Understanding Turkish NGOs' Digital Technology Use in Helping Refugees in Turkey

Bilgen Turkay
Ankara University
Ankara, Turkey
bilgenturk@gmail.com

Selen Turkay
QUT
Brisbane, Australia
selen.turkay@qut.edu.au

ABSTRACT

According to the UN Refugee Agency, there are about 22 million people considered refugees around the world. Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011 alone, approximately 11 million Syrians left their homes and sought refuge in other counties, mostly nearby countries such as Lebanon and Turkey. There are more than 3.7 million Syrian refugees in Turkey. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have a critical role in refugees' lives, their access to services, and integration into communities. In this study, we investigated the barriers NGOs encounter in their work with refugees and the types of information communication technologies they use in the process. Semi-structured interviews with participants from eight Turkish NGOs revealed that digital technologies have a fundamental role in their activities. They use them in three main ways including as tools to help them become knowledge brokers between Turkish communities and refugee communities. Our findings provide insights on NGOs' digital technology use and pave a path for future studies.

BACKGROUND

Since 2011, the start of the Syrian crisis, millions of Syrians had to leave their homes and sought refuge in other, mostly nearby, countries. One of these counties is Turkey which hosts the most number of refugees (around 4 million). These refugees encounter a multitude of challenges during their journey and after they reach Turkey [7]. The potential role and contribution of HCI in understanding and designing for refugees and humanitarian institutions is acknowledged [1, 7, 8]. There are already projects involving HCI including computer clubs and co-design practices and refugee cookbook ideas [5–7]. As such, according to Talhouk et al. [8] work within refugee humanitarian contexts is emerging within the field of HCI. In fact, there were two workshops consecutively at CHI 2016 and 2017 aimed at understanding the role of HCI in responding to the refugee crisis [7, 9]. The organizers outlined the challenges refugee communities face. Among these were political tensions creating a hostile environment for Syrians, and navigating through a fragmented humanitarian assistance network. NGOs play a crucial role in refugees' integration process and in their access to support services that can facilitate refugees' resettlement and integration process.

Previous studies on the effects of information communication technologies (ICT) and media use in recovery has found positive results. In the case of the 2011 Japanese earthquake and tsunami, the researchers found individual ICT and media use are associated with online civic participation, which in turn correlates with social capital for disaster recovery [3]. These studies were with humanitarian NGOs during disasters [3, 10]. Little is known about what role social media and technology play in the main activities of NGOs and how these technologies affect their work with refugees.

To understand how NGOs use digital technologies and social media, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from eight NGOs in Turkey. We found three main ways NGOs use digital technologies and social media: 1) operational purposes (e.g., digital records of their activities), 2) mediation purposes (e.g., use multimedia such as short video documentaries to inform Turkish citizens about the Syrian refugees' situation and alleviate political tension), 3) information dissemination to refugees.

METHODS

NGOs and Participants

There are more than 60 Turkish NGOs that help Syrian refugees. They are rights-based organizations and mostly focus on education, medical services, aid-in-kind, and support to orphans. The majority of the organizations are in large cities such as Istanbul and Ankara.

The first author recruited participants through email solicitation to NGOs in Ankara and Istanbul. Eight agreed to participate during the study time frame. These organizations' main role started after refugees reached the county and applied for refuge through the government. In terms of media use, all

of the NGOs have their websites and Facebook pages. The summary of the participant organizations can be seen in Table 1. In the findings, we will refer to participants as their organizations they represent.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author either face-to-face or via Skype, in the local language, Turkish. There were eleven main questions (e.g., How do you use digital technologies and social media in your work with refugees? How do digital technology and social media use impact your work?) The interviews were recorded with permission of the participants and were transcribed verbatim. Data analysis was conducted using qualitative analysis software Dedoose [4]. The initial codes were created based on the themes around the interview questions. As the analysis progressed subcodes were formed.

FINDINGS

Below, we go through our findings related to NGOs' digital technology use in three broad categories followed by the challenges they encountered:

Operational purposes. The main reason participants use digital technologies is to keep records of their activities, keeping track of the refugees they helped, and secure storage of private and sensitive information. Refugee Support Organization said that they keep their records under password protection in their closed system.

Mediation between local and refugee communities. Participants talked about using social media to spread positive messages, images and video regarding refugees to give them a voice. Participants believe that these carefully crafted messages can strengthen the ties between the local and refugee communities. The research-focused NGOs publish their research reports, reach out to the public, and inform them with accurate information to raise awareness and to defend refugee rights.

Information dissemination. All of the participants stated that digital technologies were useful to help refugees. Its most useful function was to facilitate the dissemination of information to refugees. When refugees arrive at community centers, they leave their contact information, so the NGOs use that information to reach the refugees to inform them about services. For instance, Sivilalan Platform talked about using SMS messages to announce local events to refugees. Participants also talked about using social media to correct fake news related to refugees in the media.

Challenges. Participants talked about several challenges related both to problems refugees face in Turkey and problems their organizations face. The main problems of refugees are unemployment and access to resources. Participants highlighted that without a source of income, the refugee integration

Table 1: Summary Information on Participant Organizations

Organization	Example activities
Refugee Support Center (Ankara) - They provide consultations on various dimensions including health, education and psychological wellbeing.	Using financial support from multiple organizations, they provide safe housing and health services for refugee women and girls.
Development Workshop (Ankara) - Aims to find permanent solutions to refugee problems.	As a result of a seven-month research, they found that majority of seasonal farm workers were Syrian refugees. They work towards preventing child labor in this context.
The Research Center on Asylum and Migration (RCAM), (Ankara) - a research center on asylum and migration issues.	Using EU funding, the center organizes events and workshops to overcome negative attitudes towards refugees and raise awareness of refugee problems.
Support to Life (Istanbul) - Was founded to help in humanitarian crises including natural disasters.	They provide refugee children with psychological services to overcome war trauma. They make use of private funds when refugees cannot access government services.
Migration Research Foundation (Istanbul) - this organization's main role is to provide reliable information on refugees and immigration.	They organize workshops and conferences to inform the public on ongoing policies and research findings.
Association for Solidarity with Asylum-Seekers and Migrants (ASAM)(Ankara) - Aims to create an environment where refugees can live alongside with local communities in harmony.	As part of the March 8th International Women's Day activities, they organized an event for over 1000 refugee women and girls in Cappadocia, Turkey.
Human Resource Development Foundation (Istanbul) - provides support for those who have been affected by migration	They help refugees understand the services and explain the extend they can benefit from them.
Sivilalan Platform (Istanbul) - A civic organization that aims to make impact via information distribution.	They collaborate with national and international NGOs to distribute their announcements to the public.

problem was difficult to address. Development Workshop talked about the continuing process of refugee registration which prevents Syrian children from being able to enroll in school.

Another big challenge participants talked about is the political tensions and negative attitudes of the Turkish community, which create a hostile and unwelcoming environment for Syrian refugees. This could lead to discrimination and social exclusion of the Syrian families. They further talked about the ubiquity of fake news in the mainstream media that exacerbates the already fragile relationship

"...they[refugees] feel happy when they see themselves in the social media. They send messages us saying, "We participated in the event at your Izmir office.Why did you not publish that? We want to see ourselves." They feel good seeing themselves because it reminds them they exist...they are not alone... and perhaps it feels like proving themselves that they built a life for themselves here..."- RCAM

between the local communities and refugees. RCAM talked about social media's role in the spread of harmful fake news, which is a current problem in society.

None of the participants talked about using any special mobile applications in their work with refugees at the time of the data collection. The main reason for this was lack of funding. At times, the NGOs did not have enough funding to publish their websites, nor had they social media experts to manage their publicity. Due to the viral nature of information dissemination in social media, rapid spread of incorrect information among refugees could cause operational problems in the organizations. Thus, they talked about an extra careful attention when putting information on social media. Interestingly, RCAM said that sharing refugee pictures helped other refugees feel that they had a community and that they were not alone.

Interestingly, none of the participants talked about language as a barrier in working with refugees. This might be because of the multilingual approach they had in information sharing. They used English, Arabic, Persian and Turkish in their communication.

DISCUSSION

This study provided initial insights on the role digital technologies play in the work NGOs do in Turkey. Digital technologies can help NGOs plan and deliver more efficient and more accurate responses to refugees, and can help mediate the relationship between the local communities and refugee communities. This is paramount for refugees' integration yet it is perhaps the most challenging. In the context of refugees, what is the role of HCI in designing for inclusion in a new culture and society?

Understanding NGOs' work and their use of technology is crucial in designing novel technologies that can facilitate their work to enable real change in refugees' lives. Turkey hosts the highest number of refugees in the world and it is critical for researchers in HCI to engage NGOs in designing technologies through effective methods.

We found that resource constraints were limiting factors for NGOs. Multiple communities have been motivated to develop technologies for this context. They organized numerous hackathons and formed specialized tech communities, such as Techfugees and EmpowerHack, that have rallied around different humanitarian causes. However, so far the resources are not developed enough to be scaled up and integrated with ongoing efforts of NGOs. In the long term, these technologies have been theorized to increase efficiency, cut down on costs of aid provision and ensure that the right people are getting the right aid. Due to high pressure nature of the work, some NGO staff may find flimsy ICT integration and discard it. Collaboration between HCI researchers and NGOs may result in a more streamlined translation of NGOs' needs and adapting new technologies into their demanding work settings [2].

It was interesting that the participants talked about refugees' desire for their pictures to be published. This is contrary to prior findings which showed refugees preferred to hide their identity for legal

reasons [8]. It also opens up the potential applications to celebrate and share refugees' achievements, traditions and cultures in their community and design technologies that can facilitate such sharing.

We acknowledge that information on participants' background in addition to their organizations could provide further insights on the findings. Their personal and professional use of technologies and social media might be affected by their digital literacy and technological competencies.

Currently, there is a lack of research on involving NGOs as participants in designing for their needs using collaborative design methods. Prior studies showed that participatory design could be an effective method when working with vulnerable groups [5]. A potential avenue for the future of this research project is to conduct such sessions with refugees and NGOs to develop technologies that can address their needs in Turkey. Considering the roadblocks the current government places for international NGOs, Turkish NGOs can benefit from applications and digital technologies to help them with their job of helping and defending rights of vulnerable populations.

REFERENCES

[1] Asam Almohamed and Dhaval Vyas. 2016. Vulnerability of displacement: challenges for integrating refugees and asylum seekers in host communities. In *Proceedings of the 28th Australian Conference on Computer-Human Interaction*. ACM, 125–134.

[2] Yao-Jen Chang, Rui-Hua Liao, Tsen-Yung Wang, and Yao-Sheng Chang. 2010. Action research as a bridge between two worlds: helping the NGOs and humanitarian agencies adapt technology to their needs. *Systemic Practice and Action Research* 23, 3 (2010), 191–202.

[3] John W Cheng, Hitoshi Mitomo, Tokio Otsuka, and Stefan Y Jeon. 2015. The effects of ICT and mass media in post-disaster recovery–a two model case study of the Great East Japan Earthquake. *Telecommunications Policy* 39, 6 (2015), 515–532.

[4] Dedoose. 2015. 6.1. 18, web application for managing, analyzing, and presenting qualitative and mixed method research data. *Los Angeles, CA: SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC* (2015).

[5] Ana Maria Bustamante Duarte, Nina Brendel, Auriol Degbelo, and Christian Kray. 2018. Participatory design and participatory research: An HCI case study with young forced migrants. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (TOCHI)* 25, 1 (2018), 3.

[6] Karen E Fisher, Reem Talhouk, Katya Yefimova, Dalya Al-Shahrabi, Eiad Yafi, Sam Ewald, and Rob Comber. 2017. Za'atari Refugee Cookbook: Relevance, Challenges and Design Considerations. In *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. ACM, 2576–2583.

[7] Reem Talhouk, Syed Ishtiaque Ahmed, Volker Wulf, Clara Crivellaro, Vasilis Vlachokyriakos, and Patrick Olivier. 2016. Refugees and HCI SIG: The role of HCI in responding to the refugee crisis. In *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. ACM, 1073–1076.

[8] Reem Talhouk, Ana Bustamante, Konstantin Aal, Anne Weibert, Koula Charitonos, and Vasilis Vlachokyriakos. 2018. HCI and Refugees. *INTERACTIONS* 25 (2018), 46.

[9] Reem Talhouk, Vasillis Vlachokyriakos, Anne Weibert, Konstantin Aal, Syed Ishtiaque Ahmed, Karen Fisher, and Volker Wulf. 2017. Refugees & HCI Workshop: The Role of HCI in Responding to the Refugee Crisis. In *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. ACM, 558–565.

[10] Andrea H Tapia, Kathleen A Moore, and Nichloas J Johnson. 2013. Beyond the trustworthy tweet: A deeper understanding of microblogged data use by disaster response and humanitarian relief organizations.. In *ISCRAM*.