
In Europe, a recurrent argument of anti-immigration rhetoric is depicting the migrant as a ‘false poor’ individual. It is claimed, in particular, that the possession of a smartphone would be conclusive evidence of a wealth status, the irrefutable proof that migrants do not need our help. We have probably forgotten the faded photographs that our grandfathers kept in their wallets, the list of addresses of expatriated relatives and the long letters sent to parents and lovers. Today, one only needs a smartphone: this technology works at the same time as a camera and a photobook, it offers maps and location tracking, not to mention web access, calls and instant messaging services. And all this, at an affordable price. For displaced persons, a smartphone can represent what Carleen F. Maitland, in her new edited collection, calls a ‘digital lifeline’.

In the book’s Introduction, Maitland explains that the digital revolution is playing even a broader role in the ongoing refugee crisis. Not only displaced persons, but also humanitarian organizations constantly need to acquire and exchange information. A table on page 9 offers the reader a clear visualization of the kind of information required by both categories of actors during the four stages of the refugee lifecycle, namely departure and transit, determination and registration, temporary asylum and permanency. The ten chapters of the book mainly focus on the second and third phase, covering not only the use of digital technology by refugees (Chapters 5, 6 and 8), but also by humanitarian organizations and national authorities.

Throughout the contributions, digital technology is mostly regarded in a positive way, as a true ‘lifeline’. However, as the question mark in the book’s title shows, there is a shared awareness of the Janus-faced role of digital technology, which at the same time can be bearer of risks for the respect of the fundamental rights of the refugees. The book is divided into three sections: ‘Legal, Social, and Information Science Perspectives’, ‘Technical perspectives’, and a third part with an outline of the information policies existing in the sector and a research agenda. In general, the book strongly emphasizes the future research perspective and, for this reason, can be recommended as a useful source of inspiration for researchers interested in the
humanitarian and IT fields. ‘Digital Lifeline?’ is the result of the work of academics with different research background, including political, information and computer science, and international law. Chapters often build on data directly acquired through fieldwork. Legal aspects of the issues related to the use of digital technology in the context of the management of the refugee crisis are mentioned, but not analysed in detail. In terms of language, the book is widely accessible.

In Chapter 2, Galya Ben-Arieh Ruffer examines how Information and Communications Technology (ICT) can improve the Refugee Status Determination Process, the fundamental procedure by which national authorities ascertain if an individual has the status of refugee, and can consequently enjoy the series of rights established by international human rights law. Significant advantages are generated by the use of ICT in the operations of refugee identification and to ensure an equal distribution of refugees among hosting countries. In these contexts, the utility of digital technology is pragmatically considered to outbalance the risks that the creation of a system of digital identity and location tracking can create.

In Chapter 3, Lindsey N. Kingston focuses on the question of identification of displaced persons. The chapter explores the use of biometrics as a potential solution to the problem of refugee identification. Concerns related to potential violations of privacy rights and a possible over-emphasis on the protection of security by states are acknowledged. The points of view of US and EU law are succinctly presented, but the chapter unfortunately still refers to the European legal system pre-GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation). Kingston proposes to reframe the issue of biometric data as a question of property rights rather than merely relying on the right to privacy. According to the author, such an approach would eventually enable refugees to enhance their control on their data.

In Chapter 4, Maitland illustrates to what extent information sharing is crucial within the humanitarian machinery. Technological developments offer new ways to acquire, store and distribute data, but the penetration of innovation depends on the configuration of the governance structure. She presents empirical evidences from two case studies, and generally observes that information converges where governance mechanisms operate. The structure of humanitarian organizations is however at its turn shaped by the need to ensure accountability towards their donors and to enhance the perception of legitimacy vis-à-vis local communities.

In Chapter 5, Karen E. Fisher conversely focuses on the refugees themselves and their need to access information. During the phase of migration and in host countries, the use of smartphones and free messaging services is essential. Fisher summarizes the advantages of using social media as a means to maintain relational ties with the past and, at the same time, acquire information on the new world where refugees are going to live. The chapter includes a paragraph on the centrality of smartphones. According to recent interviews and surveys, these tools are considered the ‘most important item to have during transit’ (p 100).

Part II on ‘Technical Perspectives’ opens with a chapter on ‘Cellular and Internet Connectivity for Displaced Populations’ by Paul Schmitt, Daniel Iland, Elizabeth Belding and Mariya Zheleva. Problems that cause displacement, such as wars, can irredeemably affect connectivity; refugee camps are often located in underdeveloped
areas with scarce connectivity that become easily overloaded; the cost for connectivity in those areas is higher, but displaced persons of course have limited financial resources. The chapter analyses the ICT performance of refugee camps, the variation of connectivity needs during the different phases of displacement and the potential technical solutions, including ‘hybrid’ cellular networks with local networks complementing commercial operators’ coverage.

In Chapter 7, Maitland focuses on the use of ICT to provide refugee services. The chapter presents three data capture systems used in this context: mobile data collection, biometrics, and proGres, a refugee registration system. In all cases, it is underlined that privacy concerns emerge and enter in natural conflict with the operational objectives of humanitarian organizations. The chapter continues with a discussion on three systems of data transfer, sharing and management, including an interesting case study on digital cash and voucher-based systems. Final research questions mention the need to study the experience of refugees with ICT. The author, in particular, observes that the adoption of new technology should not be considered as necessary at all costs.

In Chapter 8, Brian Tomaszewski highlights the values of geographic information systems (GIS) to document, analyse and better understand migratory phenomena. GIS are useful to enhance camp mapping and planning, to help politicians to operate early assessments of migratory phenomena and to assist refugees in their process of displacement towards their country of destination, working as a sort of ‘documented navigation tool’. The author worrisomely highlights a lack of policies for the protection of data produced by the use of GIS in the context of displaced persons.

In Chapter 9, Susan F. Martin and Lisa Singh deal with the cutting-edge issue of ‘Using Big Data to Forecast Mass Movements of People’. When a country of destination of mass displacement is unprepared to face migratory phenomena, problems involving both refugees and the host population are exacerbated. Therefore, prevention is extremely useful. The chapter presents a theoretical model of forced migration and explains how the likelihood of displacement can be expressed using an ‘opportunity index’ balancing ‘pull’ and ‘push’ factors. The chapter illustrates how it is possible to extract alarm signs of mass displacement from big data by analysing the appearance of specific events in the news and the reaction of people to them on social media.

In Part III, Maitland reconstructs the architecture of information policies in the context of mass displacement. The chapter highlights the complexities linked to the intertwined scope of application of these policies. In particular, it analyses the nature of emerging policies in relation to network access, refugee rights and data management at four levels: international, national, organizational, and individual. The chapter does not examine in detail existing policies from a comparative perspective, but provides a comprehensive idea of types and sources of information policies.

In the last chapter, Maitland concludes outlining an ‘ICTs and Displacement Research Agenda’. The chapter proposes two thematic lenses. First, the notion of digital refugee. This concept would identify the reflection of the person of the refugee in the digital environment, the projection of the individual in the data held by governments and humanitarian organizations during the different phases of the
displacement. Future research directions include exploring the way in which refugees construct their digital identities, how this could affect the refugee status determination process and what the related risks in terms of potential violations of fundamental rights are. The second useful concept is ‘digital humanitarian brokerage’. This notion focuses on the provision of services and it denotes an emerging trend that in some sectors is progressively replacing the role of humanitarian organizations as direct providers of services. In relation to this topic, the author underlines that further research has to be done to assess the impact of digital humanitarian brokerage on human rights, particularly in cases where refugees cannot rely on their status of citizenship.

In conclusion, this timely book has the merit of pragmatically assessing the role of ICTs in the context of mass displacement. Digital technology is not presented as a panacea. Nevertheless, this work makes clear that ICTs have the potential to support not only displaced persons, but also national authorities and humanitarian organizations. A further response to the simplistic misbelief that migrants carrying smartphones are in reality rich: these tools can truly represent their digital lifeline.

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The discussion of the right to be forgotten (RtbF) in Google Spain¹ marked a turning point in data subjects’ ability to control their personal data. Followed quickly by the introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and its extended right(s) to be forgotten, this complex area of law has developed rapidly in a short space of time, and provides a wealth of space for discussion and investigation. Paul Lambert’s expansive treatise on the development and operation of the various rights to be forgotten is a comprehensive collation of disparate law collated in a reference text which will be invaluable to practitioners seeking a convenient source for explanation.

As a comprehensive reference text, it admirably collates the Court of Justice of the European Union and UK case law, GDPR discussion and official guidance from the Article 29 Working Party, including also commentary on the potential impact of Brexit, case law from other European Union (EU) jurisdictions and alternative avenues for takedown or forgetting. However, a lengthy background section (Part A)