PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON REFUGEES, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE ETHICS IN VIRTUAL SPACES

REFLECȚII FILOSOFICE PRIVIND REFUGIAȚII, TEHNOLOGIA ȘI ETICA ÎN SPAȚIILE VIRTUALE

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Summary

The rapid advancement of technology is changing human interaction and profoundly affecting the lives of refugees whose dependence on digital spaces presents both opportunities and ethical challenges. This article critically engages with these challenges, focusing on refugees as a vulnerable group that must grapple with issues such as privacy, cybersecurity risks, digital inequality, barriers to access, and the perpetuation of harmful narratives. Grounded in ethical and political philosophy, the analysis explores how digital technologies can either empower refugees by amplifying their voices and promoting inclusion, or exacerbate existing power imbalances and marginalization. Key themes include the role of virtual spaces in promoting recognition and agency, the ethical implications of data governance, and the moral responsibilities of authorities and global actors in protecting the rights of refugees in the digital world. By looking at the refugee experience through a philosophical lens, this article highlights the tension between digital inclusion and alienation and argues for an ethical framework that prioritizes equality, human dignity and justice in the digital age.

Key words: *Digitalization, refugees, human dignity, ethics.*

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Today's world is experiencing unprecedented levels of human displacement due to ongoing and continuous crises, with refugees embodying some of the most profound challenges to traditional notions of borders, citizenship and sovereignty. At the same time, digitalization is changing the way societies interact, communicate and imagine community life. Virtual spaces, ranging from social media platforms to immersive virtual realities, offer some opportunities but also raise significant ethical concerns. First, a look back in history is necessary to recognize the intersection between refugees, technology and ethics. Historically, debates about refugees, migrants and displaced persons have generally been characterized by a tension between two extremes. First, they are portrayed as invisible individuals lost in bureaucratic systems, and second, they are also hypervisible as subjects in mass media and political populist discourses [1].

Invisibility is determined by the displaced persons' struggle for legality, lack of legal personality and marginalization. On the other hand, their hypervisibility is characterized by the sensationalism of the mass media and the political discourse of extremists. This overlap has a long history, but with the advent of the internet and the online space, these sources have a very different reach. For example, when the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, some sought to emphasize the hyper-visibility of Ukrainians in a negative way. One common story was the narrative of rented apartments left destroyed by Ukrainian refugees [2]. Another theme along the same lines is the aid that Ukrainian refugees receive and should not receive. This interplay helps to illustrate how refugees navigate between these extremes and raises the question of how ethical practices in virtual spaces can mitigate harm while amplifying true voices.

Philosophical theories of representation and recognition, especially those of Axel Honneth [3] and Charles Taylor [4], provide a framework for analyzing these dualities.

Honneth's considerations focus on the problem of recognition. This leads to a theory of recognition characterized by the normative values thanks to which identity is constructed in social relations. According to the author, individuals

are the result of relationships of mutual recognition by the other. Moreover, social interactions are important not only for the individual, but also for the normative mechanisms on which society is based. Honneth´s moral philosophy presents different types of mutual recognition and their role in identity formation. Recognition is thus determined by relationships which, as the author mentions, can take three main forms. Firstly, relationships of care and love, which are the basis for the development of the individual´s self-awareness. Secondly, legal relationships and rights are central to the development of the individual´s self-esteem and finally, relationships of solidarity are central to the development of the individual´s sense of self- esteem.

Honneth also attaches great importance to the struggle for recognition, especially for disadvantaged groups. The main idea that the author emphasizes is that social practices and institutions are established and integrated through a regime of recognition. These institutions and relationships are not static, but change over time through the struggle for recognition. Applying Honneth's opinion to the situation of refugees, it can be said that he calls for refugees to be recognized as actors with an inherent dignity and not as objects of charity, taking into account the measures taken by host societies.

Similarly, Taylor considers a political response to the problem of recognizing diverse groups in host societies. The author argues that the „demand for recognition ... is given urgency by the supposed links between recognition and identity, where this latter term designates something like a person's understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being" [4, p.25]. Taylor suggests that „our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being" [4, p.25]. Therefore, the author considers the term "politics of recognition" to be the most appropriate. Specifically, the author points out that the absence or lack of recognition is called „ misrecognition " and it „shows not just a lack of due respect [but] it

can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred. Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need" [4, p.26]. With regard to the goal of recognition, the author emphasizes how important it is to recognize the identical merits of cultures and individuals and to oppose the homogenization of a culture.

To explore some of the issues raised here, it is necessary to look at how this discourse on recognition and identity plays out in online spaces and what the key ethical concerns are when considering the specific group of refugees. This debate raises the question of how virtual spaces can honor the individuality of refugees without perpetuating reductive narratives.

First of all, virtual spaces have the potential to empower refugees by providing them with important tools for career development, education, community building and advocacy. For example, online learning platforms such as Coursera for Refugees [5] provide avenues for skills development and education that could help refugees to be recognized as active members of the host society and promote their integration. These initiatives are in line with Amartya Sen's [6] capability approach, which assumes that justice consists of expanding the real opportunities for all people to lead a life they value. Sen´s theory of justice is based on fair access for all and must deal deeply and directly with the real freedoms that different people — with possibly different goals —enjoy to lead lives they rightly value [6]. Technology, when accessible and equitable, can promote the autonomy and dignity of refugees and enable them to participate meaningfully in local and global society.

Secondly, community-building efforts in virtual spaces also offer displaced people the opportunity to maintain cultural practices and maintain or rebuild social ties. Facebook groups, Telegram channels and various networks often serve as hubs for sharing resources and mobilizing collective action. The Refugee Resource Hub [7], for example, offers a range of holistic and integrated services to support people in a whole and trauma-informed way. Dignity, respect, compassion and human rights are at the heart of their approach. Similarly, the Connectivity for Refugees initiative [8] supports forcibly displaced people and their host communities to secure their rights and choices, become

part of a connected society and gain access to technology that enables them to build a better future. As part of this initiative, efforts are focused on displaced communities to ensure that a connected world that leaves no one behind.

In this sense, Nussbaum [9] argues for the ethical imperative of cultivating the necessary conditions that allow individuals to develop their abilities and emphasizes that technological integration should prioritize the development of human potential over purely economic outcomes. However, technological access is far from equal for all. Among the biggest barriers are digital inequalities, which are exacerbated by socio-economic inequalities and geopolitical constraints. For example, refugees in camps often lack consistent internet access, reliable hardware or digital skills. These issues require urgent attention to ensure that technology serves as a bridge rather than a barrier [10]. This inequality raises urgent ethical questions about the distribution of technological resources and the moral responsibilities of states, corporations, and international organizations. Recent scholars such as Singh [11] examines the fundamental changes taking place in economic structures centered on the key resource of the digital economy´s data. Singh points out that global corporations needed national governments to create and enforce strong laws that enable value creation based on intellectual property. In the digital arena, however, they rely on the lawless extraction of data from anywhere, through their sheer digital presence and power. They avoid legal discussions about the economic value of data in order to divert attention from this lawless activity... Technical controls through software are foolproof and effective even remotely. Companies do not need much legal protection for the valuable data they collect and hoard because they mostly operate behind technical walls. Technology also provides extensive coercive power for enforcement [11, p.5]. The virtual space is therefore a complicated environment with complex dynamics.

So, returning to the group of refugees, virtual spaces can amplify the voices and narratives of refugees and provide some opportunities for self-expression. However, these platforms also carry the risk of reducing refugees to mere data or symbols in globalized activism. Ajana [12] has put this aspect in a nutshell. Using two examples, the author illustrates the overlap between technology and refugee issues and the effects of their interplay. The first example is the

Eurodac project, an EU-wide database for checking asylum applications using an automatic fingerprint identification system. The second example relates to the UK Applicant Registration Card, a biometric identity card issued to asylum seekers in the UK to manage their freedom of movement and control the distribution of welfare benefits and services [12]. Using these two examples, Ajana expresses concern about the phenomenon of the creeping expansion of biometric functions, whereby techniques originally introduced for specific applications and purposes are gradually spreading to much broader areas and practices of administration [12, p.557]. While technology can help refugees, it also exposes them to new forms of surveillance and exploitation. Therefore, while these systems offer some logistical benefits, they also raise profound ethical concerns about consent, privacy and data security. Considering the group of refugees, they often have little choice but to submit to these requirements, as access to basic needs is dependent on their consent. In order to clarify these ethical considerations, it is necessary to present three interrelated aspects: Consent - Privacy - Security. Consent is determined by refugees' autonomy in deciding whether to share biometric data, which is often limited by their dependence on aid. Privacy reflects the extent to which the data collected from refugees is protected from misuse or unauthorized access, and security is determined by the safeguards put in place to prevent breaches and ensure that the data does no harm.

The possibility of misuse of refugee data further complicates these ethical dilemmas. Data breaches, unauthorized disclosure and surveillance by state and non-state actors expose refugees to significant risks, including discrimination, persecution and identity theft [13]. Taylor summarizes the emerging scholarly perspectives and proposes "three pillars as the foundation of a concept of international data justice: (in)visibility, (dis)engagement with technology, and anti-discrimination. These pillars combine positive with negative rights and freedoms, challenging both the basis of current data protection regulations and the growing assumption that the visibility of the data we emit is part of today's social contract" [13, p.1]. The lack of a robust legal framework to protect refugee data highlights the need for an ethical approach to digital governance. To achieve this goal, Taylor develops a framework that could reconcile the

different perspectives and establish the basic requirements. First of all, the author suggests taking into account the novelty and complexity of the way in which (big) data systems can discriminate, discipline and control.

Secondly, the author argues that it should consider both the positive and negative potential of new data technologies. And finally, it should apply the principles that have been useful in all social contexts, thus eliminating the developing double standard regarding privacy and the value of visibility in lower and higher income countries [13, p.8]. These premises could help develop a framework for data justice that focuses on the rights and agency of marginalized populations in the digital age.

In this line of thoughts, Kaurin points out that "in contrast to the restrictions in mobility and access to physical spaces, the Internet and the digital realm are often framed as a borderless and egalitarian space, and therefore presented as an attractive and viable solution to various challenges refugees face. In practice, access to digital spaces has always been restricted by mobility and access to certain physical spaces. As long as connectivity is dependent on the varying quality and reliability of signal strength, access to charging points, network administrators, and mobile agents, it is unlikely to offer immediate benefits to users equally. Some refugees further experience restricted digital mobility because of lower digital literacy rates (especially among women, girls, and the elderly), and a general lack of online content in their native languages, limiting information and communication options" [14, p.1]. Later the author argues that the "restrictions in physical mobility for refugees affect … how they navigate through digital spaces, by recreating and amplifying existing power dynamics within the community and with external actors. Their fractured information landscapes are then shaped by a lack of available content, restricted access to connectivity, digital exclusion, and even issues like digital illiteracy, all of which disproportionately affect marginalized populations, including refugees" [14, p.12].

These ideas by Kaurin illustrate the complex interplay between physical and digital mobility for refugees and challenge the common notion of the digital world as a universally accessible and egalitarian space. While virtual spaces are

often portrayed as „borderless',” the practical realities of connectivity reveal significant barriers rooted in physical limitations and systemic inequalities.

Kaurin emphasizes the dependence of digital access on physical infrastructure. Connectivity depends on signal strength, charging stations and the availability of networks, all of which are often inadequate or inaccessible to refugees. This interdependence shows that digital spaces cannot be fully separated from the physical conditions that shape them, undermining the idea of a truly borderless digital space. The author identifies lower digital literacy rates, particularly among marginalized groups such as women, girls and older people, as a key factor limiting access to digital spaces. This inequality not only limits their ability to utilize available resources, but also exacerbates existing inequalities. Furthermore, the lack of content in refugees' native languages reinforces these barriers and prevents meaningful participation and communication.

Kaurin shows how existing power dynamics are recreated and reinforced in digital spaces. Refugees' limited access to reliable information and technology reinforces their marginalization, while fractured information landscapes marked by digital exclusion and insufficient content hinder their ability to advocate for themselves or integrate into host societies. These dynamics often disadvantage refugees both within their communities and in their interactions with external actors. The analysis also highlights that digital exclusion disproportionately affects already marginalized populations and exacerbates vulnerability based on gender, age and socio-economic status. This intersectional perspective highlights how barriers to digital mobility exacerbate existing inequalities and further exclude refugees from opportunities for self-determination, education and community building.

Kaurin's findings call into question the optimistic narrative of technology as a panacea for the challenges faced by refugees. Instead, they show that digital spaces, like physical spaces, are characterized by structural inequalities and power dynamics. Targeted measures are needed to address these issues, such as improving physical infrastructure, promoting digital literacy and creating inclusive online content that reflects the linguistic and cultural diversity of the refugee population.

To summarize, ethical considerations must be made when exploring the digital divide among refugees. Efforts to bridge this divide must consider the interconnected barriers that refugees face in both the physical and digital realms, focusing on equity, accessibility, and reducing systemic barriers.

CONCLUSIONS

The intersection of displacement and digitalization offers both opportunities and profound ethical challenges. Refugees, often caught between invisibility in bureaucratic systems and hypervisibility in political and media narratives, must fight for recognition and dignity in virtual spaces. Philosophical approaches by thinkers such as Honneth and Taylor highlight the importance of mutual recognition and emphasize that individuals, including refugees, must be seen as active agents with inherent dignity and not as passive objects of charity or mere symbols in political discourse.

Virtual spaces have the potential to empower refugees through access to education, community building and advocacy. Initiatives such as Coursera for Refugees and the Connectivity for Refugees program show how technology can promote inclusion, dignity and autonomy. These approaches are in line with Sen and Nussbaum's theories of justice and human potential and emphasize the need for equitable access to technologies that enable refugees to live meaningful lives. However, the promise of technology is clouded by significant challenges, including digital inequalities, surveillance and data exploitation. Refugees often face barriers to digital access, and when they are integrated into technological systems, they risk becoming the subject of intrusive surveillance and data misuse. The lack of a solid ethical framework and legal protection further exacerbates these vulnerabilities, exposing refugees to risks such as discrimination, identity theft and loss of privacy.

To address these concerns, a balanced and ethical approach to digital governance is crucial. This includes prioritizing consent, privacy and security of refugee data, and ensuring that technological advancements serve to empower, not oppress, people. International data justice frameworks, such as those proposed by Taylor, can guide the development of equitable digital systems that respect the rights and agency of marginalized populations.

In summary, while virtual spaces have the potential to amplify the voices of refugees and promote their inclusion, these platforms must be carefully managed to avoid harm. Ethical digital governance guided by the principles of recognition, equity and inclusion is essential to ensure that technology becomes a bridge for dignity and opportunity rather than a barrier to justice.

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