

Forced Migration: Making Sense of a Complex System

Guest Editors:

Nadia Caidi, University of Toronto, Canada

Juliane Stiller, You, We & Digital and Grenzenlos Digital e.V., Germany

Syed Ishtiaque Ahmed, University of Toronto, Canada

Violeta Trkulja, You, We & Digital and Grenzenlos Digital e.V., Germany

Keywords: displaced populations; forced migration; information science; refugees

Publication Type: editorial

Editorial

This special issue of IJIDI on “Forced Migration: Making Sense of a Complex Ecosystem” offers a timely assemblage of articles depicting the myriad challenges associated with forced mobilities and the multiplicity of responses to these challenges. This issue is being released at a time when the world is looking at the highest number of refugees after the Second World War, and an increasing number of forcibly moved people across the globe. The complexity of the issue is staggering, and creates resounding implications for international politics, sustainability, global and local political economies, and human welfare. As these challenges were unfolding, we organized a workshop at the 2019 iConference in Washington, DC, to invite a reflection on the interventions and conversations that were taking place in the information fields around forced migration. What ensued was a vibrant discussion on the experiences and narratives of displaced populations in different contexts through an information lens. Two major discourses pervaded the workshop—one around the (re)production and politics of information that shape our understanding of forced migration, and the second, a more pragmatic response to this issue from both design and policy perspectives. This Special Issue aims at continuing these conversations by providing a space and an opportunity to engage information science scholars—and those in related fields—in parsing this complex ecosystem and unearthing contemporary tensions and novel understandings at it relates to forced mobilization.

The conversations that constitute this Special Issue transcend the boundaries of a single discipline and profession and serve instead as a springboard for engaging a reflection on the ongoing struggles of refugees in a global networked information environment, as well as on the emerging creative, speculative, and innovative practices that contribute to a reimagining of possible futures. These two emphases might have different epistemological standpoints—one rooted in a more analytic endeavor of understanding the situational challenges surrounding forced migration, and the other one shaped by a more pragmatic spirit of reshaping a world that incorporates and builds on the social reality (and social imaginaries) of migrants. We find both of these strands sharing a common platform of ‘hope’ that comes through both the nature of the struggles and the possible interventions. In this spirit, the five research articles and the three reports from the field included in this Special Issue introduce diverse and comprehensive conceptualizations of the forced migration experiences from the standpoint of the various stakeholders involved, and discuss the implications thereof for educating new generations of

practitioners and scholars in multiple fields. Counted together, these publications also demonstrate that information encounters and interactions are at the very heart of practice and scholarship in forced migration.

The issue opens with “Situational Information Behaviour: Exploring the Complexity of Refugee Integration” by Olubukola Oduntan and Ian Ruthven. In it, the authors argue for a systemic understanding of refugees’ integration in the UK context, which takes into account both micro (individual needs) and macro (legal and social) levels. In doing so, the authors complicate our understanding of the information needs of refugees by highlighting the differences stemming from one’s immigration status and lived experiences depending on whether one is a refused asylum seeker, an asylum seeker or a refugee. This contribution emphasizes the necessity of a situational approach and method to examining refugees’ context, and conceptualizes information seeking as a bilateral and operational practice.

In Julia Devlin’s “In Search of the Missing Narrative: Children of Polish Deportees in Great Britain,” the focus is on the story of the trauma that follows forced migration for generations, focusing on the memory practices of the children of Polish survivors during World War II. Combining historical migration studies and memory studies, the author seeks to understand how the family narrative is constructed and how the communicative memory is affected. Building on both archival documents and interviews, the author reminds us of the role of communal memory in intergenerational identity formation (especially within a migrant context), and calls our attention to the role of institutions like libraries and museums when it comes to bringing out the traumatized past of a silenced community.

In “Information Spaces and Identity Navigation During Refugee Experiences,” Angela Schöpke-Gonzales, Andrea K. Thomer, and Paul Conway draw both from an information perspective and from theories of liminality to support their fieldwork findings that point to the tensions negotiated by migrants around identity and place, resilience and fracture, liminality and dissonance. In doing so, the authors point to the structural discrimination faced by migrants, and the agency they require—and eventually develop—through the lens of a dual interactive model that distinguishes between the migrants’ self-identity and their ascribed roles.

In “Ethics and Methods for Collecting Sensitive Data: Examining Sexual and Reproductive Health Needs and Services for Rohingya Refugees at Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh,” Bachera Aktar and her colleagues from the BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health in Dhaka, Bangladesh, joined forces with colleagues from the World Health Organization (WHO) to reflect on their longstanding work with the Rohingya refugees in the Cox’s Bazar camps. The authors walk us through a wide range of situated challenges that are associated with collecting, preserving, and presenting data about the sexual and reproductive health of girls and women in the camps. They reflect on the importance of the socio-cultural norms and risks associated with this type of research, and the ethical implications. The article provides both methodological guidance as well as a conceptual framework based on their work to date. Their critical reflection on the necessity of culturally-sensitive research design (building on their collective experience and positionality) is extremely valuable for a range of contexts.

The article by Michele Santamaria and Caseem Luck entitled: “From a “Limited Space” to a Much Wider Future: Meaning-Making Practices of Young Refugee Women Pursuing Post-Secondary Education” presents us with three vignettes of refugee women that address and explore questions of language, identity-building, and the role of labels and imaginaries. The unique voices of the

women illustrate their ‘shifting’ process—a transition from a traumatic past to a future that the migrant aspires to. The authors characterize these women’s journey from a ‘limited space’ to a ‘broad future’ as a form of meaning-making. This active process of reframing and interpretation is deemed essential to both survive and thrive in a new and unfamiliar environment.

In addition to the five research articles included in this Special Issue, we also included three Reports from the Field. The purpose of these reports is to share work in progress or reflections that stem from one’s professional practice. Juliane Köhler’s contribution, “Seeking Employment in a Non-Native Language: Online Information-Seeking Behavior of Refugees in Germany,” is a small-scale study of seven refugees’ interaction with online information systems in the German context. In it, the author examines the strategies used by refugees to find information online, and identifies the types of barriers hindering a successful search. As part of the laboratory experiment, participants were asked to solve online tasks in order to gain a better understanding of the variety of strategies deployed (e.g., query formulation, use of translation tools, multilingual searching or types of search strategies). In doing so, this study contributes important insights for service providers and information designers when it comes to online searching by migrants, but also invites us to reflect on broader structural inequality around access to information and resources as mediated by language(s).

While the above-mentioned articles have highlighted many challenges embedded in the encounters between migrants and their information environments, the contribution by Ricardo Gomez, Bryce Clayton Newell, and Sara Vannini (“Mind the Five Card game: Participatory games to strengthen information practices and privacy protections of migrants”) presents a design intervention that can be adopted and adapted by a range of actors such as humanitarian organizations, libraries, schools, health centers and other community-based agencies working with vulnerable populations. At the heart of the intervention using the “Mind the Five” card game is an interest by the researchers in enabling a conversation and raising awareness about migrants’ privacy rights, and the extent to which a given organization is mindful and equipped to ensure improved privacy practices for all, but especially so when dealing with vulnerable migrant populations.

Lastly, the contribution by Eliana Trinaistic, “Hackathons as Instruments for Settlement Sector Innovation,” presents an organizational perspective on change and innovation in the non-profit organizations (NPO) and settlement sectors (with a focus on Canada). In doing so, the author illustrates how organizations can build on design principles and develop an “innovation” mindset as a means of addressing the long-term outcomes of social services. A particular instrument, the hackathon, is described as a form of experiment in consulting and engaging with various stakeholders. Lessons learnt and practical considerations are shared by the author to illustrate how hackathons can be an appropriate means of fostering innovation and civic engagement by non-profit organizations.

As can be seen, the Special Issue is both inspired and guided by the imperative to look deeper and unsparingly across various geopolitical contexts at the embedded theoretical and ideological tensions that govern forced migration conversations. Taken together, the articles lend a wider lens to apprehend the complex ecosystem that undergirds forced migration research and scholarship. Through the eight articles contributed, we are also reminded of the important lens that information science can bring to these ever-evolving conversations.

Dr. Nadia Caidi (nadia.caidi@utoronto.ca) is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto. Her research focuses on human information behavior and the societal aspects of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Her research contributions aim to inform and promote a critical LIS lens and a public interest approach to the information fields. In conducting research on marginalized communities, her consideration is one that adheres to a methodology of refusing to contribute to a silencing of certain voices in society. Her approach is inscribed in a socio-constructivist perspective that takes into account both the information practices of individuals as part of communities, as well as the complex socio-economic and political realities of everyday life. Dr. Caidi was President of the Canadian Association for Information Science (2011) and the 2016 President of the international Association for Information Science & Technology (ASIS&T). She was the recipient of the 2019 ALISE/Pratt-Severn Faculty Innovation Award.

Dr. Juliane Stiller (julstiller@gmail.com) an Information and Digital Learning Specialist and co-founder of You, We & Digital that offers consultancy and workshops for implementing digital projects and teaching digital skills. Previously, she was a researcher working at Berlin School for Library and Information Science at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin in Germany. Her research areas include the usage of information and search systems, as well as digital skills and the impact of this cultural technology on people and society. Juliane conducted several studies on the online information seeking behavior of refugees in Germany, one of these funded by the OCLC/ALISE research grant in 2018. Dr. Stiller also co-founded a registered non-profit organisation Grenzenlos Digital e.V. that supports people to acquire digital skills and develop them in such a way that they are able to leverage the digital transformation to their advantage. Prior to her career in academia, Juliane was working for Google as a Search Quality Analyst.

Dr. Syed Ishtiaque Ahmed (ishtiaque@cs.toronto.edu) is an Assistant Professor of Computer Science at University of Toronto. He directs the “Third Space” research group in the “Dynamics Graphics Project (DGP)” Lab. He conducts research in the intersection between Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and Information and Communication Technology and Development (ICTD). His research focuses on the design challenges around ‘voice’, which he defines through access, autonomy, and accountability. Most of his early research is situated in the Indian subcontinent, where he conducted ethnography and design studies with many underprivileged communities including readymade garments factory workers, evicted slum dwellers, rickshaw drivers, mobile phone repairers, and victims of sexual harassment. His current work has expanded from there and is also addressing pressing concerns of marginalization of immigrants and refugees in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, China, Canada, and the US. He received the International Fulbright Science and Technology Fellowship in 2011, Intel Science and Technology Center for Social Computing graduate Fellowship in 2015, Connaught Early Researcher Award in 2018, and Fulbright Centennial Fellowship in 2019.

Dr. Violeta Trkulja (violeta.trkulja@gmail.com) is an information scientist who earned her doctorate at the Heinrich Heine University in Düsseldorf (Germany), researching the social effects of the digital divide in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina. In 2012, she joined the Berlin School of Library and Information Science at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Her research and teaching areas are knowledge organization, information economics and information and digital literacy for disadvantaged groups. She is the co-founder of You, We & Digital and offers digital consulting services to companies and non-governmental organizations. She also co-founded the non-profit organization Grenzenlos Digital e.V., which is committed to ensuring that all people are equipped with the necessary skills and competencies to benefit from the digital transformation.