

Digital technology and rethinking the impact of migrations

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Abstract:

Since 2015, several digital initiatives have been undertaken to find solutions to the problems experienced by refugees. Many of them directly or even exclusively address these problems by making available a maximum of useful information on asylum, translating and disseminating offers for jobs that could speed up the refugee's integration, and making multilingual translations of occupational and legal documents. However the major issue in the formula of digital technology plus migrations has to do with users' perceptions, evidence of this being the planetary repercussions of Facebook's presumed effects on the American elections. In other words, the diffusion and perception of a story counts even more when it is about immigration. The story about refugees tends to polarize the host society and, as a consequence, its leaders. However the way that the digital media handle this polarization (as well as the role played by the firms that own these media) is decisive: it can have a strong social impact on both refugees and the host society. In Europe and North America, reactions against immigration are rising as sensationalistic information is spread. In this case, digital technology as a set of tools has a twofold responsibility. It helps share this information and thus potentially exacerbates negative perceptions, but it also offers concrete solutions to refugees and host countries for creating a more inclusive society.

Human beings are not free to migrate. But depending on their place of birth, skin color or religion, they cannot claim this freedom, nor the right to use their intellectual, physical, creative or spiritual potential to the fullest. Besides being unjust, this creates narratives that discredit nation-states by making an issue of their capacity for creating equal opportunities. Nonetheless, there has never been as many human beings who are living outside their country of birth. Populists have turned migrations into a scapegoat for frustrations of the sort that are aroused in every historical period.¹

In 2019, the evidence is not lacking of this migratory stress, sometimes far from a country's demographic reality: the coming to power of Bolsonaro, who is taking Brazil out of the UN agreement on migrations;² the American shutdown resulting from Trump's insistence on building his egregious wall along the border with Mexico;³ Salvini's antimigrant decree in Italy; and so forth. Meanwhile, digital phenomena — in particular algorithmic biases (O'NEIL 2016) and the massive use of big data — have brought to light a major flaw with regard to the sources of information about polarizing topics. The Cambridge Analytica scandal, as well as the ambiguous uses of data by GAFA (Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple), is blurring the quest for truth and undermining the reliability of the news.⁴ More than ever, the capacity of societies to be more inclusive and agile is faced with the question of population movements and of the climatic and democratic crises.

¹ This article, including any quotations from French sources, has been translated from French by Noal Mellott (Omaha Beach, France). The translation into English has, with the editor's approval, completed a few bibliographical references. All websites were consulted in August 2019.

² LONDOÑO E. (2019) "Bolsonaro pulls Brazil from UN migration accord", *New York Times*, 9 January.

³ FORAN C., KILLOUGH A. & RAJU M. (2019) "Trump seeks 'down payment on the wall' as lawmakers search for way out of shutdown", *CNN*, 24 January.

⁴ Respectively: GRANVILLE K. (2018) "Facebook and Cambridge Analytica: What you need to know as fallout widens", *New York Times*, 19 March; & NORWEGIAN CONSUMER COUNCIL (2018) "Deceived by design: How tech companies use dark patterns to discourage us from exercising our rights to privacy", 27 June, available at <https://www.forbrukerradet.no/undersokelse/no-undersokelsekategori/deceived-by-design>.

Big data and migrations, intrinsic issues

French perceptions of refugees

The issue of asylum and refugees has always been at the center of public debates in France and, more widely, Europe (VIANNA 2008). Successive governments since the 1970s have turned this topic into a political issue mainly seen from two viewpoints, according to Otto Scharmer (2016:30-32) from MIT, who has used the “refugee crisis” to illustrate the “theory U”. The first viewpoint musters a protectionist argument to declare that it is necessary to close borders, build walls, and react violently to the arrival of presumably undesirable persons. The second considers that a host country’s role is to protect these persons by, for example, applying the right of asylum or financing the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that provide emergency humanitarian aid to them. Scharmer has argued for a third paradigm that, instead of seeing “them” (migrants) versus “we” (the host country), would design tools for constructing a “we” together. A few actors are trying to develop these tools, of which there is a dire need.

The now well-known phrases “fake news” and “posttruth” question the reality of social interactions. In 2016, “refugee” was declared word of the year at the Word Festival in La-Charité-sur-Loire, and “migrant” came in second.⁵ Type these words into a search for images on Google, and you will have an idea about what they evoke in the collective unconscious.

In 2017, the organization More in Common undertook a study of the perceptions of migrations in France and Europe (BEDDIAR *et al.* 2017). The findings turned up no surprises: this issue definitely polarized the French. Five tendencies were brought to light in this polarization: on the one side, “*identitarian nationalists*” (17% of the country’s population) and, on the other side, “*multiculturals*” (30%). However an ambivalent majority of 53% was divided into three groups: “*humanitarians*” (15%), “*left-behinds*” (21%) and the “*economically insecure*” (17%). These persons tended toward a “national pessimism”; and fear (individual and collective) was a reason for humanitarians to accept migrants or for the two other groups to reject them. This study included an interesting opinion poll, which showed that 30% of respondents wanted to do more to welcome migrants, including 3% who said they would be willing to welcome a refugee in their homes. Among the choices proposed for turning words into deeds were so-called altruistic proposals such as “*make a donation*”, “*join a volunteer association*” or “*sign a petition*” but no mention of actually meeting migrants. The very core of this social issue is for migrants and locals to meet each other.

According to a study by the UNHCR (2013), only 12% of refugees had social interactions with a French person. In other words, the very large majority of the beneficiaries of international protection lack social capital and are isolated. Since the policies (including in France) for “integrating” refugees have among their priorities the learning of the national language and of the host country’s culture, this lack of contact with locals is a problem.⁶ Without social capital, how can a migrant understand the inhabitants of a country and learn?

⁵ <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/bourgogne-franche-comte/nievre/festival-du-mot-refugies-est-le-mot-marquant-de-l-ann-ee-2016-1001667.html>

⁶ COUVELAIRE L. (2018) “Intégration des immigrés, priorité à l’emploi et au français”, *Le Monde*, 5 June.

The role of the high tech giants

A characteristic of information and communications technology (ICT) is that it pays no heed to borders. Apart from a few exceptions, it and, in particular GAFSA, are seeking to install a “culture of the unlimited”. According to the manifesto posted by Mark Zuckerberg in February 2017, “*Progress now requires humanity coming together not just as cities or nations, but also as a global community.*”⁷ Facebook’s founder added that his platform would seek to identify “*meaningful communities*” and “*reinforce our physical communities by bringing us together in person to support each other*”. Yet another example: AirBnB’s motto, “*Belong anywhere*”,⁸ indicates the willingness (or claims to be willing) to use technology to foster social interactions. Looking for love? Tinder. Looking for a roommate? Roomster. Looking for a friendly event? Meetup. For a job? LinkedIn. It is no surprise that the French issue of *Harvard Business Review* in December 2018 ran on its cover: “*How to create bonds during the era of hyperconnections*”. Social bonding seems — paradoxically — to have become high tech’s El Dorado. It has been proven that the social networks create and exacerbate feelings of solitude (PRIMACK *et al.* 2017). The cofounders of HelloAsso and Social Good Week have described this phenomenon.⁹ According to them, the Web giants do not seem to have yet developed their technology to serve the common good and protect data; and they must inquire into their capacity to be at the service of global concerns in our societies.

Digital technology, an ambiguous solution

Tech and refugees

Since 2015, countless applications have been made for refugees, but very few of them actually respond to their users’ needs.¹⁰ A digital device cannot always be programmed to offer help, a welcome, accommodations or a meal. Furthermore, users have to have a need, and the offer has to match it. These digital devices and apps lack “inclusive design” when they are based on the postulate that all refugees need a roof or a job, or need to learn French, while failing to make distinctions among users. According to Dana Diminescu, the apps made for refugees have the life span of a comet; and the persons targeted are like everyone else — they use Facebook, WhatsApp and Skype.

Talk about digital technology and refugees echoes a new trend. But if digital tools are not inclusively designed and if the narrative about asylum is not taken into account, the result will but reinforce stereotypes about migrations. In other words, if we do not start by changing our view of migrants (as being poor and uneducated, stealing “our” jobs, or being in dire poverty or distress) so as to adopt more varied, more concrete views, no digital device or app will be able to propose a durable, global solution for the situations encountered by these beneficiaries of international protection.

The claim that digital technology is the solution for refugees is skewed. This technology can offer solutions to everyone, independently of their legal status or country of birth. However the question of including refugees in the making of digital tools and apps is pertinent. Evidence of this is the startup LevelApp, developed by REFUNITE, which offers refugees in Uganda pay for testing

⁷ See HARARI (2018: 91-92) & ZUCKERBERG M. (2017) “Building global community”, 16 February available at <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/building-global-community/10154544292806634/>.

⁸ <https://www.airbnb.fr/belong-anywhere>

⁹ LE MOUËL I. & THOMASSIN L. (2018) “Sommet Tech for Good: Ne confondons pas intérêt général et génération d’intérêts”, *Libération*, 21 May.

¹⁰ DIMINESCU D. (2018) “Les applis pour réfugiés sont-elles victimes de la pensée magique?”, *Digital Society Forum*, 8 November available at <https://digital-society-forum.orange.com/fr/les-actus/1149-la-plupart-des-applis-pour-les-refugies-ne-sont-pas-utilisees>.

algorithms of artificial intelligence.¹¹ The benefits are double: income for the testers and algorithms that take account of intercultural biases.

The role that digital technology has to play in relation to refugees might not be what we expect. In 2016, the World Economic Forum considered forced displacements to be the most important issue and problem with which the world has to cope (KLUGE *et al.* 2018). Solutions depend on humanitarian assistance and the funding for it, and thus on nation-states and citizens. Since rising populism and nationalism are leading governments in host countries,¹² especially in the West, to be openly adverse to immigration, it is becoming harder, nigh impossible, for people to actually meet each other — for the meeting to be a way to create bonds, a lever for a migration that creates wealth. The role played by digital technology and by citizens capable of taking advantage of it thus becomes the key: the priority is to propose, independently of political contexts, digital tools for bringing people together, for meetings between newcomers and locals.

Using digital technology to change our perceptions

A twofold problem sums up the situation. For migrants, poor knowledge of the inhabitants and culture of the host country is a barrier to what is called “integration”. For persons in the host society, the stumbling block is their preconceived ideas and stereotypes about migration and migrants themselves. While solutions for integration, for newcomers to learn sociocultural codes, are timidly being implemented, the solution for dealing with stereotypes about refugees is taking more time, because “locals” do not feel responsible for migrations. For locals, migration is the problem of migrants and eventually of the institutions that host them. Only the experience of actually meeting refugees provides a way to work on stereotypes.

Meanwhile, the media and social networks that spawn hateful rhetoric and images are proliferating. The “native” French media, which receive nearly a million unique visitors per month, resemble a press review that references all articles related to migration for readers hostile to migrations. As Fabrice Epelboin has explained, it is easy to stir up hate when addressing a hostile public and feeding it biased information.¹³ Given phantasms and fears of the “Other”, the targeting and sharing of information affects perceptions and, consequently, has an impact on several societal issues, ranging from the right to vote and, by ricochet, the public policies adopted in response to public reactions.

The major problem is not for digital technology to create positive contents about migrations. Despite the proliferation of campaigns by NGOs and the UNHCR (#WithRefugees), the rejection of immigrants recurs, and leads to polarization, radicalization and murder, as at Christchurch in New Zealand.

At a time when big data should facilitate contacts between people who share enthusiasms, the digital tools now made for refugees hardly attract users. Though designed for refugees, they overlook that these persons might not want to be considered to be refugees given, in particular, this word’s negative connotations. For example, a Russian refugee declared that, upon arrival in France, she used Tinder to meet people and practice French (with the help of Google Translate) in an environment where she would not be seen as a refugee.¹⁴ These two digital tools, which enabled her to feel socially integrated, were designed to facilitate communication and meetings, not to help refugees. The French state has insisted on the need to create more social bonds between newcomers and locals, and to use digital technology for this purpose.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the digital tools for improving the lives of refugees (and, therefore, the situation in host societies) must have a worldwide, long-term ambition.

¹¹ HOUSER K. (2018) “Refugees in Uganda are earning money by training AIs”, 21 November, available at <https://futurism.com/the-byte/training-ais-refugees-levelapp>.

¹² The biggest host countries seldom have a substantial GDP (AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL 2016).

¹³ In the podcast: *Vlan #68* (2018) “Les gilets jaunes et l’usage sombre des réseaux sociaux”, November, Soundcloud at https://soundcloud.com/vlan_podcast/vlan-68-les-gilets-jaunes-et.

¹⁴ On the radio station France Inter: <https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/a-ton-age/a-ton-age-23-avril-2017>.

¹⁵ When setting up in 2018 the Délégation Interministérielle de l’Accueil des Réfugiés: <https://accueil-integration-refugies.fr>.

Given global warming, the IOM (2017) has predicted 405 million forcibly displaced persons by 2050. According to the UNHCR, 68.5 million people have been uprooted. Even if they are on par with the situation, humanitarian responses will not solve the problems related to story-telling and perceptions. Besides, it is very unlikely that they will be on par, given that only 1% of humanitarian aid for reaching the UN's sustainable development goals is earmarked for migrations (KLUGE *et al.* 2018).

Technology, in particular digital tools for creating solutions based on social bonds and lifestyles, should address questions related to their ethics and finality: how to place social bonds at the center of their model?

Conclusion

Since 2015 in France, efforts have been made to explore technology's potential for improving refugees' lives. For instance, Techfugees acts as a hub for "*empowering the displaced with technology*".¹⁶ Given its guiding principles, Techfugees promotes an enlightened use of digital technology by, in particular, insisting on: "inclusion" in the design of digital tools; the positive effects on other groups of vulnerable persons; and data management. On 30 January 2018, the platform Action Emploi Réfugiés listed 895,047 job offers for which refugees could file an online application, while other platforms such as CALM (Comme À La Maison) and, since 2017, AirBnB Open Homes, make it possible for anyone to offer a room in their home to house a refugee. There are many examples; but their long-term impact is yet to be assessed, and the data are lacking for evaluating how much they improve refugees' lives.

One thing is for sure: the story being told has changed very little. Negative perceptions remain and are growing, especially on the social networks. Newcomers, firms, locals and associations are asking for more tools to organize meetings between people: whether a firm that wants to recruit a refugee (like most of the companies in TENT Foundation)¹⁷ or a nonprofit organization or a socially responsible firm that provides services, such as peer-to-peer programs like (Kodiko and Wintegreat) or websites that use refugees' knowhow to make innovations for locals (Meet My Mama, which allows women migrants to share recipes, or Natakallam, a platform for learning Arabic on line with the help of refugees). What is urgent for tomorrow and might be an El Dorado for the Web giants is the creation of bonds between displaced persons and their host society. A priority is to include migrants in the design and finality of digital tools. Imbued with this conviction, SINGA has (in a partnership with Share.it, Accenture and Pixelis) placed on line an algorithm for better matching refugees and locals, organizations and firms. This was done following three years of R&D on technology and migrations.¹⁸

For these examples to serve as an inspiration, it is important for tech players, big or small, to address the questions of "inclusion" and of the meaning that they give to their inventions. International law will still have a regulatory role in relation to national policies for welcoming and integrating refugees, but the solutions for dealing with crises will also come from refugees themselves. Might it not be time to listen to them so as to avoid the worst?

¹⁶ <https://techfugees.com/techfugees-guiding-principles/>

¹⁷ <https://www.tent.org>: "*The Tent Partnership for Refugees works with businesses to develop and implement concrete commitments to support refugees, especially by hiring refugees, integrating them into supply chains, investing in refugees, and delivering services to them.*"

¹⁸ In particular with Telecom Paristech: <http://www.socialgoodweek.com/lalgorithme-service-lien-social-refugies/>.

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