also part of the solution.

At INFO, the potential for technology to change lives was described by a panel of North Korean defectors, who shared the story of their escape through China and South Korea. They spoke about the darkness in any society deprived of access to information, and the ability of even basic tools like cell phones to provide illumination.

In all our projects, we work with partners who are already doing great things on the ground. Our aim is to give tools to the real experts who are confronting these challenges. We hope these projects can establish a precedent for how technology can be used in a positive way, one that can then be expanded on a larger scale. Even if we move the needle a little bit, we can inspire other organizations to embark on similar efforts, and acknowledge the power technology can have to improve people's lives