



Digital lifeline? ICTs for refugees and displaced persons

edited by Carleen Maitland, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2018, 304 pp., £38.00 (paperback), ISBN: 9780262535083

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BOOK REVIEW

Digital lifeline? ICTs for refugees and displaced persons, edited by Carleen Maitland, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2018, 304 pp., £ 38.00 (paperback), ISBN: 9780262535083

Digital lifeline? Contributes with an information perspective to the emerging research agenda of digital migration studies (Leurs & Smets, 2018). This urgent, interdisciplinary anthology foregrounds the information needs and practices of multiple stakeholders involved in the humanitarian community. Sharing a sociotechnical systems angle, the contributors offer a comprehensive overview of how involved organizations imagine and use the proliferation of refugee-related information technologies. Importantly, the question mark in the book's title refers to the critical stance taken throughout the book, as well as the shared recognition that 'questions of technology's impacts for refugees are not settled' (p. 5).

Three sections structure the book, which consists of 11 chapters in total. The first section provides an overview of relevant debates unfolding in the disciplines of legal, political, organizational and information sciences. Analyses offered here are multi-scalar, combining attention for the international, national, organizational and individual level. 'Technical perspectives,' offered in section two range from computer science, information systems and geographic information science (GIS). Levels of analysis include network access, information systems, apps and big data analytics. The final section synthesizes and translates findings into policy directions and offers new conceptual contours for future research. Chapters follow a similar structure: each describes, from a specific discipline, empirical findings on how information needs are variously addressed among relevant actors, contributors subsequently conceptualize those and raise critical questions about future obstacles, concerns, challenges and ethics.

Section one opens with Galya Ben-Arieh Ruffer's chapter, which charts the informational components of refugee status determination. Legal recognition 'can be a matter of life or death', and technological transformations have a disruptive potential. According to Ruffer, the question arises 'how can cloud-based technologies better connect legal aid providers, enable popup and mobile legal clinics, and support the development of strategic litigation and web training needed to create a pro-bono refugee legal aid corps on a global scale' (p. 30). Here we see how utopian technological imaginaries of how to address refugee information needs' clash sharply with the geopolitical realities of political reluctance to initiate this process. In chapter 3, Lyndsey N. Kingston charts the thorny paradox of biometric identification systems – which involve measurement of physical or behavior characteristics such as fingerprints, faces, irises, bone-marrow, DNA, voices and keystrokes – that both offer grounds for identity determination and verification. These are posited as a solution, but examples of 'function' and 'mission creep' show 'protection gaps' which exacerbate power hierarchies (p. 42). Function creep refers to the gradual broadening application of newly developed technologies beyond their intended usage. Function creep of digital refugee identity technologies might result in privacy breaches or even persecution: the World Food Programme mines data on what Syrian refugees in the Za'atari camp in Jordan buy from their personal budgets to ensure refugees maintain healthy diets (Nedden & Dongus, 2018) and the Myanmar government accesses UNHCR data to control Rohingya refugees upon their return to Myanmar (Thomas, 2018). Chapters 3 and 4 by Carleen Maitland and Karin Fisher map (1) the intricacies of information sharing in multi-level governance in refugee services and (2) refugees' information worlds during journeys, while living in camps and making

home in destination settings respectively. As common technology-driven solutions are government or NGO-centered, Fisher importantly concludes that ‘much more work is needed, especially to create refugee-centred, participatory designs and services that can benefit all’ (p. 104).

Section two opens with chapter 6 by Paul Schmitt and colleagues. They scrutinize the communication infrastructure and map connectivity gaps displaced populations face. Notable examples are complex spectrum regulations and the unstable performance of cellular carriers serving Za’atari refugee camp. Chapter 7, written by the editor, offers a systems analysis, questioning the lack of refugees to manage their own biometric data, the opaque future consequences of data capture, lack of rules on data access and sharing. Furthermore, it’s not only refugees that are biometrically processed, questions emerge from UNHCR requiring local staff in Za’atari refugee camp to share their fingerprints to complete time sheets for camp payroll systems (p. 145). Brian Tomaszewski in chapter 8 combines attention for the relevance of using geographic information systems (GIS) for camp management and planning. From the perspective of critical cartography, he also highlights that from the point of view of refugees, GIS operates as a surveillance technology. Refugee-led ‘maptivism’ has not attracted scholarly attention. The author mentions RefuGIS as an example of Congolese refugees co-mapping with U.S. students and the UNHCR in the Kigeme camp in Rwanda, demonstrating potential for collaborative decision-making with those displaced and UN/international non-governmental actors. In chapter 9 Susan F. Martin and Lisa Singh describe the potential of big data to forecast mass movement of populations – highlighting the key question how to ‘identify meaningful forced migration-related variables from big data sources’ such as determinants or triggers of displacement (p. 194).

In chapters 10 and 11 the editor ties different red threads emerging from the anthology together in providing an information policies overview and conceptualizing cross-cutting themes. Two key concepts are proposed, (1) the ‘digital refugee’, which revolves around data and information reflecting individual displaced people ‘the basis for a digital persona that not only reflects a static picture generated from categorical data, such as gender, nationality, and education level, but also depicts a much richer identity, mirroring and communicating a refugee’s lived experience, emotions, preferences and passions’ (p. 238). This broad, holistic understanding raises important questions about how refugees’ digital persona ‘affects refugees’ coping mechanisms, emotional well-being, and resiliency’ (p. 242). The proposal reflects recent pleas to de-fetishize refugees’ digital practices by conducting non-digital-media-centric analysis of refugee lifeworld’s (e.g., Morley, 2017; Smets, 2018). Secondly, the notion of ‘digital humanitarian brokerage’ seeks to capture the changing humanitarian sector by focusing on ‘(1) increasing data sharing [...], (2) greater connectivity or refugees and the displaced [...] (3) cultural changes within the sector related to humanitarian reform and the need to be more open and flexible, and recognize refugees not as beneficiaries but as partners’ (p. 245).

Several aspects have remained under addressed in this otherwise ambitious and laudable book project: First, the focus is predominantly on refugee protection, what roles can (should?) information technologies play in provision and participation? Secondly, the growing NGO-ization is largely taken at face-value, while the overarching political economy of the parallel proliferation of public-private partnerships demand further scrutiny. Finally, although there are several pleas made in the book for ethical, refugee-centered information technologies and scholarly engagement, reflection on the roles information science plays itself as an actor within the larger migration industry is limited. What are the consequences of using terms like ‘displaced’ and ‘refugees’ which reflect a broader ‘categorical fetishism’ which conceals a geo-political ‘politics of bounding’? (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018). The question arises

how we as scholars are also implicated in this industry that allows mobility for some and curtails mobility for most – what measures can digital migration scholars take to ensure their insights (for example on forecasting displacement, predictive analytics or biometrical identification) are not co-opted and used to exclude transnationally displaced populations from accessing their legal rights, such as the right to claim for asylum? Refugee-centered sociotechnical analysis could for example attend more to how ‘digital refugees’ seek to become political subjects in exposing and contesting dominant media and humanitarian discourse (e.g., Stavinoha, 2019).



All in all, this is a long overdue interdisciplinary book, which draws attention to how digital innovation might alleviate but also exacerbate challenges marginalized and vulnerable groups like refugees face. I warmly recommend it to graduate students and researchers from fields including media, communication, and migration studies, geography, sociology, political science and cultural anthropology.

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