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Technology Can Be Transformative for Refugees, but It Can Also Hold Them Back

News and Press Release

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There is a simple narrative that digital technology makes migration easier for refugees and other forcibly displaced people. Indeed, smartphones, computers, and social media enable migrants to gather information and establish relevant networks that guide their migration and offer support as they navigate the challenges and opportunities of life in their host society. Humanitarian agencies have framed refugees' digital inclusion as a fundamental human right and an essential tool to promote access to education, health care, social connections, income, and skills development.

Yet while these technologies can assist decision-making, they do not always improve migrants' lives. Limited or nonexistent access to the internet, low levels of digital literacy, and socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural barriers pose obstacles for many forcibly displaced populations. Technology can also have unintended consequences for migrants' movement and integration, particularly for refugees and asylum seekers, such as by making it easier for them to be monitored by the government they left and the one they are seeking protection from, while also raising anxiety and complicating social relations with loved ones.

This article examines how humanitarian migrants engage with technologies across the stages of their journeys. Based in part on the author's research with Syrian refugees in the European Union and Venezuelans in Brazil, it identifies why humanitarian migrants might face digital barriers and how governments have at time excluded them, intentionally or not.

The Role of Mobile Media

Mobile technologies have unquestionably made it easier for migrants to plan their journeys, form bonds, and reduce the costs of travel. Even before they leave, migrants can seek out knowledge about destination countries' immigration procedures and use social media to learn about the experiences of others who travelled certain routes or went through border registration processes. In many places, individuals have created crowdfunding campaigns on social media to raise money for their trip.

While en route, information from GPS and other technologies can allow migrants to check their location and orient themselves toward their destination, potentially resulting in decreased reliance on smugglers. In fact, according to research conducted by the author, Syrian refugees have referred to these apps as "the most essential tools" to have during their flight. These can be seen as a source of empowerment for

refugees and other migrants. Moreover, smartphones can serve as digital archives for migrants to store important documents or evidence of persecution, further enabling their movement and increasing their chances of obtaining asylum.

Social networks can also offer migrants a range of resources and services along their journeys, including information about work, transportation, and accommodations, as well as physical protection and financial assistance. Mobile connectivity enables many migrants to maintain contact with their families and friends throughout their journey, providing crucial sources of financial and emotional support. By calling their families, migrants report feeling less anxious during migration. In case of emergencies, migrants can also use phones and social media to request support and guidance. However, some avoid contact with their families until they reach their destination. "You don't need to call your family," one Syrian refugee in the Netherlands told the author in 2018. "For me... I don't want to make them be afraid."

Additionally, smartphones offer a valuable means to distract from migrants' negative feelings and relieve boredom during long waits for transportation, border crossings, or contact with a smuggler. Playing games or watching movies help migrants pass time and cope in stressful situations. Scrolling through pictures of family, friends, and moments of joy can remind them of their loved ones and the sights they have seen along the way.

When Can Mobile Technology Complicate Journeys?

Smartphones do not always make migration easier, however. In certain moments of their journeys, migrants may need to turn off their phones or use them strategically to avoid being detected by authorities, which may lead to them being arrested, detained, and deported.

In fact, prolonged use of digital technologies can generate digital traces that leave migrants more vulnerable to surveillance and privacy breaches by authorities. Border control technologies such as satellites, drones, and offshore sensors can detect movement before individuals reach national borders. And researchers have found that GPS apps can be used by state officials, traffickers, and smugglers to track refugees' movements, meaning that the same tools that some have cited as critical to their journey may also make them vulnerable to arrest and abduction. To protect their identities online, migrants often use pseudonyms or communicate through closed Facebook groups and encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp.

Additionally, the same online resources that enable migrants to plan out their journeys ahead of time may also contain misinformation and falsehoods. Refugees have at times been reluctant to rely on information obtained from Facebook and WhatsApp groups because of previous negative experiences on these platforms. Mouaz, an Iraqi refugee in France, illustrated this sentiment with his statement to the researchers Marie Gillespie, Souad Osseiran, and Margie Cheesman: "I don't trust any news or information people tell me. I trust no one. Only my mother." To check the veracity of online information, refugees and other migrants sometimes compare narratives from different social media groups, choose the most updated information, and ask people near them about information they read online.

Finally, people on the move in precarious situations must contend with fragile and unpredictable access to the internet. They often share Wi-Fi hotspots with one another and search for free Wi-Fi in public spaces. But maintaining mobile connectivity during their journey can come at a high cost. Lack of legal status can

prevent migrants from securing a phone and SIM card, making it difficult to obtain aid and services from humanitarian and government agencies. The need to purchase a new SIM card in each transit country can also force migrants to make difficult financial decisions with their limited savings. This was the case for Jessica, a Venezuelan woman who told the author she was asked by border police in Brazil to prove that she had money when entering the country. Jessica used all her savings to call her aunt, who confirmed this demand was not necessary, leaving Jessica without money to buy food for her daughter. And after arrival, precarious digital connectivity can constrain migrants' abilities to thrive. Some share mobile phones and SIM cards to cope with these limitations. Families, for instance, often share one smartphone, which tends to be controlled by the man, highlighting gender and power dynamics.

Access to Asylum

Different kinds of challenges sometimes emerge at borders, as migrants seek humanitarian protection using digital apps that have been problematic. In the United States, for instance, the CBP One app for asylum seekers to make appointments at border posts has posed challenges to people who lack smartphones or reliable internet, as well as those with dark skin, and who speak languages other than the app's primary English and Spanish interfaces.

Elsewhere, the digitization of Brazil's asylum process complicated the registration of applications in the country's northwest, where many asylum seekers are sheltered and for whom access to digital connectivity remains a challenge. And some EU Member States have started analyzing mobile phone data as part of the asylum application process, potentially making migrants' digital devices a liability.

Protracted Displacement Contexts

For people in refugee camps and other protected displacement situations, digital communication devices can be their key to a new world. For example, researchers have documented how photographing nature soothed refugee women in Greek camps, while Iraqis in Jordan used smartphones to learn English and acquire practical skills through online tutorials. Mobile devices also enable migrants to create content on platforms such as Facebook or Instagram where they can present themselves as multifaceted humans, transcending the labels of asylum seeker or refugee. This facilitates connections abroad, allowing them to share strategies with migrants elsewhere. Among other things, digital social networks can enhance migrants' access to information about higher education, as was documented among Somali refugee women in Kenya. And it can allow them to obtain visibility to defend their rights publicly.

Moreover, communication with family and friends helps migrants cope with the hardships of their physical environments and regain a sense of confidence and well-being. Digital media enable migrants to share important moments of their lives with distant family members through photos, videos, and electronic postcards.

In some cases, however, this digital togetherness may prompt more emotional stress. Due to expectations that they quickly thrive in their new home---and feelings of shame when they do not---migrants may feel pressured to always be reachable on their phones by their families. At times, migrants may temporarily cease communication until they can establish a life they view as dignified and can help their families back in their origin countries.

And although many migrants have smartphones, their access to stable and reliable mobile networks can be restricted by several factors. Refugees in camps, for example, often face reduced, controlled, or no access to the internet. Venezuelans in Brazilian shelters have reported that their limited internet does not allow access to certain websites and social media platforms such as TikTok and YouTube.

Moreover, surveillance concerns can further complicate digital media use among refugees facing prolonged and uncertain asylum and resettlement processes, such as among Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Indian camps. Some asylum seekers in Germany stopped using social media to avoid surveillance from their origin governments. At times, this situation can jeopardize refugees' safety and privacy, such as for Rohingya refugees whose information the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) allegedly shared with the Bangladeshi government without their consent. (UNHCR has denied wrongdoing and maintained that it obtained refugees' consent and fully detailed how data would be used.)

Resettlement and Integration

Like many other migrants, resettled refugees and asylees must often navigate their new country while maintaining a connection to their former home. Digital media can be invaluable for staying updated on news, overcoming adjustment challenges, and acquiring information to enhance daily life. Several studies have established that using technology to stay in touch with families and friends and to form new connections at destination can aid refugees' integration by ensuring access to social, economic, cultural, affective, and legal capital from these support networks. Digital technologies can help recent arrivals navigate bureaucracies, orient themselves, and become familiar with the local information landscapes in their new host community. Moreover, refugees have used mobile technologies to seek medical support on mental health apps and through SMS. It can also help them express themselves; the recent Translocal Lives project in the Netherlands, for instance, showed how refugees used smartphones to produce short films voicing their communities' concerns after resettlement.

But access can be constrained by affordability, language, and literacy barriers, many of which are particularly acute among newly arrived refugees. These barriers can result in limited social participation, including inadequate access to education, employment, and sociocultural interactions. At the same time, digital communication apps may limit refugees' opportunities to engage with the local community in person, which can in turn encourage social exclusion.

There have been notable challenges for host societies and institutions serving refugee and asylee communities. According to research by Katja Kaufmann, Syrians in Vienna revealed that most apps they needed to use to engage with officials were not designed for migrants or refugees. For many refugees, their social and economic exclusion was reinforced by the move by host governments and community organizations to remote and technology-based solutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, several social innovation projects in Brazil began offering only online-based entrepreneurial and financial programs and Portuguese classes, consequently excluding those without digital connectivity or the necessary literacy. Since many migrants are tech savvy, however, the dynamic works in both directions; according to a study by Katherine T. McCaffrey and Maisa C. Taha, caseworkers, schools, and health clinics working with Middle Eastern refugees in New Jersey used outmoded communication channels that failed to match refugees' high levels of mobile usage, leading to unnecessary integration obstacles.

Technology's Role in Shaping Migrant Experiences

Refugees and other vulnerable migrants are already at a disadvantage due to forcible displacement from their homelands. They are more prone to be affected by issues related to limited digital literacy and the cost of digital communications technologies. These factors are often exacerbated by overly simplistic government approaches towards migrants' digital inclusion.

Mobile technologies are often described as facilitators of migration that can enable a range of actions. But they are not determinative. While these technologies can definitely assist migrants in their journey, there are many other factors shaping whether individuals will arrive safely in destination countries, including their personal circumstances, aspirations, government policies, and obstacles encountered along the way.

For those in camps and shelters, effective and creative uses of technology may help them cope with the struggles of living in limbo. But humanitarian actors' digital connectivity initiatives can at times reinforce vulnerabilities and inequalities in these locations. This is especially true for public-private partnerships between aid agencies and companies that provide limited Wi-Fi connections, which can prevent migrants from fully capitalizing on the benefits of digital media and creatively engage with online content.

Finally, as migrants settle into their new homes, digital technologies may provide a range of resources to guide them. But oftentimes, new arrivals are excluded from digital services that are designed for their surrounding communities, due to governments' failures to offer materials in languages they can read, accommodate their unfamiliarity with digital services, or a range of other reasons.

As governments and humanitarian organizations reckon with the record 35 million refugees worldwide, they do so while emerging from the pandemic era's push towards moving services and processes online. This trend may offer convenience for some, but it runs the risk of further excluding refugees, asylum seekers, and other migrants with different levels of digital skill and access. In the right instances, digital technology may be transformative for these migrants. But being left behind in a rapidly digitizing world may be just as damaging.

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