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Digitization to Support Generations of Refugees: How Can IS Research and Researchers Make a Difference?

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Panel

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Abstract

In recent years, a new refugee crisis has been sweeping the world due to the continuous violence in different places and countries. These developments have caused unexpected challenges on different levels, ranging from individuals (including migrants and refugees and hosting populations) to organizations, countries, and continents (including those fleeing violence and hosting countries of fleeing individuals). Despite the urgency and the potential risks associated with the current refugee situation, relatively little work has been carried out by IS researchers on how to find the intersection between this societal topic and the use of technology to alleviate this crisis. The outcomes of the panel have implications for both academia and practice. We would like to uncover the beneficial use of digital transformation solutions that could help and empower refugees and host communities using the bright side of existing technologies in integrating refugees into society.

Keywords: Information Systems, Research, Refugees, Digitization, ICT, Social Inclusion

Introduction

In recent years, a new refugee crisis has been sweeping the world due to the continuous violence in different places and countries. These developments have caused unexpected challenges on different levels, ranging from individuals (including migrants and refugees and hosting populations) to organizations, countries, and continents (including those fleeing violence and hosting countries of fleeing individuals).

The conversation on how the information systems (IS) discipline could and should help through addressing refugee topics started at ICIS 2016 with a panel discussion (AbuJarour et al., 2016). However, despite the urgency and the potential risks associated with the current refugee situation, relatively little work has been carried out by IS researchers on how to find the intersection between this societal topic and the use of technology to alleviate this crisis. The motivation to propose another panel at ICIS 2022 started with the fact that according to the AIS eLibrary (https://aisel.aisnet.org/), only 36 research articles have been published in AIS journals and conferences on the refugee topic. Considering the current challenges and issues caused by the refugee crisis and considering the potential roles that technology and digitized technological solutions can play in alleviating societal issues, this number is very small and indicates that we as a community should care more about contributing to alleviating the current situation and making peoples' lives better, to make a better world and/or understand how we can use our skills and knowledge to do so.

Following the conference theme of "Digitization for the Next Generation," which challenges us as a community to look ahead, this panel will discuss the new normal for an important group in our society that should not be considered a minority anymore, which is refugees. Many refugees are "techno-savvy"; thus, it is expected that the technologies and the digitalized services provided to refugees in the hosting countries will affect their way of life in their new homes. This is especially true due to some fundamental problems that refugees face, like exclusion from participation in economic activity, pressures to homogenize that compromise their cultural identities, being targets of hate speech and outright violence in hosting nations, and the current COVID-19 pandemic that has affected all sectors of society. These problems and challenges lead to a call for research that tackles the intersection of the IS field with the refugee issues and topics and how IS research can "leverage opportunities for innovation, tackling grand challenges of our societies, and grappling with the effects of digital transformation" (https://icis2022.aisconferences.org/). Moreover, the panel's topic is situated within the domain of the Bright ICT Initiative – a set of concerted research directions promoted by the AIS to achieve a greater impact of the IS discipline (Lee, 2015).

Against this background, the following key points will be explored in the discussion:

- The large research opportunities that exist at the IS/refugee intersection.
- The challenges for academia and practice in conducting research in this area, relevant topics, and recommendations on how to overcome those challenges.
- Encouragement for early-stage researchers and supervisors, educational institutions, and fund-raisers to adopt projects that tackle refugee/immigration topics in IS.

The outcomes of the panel have implications for both academia and practice. We would like to uncover pathways for researching the beneficial use of digital transformation solutions that could help and empower refugees and host communities using the bright side of existing technologies in integrating refugees into society. The expected outcomes from the panel discussion will be directed toward different stakeholders including:

- Researchers, supervisors, and academic institutions
- Practitioners, industry partners, and technology-related stakeholders
- NGOs and volunteering institutions
- Inter-governmental bodies, governments, and decision-makers
- Refugees, vulnerable groups, and the local hosting communities

We are confident that this panel will draw a wide audience because its topic is timely, relevant, and novel in the information systems context. Researchers in the IS field are still hungry to uncover the social side of the IS and ICT and how to use their tools to improve people's lives.

Issues and Discussion Points

Based on an open discussion between the panelists and the audience, the panel will discuss issues related to the following themes:

Questions that will be discussed during the panel discussion include (in addition to the questions that come from the audience):

1. **The Need for Research:**
- What are the real-world issues that need to be studied at the IS/refugee intersection?
- What do we not know about how to solve these issues? What are the most pressing related research questions?
- What kinds of research and researchers are needed to solve the issues in this space?
- What is the IS angle on these problems?

2. **Appropriate Theories and Research Methodologies:**
- What related theories would you suggest using to study in this area?
- What dependent variables can be used to assess the relationship between IT/ICT and any issue related to refugees or the host countries? And what are the positive as well as adverse consequences that digitalization may have on refugee communities?
- What research methods or techniques lend themselves to studying these problems?
- What methodological issues typically arise in this space? Are there any issues in collecting data?

3. **Contribution to Academia and Potential Publication Opportunities**
- What are the benefits to researchers of engaging in research in this space?
- How should research in this area be evaluated by reviewers, editors, and gatekeepers?
- What is to be considered when submitting research articles on this topic?
- What are the journal recommendations for researchers on this topic?

4. **Practical Implications for Industry and Society**
- Who are the stakeholders of this research topic?
- What are the benefits of researching this topic for the industry and for other stakeholders?
- What are the requirements of industry partners and other stakeholders from researchers on this topic?
- How can academics and practitioners cooperate to solve issues related to refugee topics?

5. **Challenges to Conduct Research and Recommendations:**
- What are the challenges of engaging in research in this space?
- What are the recommendations to academic institutions that are interested in supporting this research topic?
- How can researchers work with refugee communities in ways that treat them as co-collaborators and empower them in finding potential solutions to issues that they see as relevant and of value to them?
- If a doctoral student or early-career faculty member expressed an interest in engaging in research at the intersection of IS and refugees, what advice would you give these early-stage researchers?

Panelists

- Moderator: **Michelle Carter**, Associate Professor, Washington State University, USA, michelle.carter@wsu.edu
- Panelist: **Safa'a AbuJarour**, Assistant Professor, An-Najah National University, Palestine, safaa.abujarour@najah.edu
- Panelist: **Robert Davison**, Professor, City University of Hong Kong, isrobert@cityu.edu.hk
- Panelist: **Shirin Madon**, Associate Professor, LSE, England, s.madon@lse.ac.uk (to join only virtually)

- Panelist: **Carleen Maitland**, Professor, Penn State University, USA, cmaitland@ist.psu.edu
- Panelist: **Shaila Miranda**, Professor, University of Oklahoma, USA, shailamiranda@ou.edu
- Practitioner Panelist: [The refugee situation in Europe is very critical right now, also, the COVID regulations are changing quickly. Therefore, we would like to secure a commitment from a local practitioner with expertise in this topic to attend ICIS after the proposal gets accepted.]

Panel Structure

1. The 1.5-hour panel is intended to be an open dialog between the panelists and the audience.
2. The moderator will start by welcoming the participants and give a brief introduction of the topic, the purpose of the panel, the panelists, and the logistics for the panel session.
3. Panelists will be asked to create a 2-minute video with an opening statement about their view on the topic. The combined set will be shown at the start of the session to set the stage and introduce the panelists properly.
4. Then, the moderator will start the panel discussion by asking the audience one or two questions whose answers can be turned into a word cloud, using Mentimeter, like "What do you think are the biggest unsolved problems at the intersection of IS and refugees?"
5. From the audience comments and from a predefined list of questions, 2-3 panelists will be invited to speak to each of these questions. To ensure the interaction with the audience throughout the session, the moderator will ask the audience if they have anything to add to what the panelists have said after each question, or if they have questions for the panelists.
6. If the panel is completely in-person, attendees can simply stand up and ask their questions or contribute additional ideas. If the audience is very large, we will ask attendees to submit questions or comments via the conference app or Twitter, and the moderator will facilitate them or call on participants to weigh in for themselves. If the panel is hybrid, the moderator will facilitate questions and comments from the remote audience that can be submitted via chat.
7. To conclude the panel, each panelist will suggest a one-minute takeaway for the audience and what is the unique opportunity for IS researchers and practitioners in this space. The moderator will conclude the panel with summary comments based on the panel and audience discussion. Moreover, next steps and helpful resources to continue the discussion and support contributions to refugee communities through IS research/practice and policy will be shared.
8. A final moment will be given to a member of Concerned Academics Now (CAN) to introduce the group to the audience and invite audience members to contribute to the current conference cause which is about supporting refugees by choosing an organization in Denmark to donate to one of its projects. This way, we are not only supporting research on the topic, but we support refugees in meaningful ways.

Participation Statement

All participants have made a commitment to attend the conference and serve on the panel if the panel is accepted, contingent on COVID-related policies and regulations. One panelist indicated that she is able to join only virtually. We will leave the choice to the Panel Chairs to decide if this is feasible for this panel or not.

Biographies

Panelists have been carefully selected to fit the focus of the panel, including expertise in the area of refugee research, ICTD (Information and Communications Technologies for Development), journal editing and publications, social inclusion and integration, and practical implications of refugee integration.

Here is a brief description of the background of each panel participant. Participants appear in alphabetical order.

Safa'a AbuJarour is an Assistant Professor in Management Information Systems at An-Najah National University in Palestine. She has been announced as an AIS Distinguished Member in December 2021. In her research, Safa'a investigates the use of ICTs by the refugees. Specifically, she focuses on finding new technological solutions for enhancing the interconnectedness of newcomers and locals in a host society.

Since 2015 Safa'a has been actively engaged as a volunteer in the refugee crisis in Berlin, Germany. She is also the founder of the non-profit organization "Place4Refugees" which matches local people with refugees to help with the integration process. Due to her research and volunteer background, she has a deep understanding of the needs of refugees with regard to technology and integration. She firmly believes that ICTs can play a crucial role in the integration process of refugees. Her research has been published and presented in top-tier venues.

Michelle Carter is an Associate Professor in the Carson College of Business Management, Information Systems, and Entrepreneurship Department at Washington State University and an affiliate associate professor in the Information School at the University of Washington. Michelle's research focuses on information technologies' involvement in identity and social change, factors that shape IT usage behaviors, and information systems management. Her work has appeared in *MIS Quarterly,* the *European Journal of Information Systems,* the *Journal of the Association for Information Systems,* the *Journal of Information Technolog*y, as well as other journals, books, and conference proceedings. Michelle is a past-president of the Association for Information Systems (AIS) Special Interest Group on Social Inclusion and previously chaired the AIS standing committee on diversity and inclusion. She is the current AIS Vice President for Special Interest Groups and Colleges.

Robert Davison is a Professor of Information Systems at the City University of Hong Kong. His research focuses on the use and misuse of information systems, especially with respect to problem solving, guanxi formation and knowledge management, in Chinese organizations. He is particularly known for his scholarship in the domain of action research. Robert is the Editor-in-Chief of the *Information Systems Journal* and the *Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries*. As a researcher and as an editor, he seeks to promote both an inclusive and an indigenous perspective to research.

Shirin Madon is an Associate Professor working jointly in the Departments of International Development, and Management at the LSE teaching courses on ICT and Socioeconomic Development, and Humanitarian Intervention and Digital Innovation. Current research focuses on digital identity platforms for disaster management and social protection. A second strand of research is on primary healthcare in India where she has been studying how community health governance structures established by the government develop capacity for local planning and monitoring both in terms of routine public health management and for disease surveillance during the pandemic.

Carleen Maitland is co-Director of the Institute for Information Policy and a Professor in the College of Information Sciences and Technology at Penn State University, USA. Her expertise includes analyses of information and communication technology (ICT) use in international organizations, particularly those involved in fostering economic and social development as well as humanitarian relief. Her work has been carried out in the U.S., Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, while working with several UN organizations, Save the Children, and the U.S. State Department, just to name a few. Her work on ICTs and displacement, with a focus on refugees, builds on her previous work on inter-organizational coordination and multi-level governance in ICT use for humanitarian relief and aid organizations.

Shaila Miranda is the W.P. Wood Professor of MIS at the University of Oklahoma in the USA. Central to her research stream is investigating the role of ICTs in producing and disrupting social orders. Her research has appeared in journals such as the MIS Quarterly, Information Systems Research, Journal of Management Information Systems, and Information and Management. She serves as Senior Editor for MIS Quarterly.

Practitioner Panelist: *to be added after the panel proposal gets accepted.*

Acknowledgments

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