MERL TECH DC 2018 REPORT

MERL Tech DC was sponsored by:

[Logos of various sponsors]
Who attended?
160 organizations, 336 people

- INGO (33%)
- Consulting Agency (18%)
- Technology (18%)
- Contractor (8%)
First time at MERL Tech?

Yes 38%

No 62%
Exhibitors / Demo Tables

First Floor

esri
DevResults
fhi360
iMC worldwide
M4
ROOT CHANGE
iGeoPoll
dimagi
salesforce.org
BAO SYSTEMS

Second Floor

dial
Digital Impact Alliance
PRAEKELT ORG
AMERICAN EVALUATION ASSOCIATION
project balance
SYNERGY INTERNATIONAL SYSTEMS
Environmental Incentives
fraym
IMPACT MAPPER
tyler technologies
Agenda

http://merltech.org/merl-tech-dc-agenda-2018/

• Talks, Hard Talks and Lightning Talks
• Breakout Sessions
• Happy Hour & Fail Fest
Themes

1. Building bridges, connections, community, and capacity
2. Sharing experiences, examples, challenges, good practice
3. Strengthening the evidence base on MERL Tech and ICT4D approaches
4. Facing our challenges and shortcomings
5. Exploring the future of MERL
Speakers
Who spoke?

- 11% men of color
- 33% white men
- 17% women of color
- 39% white women

(unofficial estimate)
Gender balance on panels?

- Mixed: 59%
- All Female: 27%
- All Male: 14%
Racial balance on panels?

- All PoC Panels: 5%
- All White Panels: 38%
- Mixed Panels: 57%

(unofficial estimates)
Participant Feedback
Survey Results

44 people out of 336 (17.5%) filled out the survey on Google Forms. 70% rated MERL Tech DC awesome or good.

24 (7%) people rated individual sessions via Sched, with an average rating of 8.8 out of 10.
Top Rated Sessions

• Hard Talk: Will Technology and Big Data Replace MERL? (Madeleine Gleave, Nithio; Sam Scarpino, Dharma.ai; Alexa Courtney, Frontier Design Group)

• From Words to Wisdom: exploring free tools for qualitative data analysis (Samhir Vesdev, IREX)

• When MERL takes over (Jonathan McKay, Girl Effect and Christopher Ying, Save the Children)

• WhatsApp is Whats Up (Ambika Samarthya-Howard, praekelt.org)
Why did people like sessions?

Top rated sessions overall were:

- engaging, practical, relevant, concrete, applicable, hands-on
- with varied opinions and examples, new information, and good facilitation

Top speakers were:

- honest, authentic, critical, informative, and able to tie tech to both theory and practice
What didn’t people like?

Comments on the least favorite sessions included:

- poorly organized, prepared, managed, facilitated
- speakers/topic didn’t bring anything new
- speakers were boring/not engaging
- session was not what I expected
Aha! Moments

Because of the nature of our funding structures, we’re very reactive and ad-hoc in our thinking, and many problem-solving approaches feel highly constrained (i.e., "how can we use data to demonstrate impact to donors when they don’t understand how complicated this is?" instead of “how can we use data to understand impact and to leverage or restructure the trust of our donors so that they’ll help us build our capacity for data-driven decision-making?")

The realization that there’s no longer a line between Tech experts & M&E experts; there are a whole lot of us with a foot in both doors. And that AEA & Washington evaluators do not represent the evaluation scene in DC.

I feel like I now know what MERL is. I did not before. My Aha moment was the whole conference.

We assume that access to tech is a good thing and immediately helps development outcomes — but do we have evidence of that?

The last panel on irresponsible innovation: the whole issue about evidence of tech impact is very interesting!

Measuring MERL is still such a challenge for all

There is little need for blockchain in MERL

Blockchains are not the answer (yet!) and drones can do very cool things.

We need to be making the case for effective ICT4D differently by understanding the costs and impact of the technology. This is a key communication point when we talk to COPs that are hesitant to adopt more tech in their M&E

I have not worked on studies that evaluate the ethics of using ICT. I think that is important to consider when designing a new study or intervention and will take it into account in the future.

I came away realizing that everybody — whether a startup, big time tech company or nonprofit — is struggling with the same questions and issues (what do we do with all this data, what are the ethics of collecting data, we need a data policy, etc.).

The space is continuing to mature and the nature of the presentations, discussions and hallway conversations demonstrate that. In addition, robust evaluators are beginning to be interested in learning about the content of conference. I ran into someone who only came because of an AEA 365 post about MERL Tech for example. And Julia Coffman joined the list of highly respected evaluators who joined this year. This adds another level of depth to the discussions.
Suggestions for Next Time

- Less content and shorter days
- More basic tracks - some topics are 3-5 years too early for the sector
- Less Hard Talks - less plenary and more break outs
- More advanced tracks — the private sector is way ahead of us
- More Hard Talks!
- Bring in some new blood, new presenters
- I think participants need more practical sessions about responsible data going forward.
- Accountability is a topic I would like to see more: we are still the only sector that "monitor and evaluate" itself, with a huge lack of real accountability. How could Tech help in setting up more independent accountability systems that include a very different way to do M&E?
- Bring in some voices from the communities we work in
- Honestly I just want this to become a community with regular events. I would love if there were Science Cafe-style get togethers with this group.

MERL Tech has the opportunity to represent these issues honestly and openly, and to lessen some of the anxious urgency around becoming data-driven. We all think each other is ahead of us, and we're becoming sloppy in how we're trying to remedy these issues. Culture change takes time and capital investment, and we as a community should be willing to admit that publicly. This is urgent, yes, but we need to approach this responsibly and diligently. We should avoid 'othering' data and data folk, because good data belong to everyone.

There was only one session that I could find touching on the subject of the ethics behind collecting all this data. I feel more attention should be placed in this area.
Kudos

I loved the FailFest and the Lightning Talks. It was a good conference.

I liked the opening morning activity - filling out note cards with questions and going around and talking with others to rate those questions. I thought it was a good way to get people talking and meeting each other.

Very well planned and well executed.

Really enjoyed, very energizing, and amazing to see what people are working on in this space.

It was a wonderful flow of events and a great comfortable professional atmosphere. Thanks!

Overall I thought it was a really nice event. I only attended the session I was speaking at, as I was not registered for the full event. That said, what I saw, on the whole, was a really dynamic event with lots of smart and dynamic people. Will try to register for the full experience next year. Thanks so much.

I really appreciated the focus on inclusion and the stats presented during the very first presentation related to diversity and inclusion.

This year was great!

Great conference!
Thanks!!

Please contact Linda Raftree if you have questions or comments about MERL Tech or about this report.

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