

Technologies of Refuge and Displacement: Rethinking Digital Divides by Linda Leung

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Linda Leung (2018) *Technologies of Refuge and Displacement: Rethinking Digital Divides* (Lanham, MA: Lexington Books), hardcover, 141 pages; ISBN: 978-1-14985-0002-9

In her book *Technologies of Refuge and Displacement: Rethinking Digital Divides*, Linda Leung – a researcher at University of Technology Sydney, Australia – provides a systematic empirical analysis of data collected between 2007 and 2011, which involved more than 100 interviews with individuals from refugee backgrounds. The book addresses the overarching question of how individuals from refugee backgrounds use digital technology to fulfil their communication and information needs. In doing so, Leung describes the scenarios and challenges that refugees face in the three stages that typically describe their journeys: before displacement, during displacement (in transit, refugee camps or detention centres) and resettlement. In her analysis, she rejects the simplistic conceptualisation of the digital divide as a matter of access that results in the ‘haves’ versus the ‘have nots’. She convincingly argues that this definition, developed in the West, does not capture the complexities and transient nature of refugees using digital technology.

The current refugee crisis has witnessed the displacement of close to 70 million people worldwide (UNHCR, 2019) due to political conflict, criminal violence and war. While the waves of migrants reaching the coast of southern Europe has attracted global attention, Australia also receives a sizeable number of refugees, who are the focus of the book. Since it is not clear why and how individuals from refugee backgrounds engage in digital-technology use, Leung presents pertinent questions. How do individuals from refugee backgrounds interpret digital technology? What actions describe their engagement in digital-technology use? How do they negotiate the restrictions imposed during displacement, especially in detention centres? How do government

agencies devise policies intended to enhance their digital skills with the expectation to facilitate resettlement? Most importantly, what makes digital-technology use by individuals from refugee backgrounds different from use by those who can be considered mainstream users?

The book contains eleven chapters organised in four parts (‘Introduction’, ‘Digital Dichotomies’, ‘Alternative Models’ and ‘Practices and Principles’) and a concluding chapter. The book opens with an invitation to explore the interplay between refugees and digital technology in the face of scarce literature on the topic when Leung conducted her research (by the time the book was published, substantial research on the matter was available). Following this invitation, the author elaborates on what constitutes a refugee, a legal status that is often contingent on an assessment by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the host country. Through several examples, Leung debunks the myth that all individuals from refugee backgrounds were poor and/or illiterate in their countries of origin. More importantly, she demonstrates that, through their engagement in digital technology, they are not passive subjects; they continuously exercise their agency.

Leung meticulously documents the her participants’ journeys from their countries of origin to their detention or resettlement in Australia. Throughout the book, she provides a vivid personal account of her interaction with them. She shares with the reader the experience of going through the severe security checks at detention centres, facing apprehensive asylum seekers waiting for their legal status to be resolved and meeting optimistic resettled individuals in Australia. In her interviews, Leung explores the emergent dynamic in the user-technology dyad that takes place in restrictive environments, such as detention centres.

Having set the conceptual and methodological foundations of her work in the introductory part of the book,

in the second part ('Digital Dichotomies') Leung articulately discusses how refugees resort to information technology to manage their current circumstances and connect back to where they come from. She contrasts the dissimilar backgrounds of the netizens and the asylum seekers: the former rely on the internet to participate actively in online communities; the latter use the internet to access information that allows them to manage their lives and communicate with their loved ones and other individuals with whom they share the experience of being displaced. She borrows Appadurai's (1996) label of 'cultural citizens' to describe these two groups, given that both rely on information technology to engage in producing locality that transcends the artificial boundaries defined by the nation-state. Interestingly, while both netizens and asylum seekers share this trait, Leung identifies a key difference: netizens, she claims, receive the nation-state's endorsement as long as they do not challenge its authority; in contrast, both the nation-state from which they come and the one to which they want to relocate invariably question the legitimacy of asylum seekers. Her exposition also contrasts two perspectives for the study of technology in society: technological determinism and social determinism. She concludes this part of the book with a call for a middle ground, in which the analysis of digital-technology use balances the artefact's technological properties with the user's goals and needs.

In the third part of her book ('Alternative Models'), Leung presents two theoretical approaches that could be used as analytical lenses for the study of digital-technology use by individuals from refugee backgrounds and compares the notion of technology literacy with the concept of digital literacy. The first theoretical approach is discussed in chapter 6. Building on Granovetter's (1973) seminal work, Leung argues that weak ties and low-density networks characterise the social relationships of asylum seekers in refugee camps and detention centres. Supported by impactful quotes from asylum seekers who survived violence and war, she elaborates on how strong community ties – largely face-to-face – give way to the formation of weak ties in the face of forced migration. To some extent these interactions allow refugees to restore connections and obtain vital information for their life in an unfamiliar environment. Her findings suggest that these weak ties prove to be particularly useful to those who are illiterate and, rather paradoxically, to those who cannot use a mobile phone. Based on her observation that these interactions are often mediated by technology, Leung convincingly argues that technology-mediated interactions constitute proof of 'the haphazard but functional dynamic of a network of weak ties' (p. 54). Chapter 6 provides a compelling explanation of the complexities of how individuals from refugee backgrounds engage in digital-technology use.

In chapter 7, Leung presents the second analytical lens: actor-network theory. She opens the chapter describing Australia as a country in which the use of digital technology is part of everyday life for most people. This situation can be construed as a scenario in which both human and non-human actors establish a network, characterised by symmetry between the social and the technical (Latour, 1999, 2005). Leung relies on actor-network theory to reject the binary conceptualisation of humans and technology. The analytical power of actor-network theory is, however, underutilised in the examination of the rich dataset she presents throughout the book. The tangential account of the connection between the empirical evidence and the tenets of actor-network theory represents a missed opportunity to elaborate on the process of establishing the networks constituted by individuals from refugee backgrounds and digital technology. My review and critique come from the perspective of an information-systems researcher with a focus on socio-technical systems who is yearning for a deeper examination of the interplay between human and non-human actors.

In chapter 8, the last of the third part of the book, Leung summarises her *Mind the Gap* (2011) study to advance the central idea of her work: how the notion of the digital divide has been, paradoxically, detrimental to those who were supposed to be its beneficiaries. She builds her argument by tracing the journeys of refugees, which she organises into three groups by the geographical regions they come from: South East Asians (from Cambodia, Burma and Thailand), Africans and the third group, comprising Iraqis, Iranians and Afghans. She discovers differences in their ability to use telecommunications technology (e.g. telephones, fax machines and mobile phones), depending on their countries of origin, suggesting that conflict, war or government surveillance hindered their abilities. Leung also observes that exposure to new technologies during displacement resulted in an improvement on what she labels 'technology literacy'. She identifies a hierarchy of technology literacy – from the ability to receive calls to the ability to liaise with telecommunications providers. However, the refugees' resettlement in Australia marked a point of departure, since the initiatives taken as part of the resettlement process emphasise computer skills. While technology literacy was essential for individuals from refugee backgrounds to fulfil their communication needs during forced displacement, it was of little value in Australia, where technology literacy has been traditionally disregarded in favour of digital literacy – that is, the ability to use software tools, or, as Leung writes, 'the ways in which digital literacy have been defined sets up the kind of social exclusion it purports to address' (p. 90).

In chapter 9, the first of the fourth part of the book ('Practices and Principles'), Leung presents the difference between availability and accessibility to make a point supporting her subsequent argument. While availability mainly describes the provision of technology, accessibility is multidimensional in nature and represents the real opportunity of using technology. Building on these basic definitions, she identifies the two biggest barriers to access for individuals from refugee background: content in English – the official language in Australia and the internet's lingua franca – and affordability in the face of more pressing needs. With this premise, she outlines a user-centred design in chapter 10; and to outline the principles of the user-centred design that would contribute to removing these barriers, she relies on ethnographic research. From the accounts given by participants from different demographic characteristics, she develops user personas. The information gathered allowed her to prototype four resource-kit units around telephones (both landlines and mobile phones) as part of a training programme for resettled refugees. The proposed user-centred design training programme is three-pronged: it takes into consideration not only technology literacy but also content interpretation and financial literacy. Hence individuals from refugee backgrounds are trained in how to interpret information presented in different formats, mainly visual, and understand the terms and conditions of telecommunications providers. In chapter 11, she presents examples of selected individuals who participated in the user-centred design training.

In the last chapter, Leung makes a call to leave the binary notion of digital divide behind, with an invitation to multidisciplinary teams to explore with an open mind the complexities associated with the use of technology by individuals from refugee backgrounds. She concludes by

inviting the reader to find the middle ground between a purely functionalist approach and an integrative view of technology.

Leung writes in an accessible manner and weaves the words of her participants into the text, transmitting authenticity. She makes good use of tables, diagrams and photographs throughout the book. Her interview data is publicly available at <http://trr.digimatter.com> ('Use of Technology by Asylum Seekers and Refugees' (accessed 3 January 2020)). This constitutes a valuable resource for interested readers.

The book is well suited to policymakers devising information and communication-technology policies, especially those intended for individuals from refugee backgrounds. The book can also be an interesting resource for academics from different fields (e.g. human geography, information systems, anthropology and sociology, among others) interested in understanding the role digital technology plays in the fulfilment of people's communication and information needs.

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