

How can technology be used to raise awareness on the protection of refugees, to the general public

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The world is currently going through several changes, with the introduction of AI in our lives, the impact that revolution 4.0 has in everyday life, and the impact of social media, which changes how people get informed about what is happening around the globe and how they stay up-to-date with the latest news and events. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, people's switch to web-based channels has been nearly exponential, with 58% of customer interactions being online in July 2020, a growth of 38 percentage points from July 2020 (McKinsey & Company, 2020). A sound example of the switch from traditionally face-to-face interactions to digital is that companies have started shifting their approach by introducing more and more the usage of AI in their business processes, with the AI growth rate expected to be 37.3% from 2023 to 2030 (Haan, 2023). Social media are also proving their impact in everyday life, with the global number of social media users being estimated to be 4.88 billion, while their penetration is estimated to be 59.4%, which, in other words, means that more than one out of two persons worldwide have a social media account (Dixon, 2023). The effect of social media, in general, on information and news provision is also tremendous, with nearly 60% of people using the internet to find information and 50% of users using the internet to stay up to date with the news (DATAREPORTAL, 2023).

Despite the exponential advancements in technology, which drive the "economic growth" (Driskell, 2022) and help people stay connected and in spite of the social media penetration mentioned previously, social inequalities are on the rise, suggesting that the world is moving forward in terms of technological application metrics but backwards in terms of inequality metrics. Private wealth is rising, while public wealth has been on a decline since 1970. Income inequalities are found to be on levels similar to those found in the early 20th century, while gender inequalities in pay are only 4% lower than in 1990 (World Inequality Report, 2022). Other examples of untackled inequalities include the lack of access to healthcare for women and children (United Nations, 2023), while the Gini coefficient, which measures inequality, increased from 27% in 2021 to 28% in 2022, signifying a general increase in inequalities in Ireland (Ireland Central Statistics Office, 2023). The United Nations (2023) also reports that 20% of people have been discriminated against at least once in their lifetime. The social injustices, despite the progress of humankind, also disproportionately affect refugees, asylum seekers and people in need of international protection.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in their 2022 Global Trends, report a negative track record with nearly 109 million displaced people, out of which 35 million are refugees, 5.4 million are asylum seekers, and 5.2 million are others in need of international protection, while nearly 63 million are internally displaced, in their country of origin or habitual residence (UNHCR, 2023). 43.3 million of those are children, and 70% are hosted in "low- and middle-income countries", further boosting the effects of social inequalities. Despite currently facing the most significant

displacement in history, the anti-refugee rhetoric and discrimination against people facing "persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order" (UNHCR, 2023) are becoming more and more frequent (Findor et al., 2021). Putting to work the exponential growth of technology may help swift the negative narrative (McCann et al., 2023) and raise awareness of the negative social equality metrics, especially for populations "disproportionately vulnerable to exclusion, stigma and discrimination" (OHCHR et al., 2020), such as refugees, asylum seekers and others in need of international protection.

Some of the most conservative and anti-refugee voices tend to be the loudest, lobbying for hardened border security and immigration laws while making it harder for refugees to be recognized and receive the much-needed protection of the international community, with one most recent example being the UK Illegal Migration Bill (UNHCR, 2023) with experts of the United Nations condemning this negative legislative development (OHCHR, 2023). Despite losing their traditional influence (Shearer, 2021), mainstream media such as television, radio and print publications can be the first line of defence, giving voice to the international community and the people affected. From television spots to new stories and radio spots to podcasts, mainstream media have historically shaped the social scale and public opinion (Dwivedi et al., 2013). Another way that mainstream media, such as the online versions of print publications, can use innovative techniques in their news-bringing is by employing creative storytelling, with one example being the article by Himmelman (2023), who used an in-writing story by embedding images, videos and infographics in a visually appealing way. Similar

techniques can be used to showcase the journey and challenges that refugees and other affected people are facing. Television also has its fair share in using the technology, benefitting from AI to produce inclusive content in different languages and embed augmented reality concepts (TV Production, 2023).

Moreover, the research shows that nearly as many people use traditional media as online media. Currently, 60% of Americans learn the news by using online means (a smartphone, tablet or PC), while half prefer learning the news via digital platforms, further weakening the impact of mainstream media (Shearer, 2021). Social media are used by 94% of the people using the internet (DATAREPORTAL, 2023), while social media activism is a trend that knows no border, quickly bringing together people from all over the globe and helping bring social change. One of the most known examples of online activism platforms is Avaaz, while other events where social media played a crucial role to include the Black Lives Matter movement, where communities mobilized and united against racism and police brutality towards people of colour, the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, where USD 115 million were donated to combat the ALS disease and the "me too" movement which showed solidarity to all women who have experienced or are currently experiencing sexual harassment (Maryville University, ND). Similarly, social media, especially if used by influential and well-known people (Kent, 2018), can be used to help raise awareness (Priyadarshani et al, 2022) of the challenges and the dangers of being a refugee, to fundraise for organizations that help refugees, especially in periods of fundraising gaps, such as the USD 700 million reported by the lead agency of the United Nations for Refugee Protection (UNHCR,

2022) and share real stories of the refugee life. The power of social media is further boosted as the world is drifting away from the written content era to the picture era and nowadays to the video era (Spire, N.D.), with one of the primarily used means being TikTok and YouTube both having 30% of the share of where the people get the news from (Pew Research Center, 2022), while videos are used more and more to bring awareness for critical global issues (Davison, 2009).

Additionally, AI and virtual and augmented reality are technological innovations that can contribute to raising awareness of the challenges displaced people face. Beyond the mainstream media and online platforms, such technological innovations have been previously used by organizations such as the United Nations for humanitarian purposes. From 2004 onwards, one can find several examples of employing augmented reality (Irom, 2018), and the use cases are limitless. The International Telecommunications Union has collected the most significant AI projects used by United Nations Organizations, including the International Organization for Migration, the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, while use cases include the prediction of population movements and analyzing Twitter trends to enhance the protection of people. Even though those actions do not specifically target the greater public, employing such tools can show people the rising issue of displacement, how people are affected and the legal and physical protection concerns that can be harvested through social media (ITU, 2023). Moreover, augmented and virtual reality can show people what it really is like to be a displaced person, putting the public in a displaced person's shoes (Gajazur, 2020;

Fiador, 2020). Showing how someone becomes a refugee through conflict or due to other protection reasons, surviving the perilous journey on the lookout for shelter and arriving in a host country in a camp or other settlement can raise awareness and shift the anti-refugee rhetorics and point out that no one chooses to be a refugee (Irom, 2018).

On the other hand, employing such technologies should be with due regard, proper assessment and thorough risk analysis. Displaced people are vulnerable to several protection risks, including but not limited to older individuals at risk, minors, women at risk, people at risk due to profile, people at risk of prosecution or refoulement, survivors of Gender Based Violence and people with physical or mental disabilities (UNHCR, 2020). Increased publicity can put those people at further risk, and instead of raising awareness and assisting with their protection needs, have the exact opposite impact (Pandir, 2019). Moreover, augmented and virtual reality may make already vulnerable people even more vulnerable if no data protection techniques are used (Jerome & Greenberg, 2021). Enhanced data protection should be the primary objective when using innovative technology to sensitize the general public on the refugees' living conditions when sensitive information such as the refugee's whereabouts, the used coping mechanisms (especially if negative), or even the people's physical identities can be revealed (Koilakos, 2023). Specific needs should also be redacted from the general public with increased attention to those that involve perpetrators (e.g. Gender-Based Violence, at risk of refoulement or at risk due to profile), who may still search for their victims. Finally, overexposure to the refugees' challenges can lead to desensitization,

equating such desensitization to the viewers' desensitization to violence (Krahe et al., 2015) and the normalization of violent events in everyday life (Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 2020).

In conclusion, employing innovative technology and leveraging the power of mainstream technology (e.g. social media) or mainstream media (e.g. television) simultaneously presents immense opportunities but also challenges for sensitizing the world about forced displacement and the people affected, such as refugees, asylum seekers or others in need of legal and physical protection. The use cases and the present literature suggest that creative storytelling, the use of social media to sensitize the many, and the use of virtual and augmented reality can provide both information and showcase to people how it is to be a refugee as if they were themselves. The sensitization of the general public and the awareness-raising campaigns will apply pressure on global leaders to shift their policies, strengthen the protection initiatives, participate in displacement issues as part of the international community and welcome people in need. However, throughout the whole process and use of technology, the principle of "Do not harm" (UNDP, 2023) should be upheld to its highest standard and ensure that the lives of displaced people are not in danger and their personal information is not jeopardized. By ensuring practical technology usage and protection, the people will help spread the word that "no one puts their children on a boat unless the water is safer than the land" (Martin, 2021).

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