Book Review

Carleen F. Maitland (ed.) '*Digital Lifeline? ICTs for Refugees and Displaced Persons*', MIT Press.

This book, edited by Carleen Maitland, addresses the role of information communication technologies (ICTs) for displacement futures related to forced migration. Through highlighting the possibilities, limitations and ethical issues associated with ICTs, the selection of authors adeptly addresses the book's title, posed as a question: *Digital Lifeline?* This framing provides a critical perspective for understanding the ways in which ICTs can empower, hinder and transform forced migration pathways and possibilities.

The contributors span a range of disciplines from information sciences, geography, and international law to computer science. They draw on field work and case studies from proximal hosts of displacement in Jordan, Rwanda, Lebanon, and Greece alongside the influence of state actors (United States, Canada, and Germany) and international organisations involved in delivering humanitarian aid, establishing refugee status determination and providing settlement support. The contributors focus on how digital technologies can act as a lifeline – effectively providing a new set of tools to keep refugees safe, to forecast and identify mass migrations, accurately map displacement locations, influence humanitarian actions and inform government policies.

The book is framed within sociotechnical systems theory that looks to illuminate the rapid social and technological changes, which characterize current forced migration situations and humanitarian responses to it. It is divided into three main sections:

1. Legal, social, and information science perspectives;
2. Technical perspectives; and
3. Policy directions.

These sections consider the interplay between the *digital refugee* and the systems of *digital humanitarian brokerage.* The former is defined as an interaction between the 'self and other' that reflects the use of data and information as these interface with particular social locations. The latter considers how information determines organisational processes (for better and worse). Following the introduction, the remaining 10 chapters helpfully identify policy and research directions in relation to each substantive focus.

The book's first section examines a range of topics relating to the role of technology in the refugee-determination process, biometric identification, communication between humanitarian organisations and how ICTs influence the behaviours of displaced individuals. Within these chapters, the authors explore the ethics of rapidly evolving technologies and highlight the urgent need to consider the associated intended, unintended and unanticipated consequences of responding to crisis events and mass migrations. Ruffer's chapter on status determination unpacks how ICTs can enhance burden-sharing between local, national, regional and international players and, potentially, improve solidarity – particularly as this relates the reliability, accuracy and accessibility of this process for individual and *prima facie* recognition. Kingston's piece rightly acknowledges the potential dangers of 'function creep' whereby the applications of communication technologies and analytics can exceed their original intended purposes highlighting the complexities of the use and ownership of data. One of the most helpful chapters (Fisher's) focusses on the information worlds of refugees and cites an extensive literature to establish how access to information and the use of ICT devices influence, and times govern, people's behaviour and decision-making processes.

The second section shifts to *technical perspectives* and draws on contributions ranging from computer science, information sciences and geography to articulate current and future applications and the implications for rapidly evolving technologies. It examines the use of cellular technologies, humanitarian information systems (within and across actors), use of geographic information systems (GIS) and the application and possibilities of new data analytic techniques. Maitland's chapter on information systems and technologies in refugee services provides a helpful history of ICTs and demonstrates the vast array of applications that can provide a 'digital lifeline' through improving access to food, information and opportunities for self-determination across the 'refugee life cycle'. She examines the ways in which information systems produce, capture, manage and transfer data drawing on several case studies where forced migration has occurred. The chapter helpfully posits future research directions for unpacking how humanitarian networks manage innovation and employ emerging technologies alongside the lived experiences and perspectives of forced migrants themselves. Tomaszewski's focus on GIS provides a fascinating insight as to its use for field-based and participatory mapping, particularly in refugee camps (Dadaab, Kigeme, and Za'atari) for spatial thinking and awareness. It outlines how smartphones can be used as mapping tools that empower refugees for decision making and the identification of safe spaces. It also cautions the ways in which GIS can serve as surveillance technology and thus compromise privacy. Martin and Singh's piece on data analytics and displacement demonstrates both the potential and the drawbacks of early warning systems. They highlight the challenges of obtaining timely, accurate and reliable data alongside the imperative to build political will to act on such information.

Bringing these two section together, the book effectively incorporates micro, meso and macro level considerations to understand how communication technologies influence and inform individual and group behaviours, organisational practices, government approaches and international cooperation (or the lack thereof). The last section, authored solely by Maitland, considers these intersections to suggest a number of policy directions particularly as they relate to information science. It rightly acknowledges that not every humanitarian problem necessarily has, or even needs, a technological solution – thereby reinforcing the book's articulated position within sociotechnical systems theory.

Potential limitations of the book include the treatment of the 'refugee life cycle' and its associated 'stages' defined as departure and transit; legal determination; temporary asylum; and permanency. Whilst the book's content does not suggest a deterministic outcome or focus of such a cycle – this in some ways contradicts how technologies are disrupting traditional patterns of movement and support from micro to macro levels. Suggesting the idea of 'permanence' as one of the stages is problematic as people can often now renegotiate and, at times transcend, the physical distances between 'here' and 'there'. Even when durable solutions for forced migrants are realised through repatriation, local integration or resettlement, the notion of permanence can still be a dynamic state. Scholars have recently noted how transnationalism can represent an 'enduring solution' for refugees separated from family, particularly through the use of social media and the smart phone (see Long, 2014). These dynamics suggest the need to re-examine forced migration pathways as proximal and distant networks find novel ways to remain connected and support one another in increasingly intimate and instantaneous ways. Whilst such staged or phased understandings have been used widely in the forced migration literature, the assumption of a *cycle* and *permanence* at times makes the trajectories of forced migration appear too linear and fixed as a framing for the book.

The number of acronyms in several sections was, at times, daunting. For those familiar with information sciences, this may not be a problem but the assumption that GSM, LTE, HSPA, BTS, SIP, RTP and SS7, amongst numerous others, are readily understood acronyms made reading some sections difficult (even with the list provided at the beginning of the book). It means that only a select readership can

fully engage with some chapters without doing extra work to understand what these terms mean and the histories behind them.

These critiques, however, are minor alongside the merits of the book – it provides a solid basis for understanding the complexities of forced migration from individual to macro-level considerations. The book presents contemporary case studies to consider how various actors and the vast array of technologies powerfully inform the opportunities and cautions of digital lifelines.

Overall, this book addresses the importance of responding to the new technological, political and social conditions that sit alongside record levels of forced migration. This collection situates the significance and prominence of communication technologies in a range of settings on a scale from individual to international levels. It successfully captures the interplay between the *digital refugee* and the systems of *digital humanitarian brokerage.* I would recommend the text for information science scholars and practitioners wanting to identify the possibilities and constraints associated with communication technologies and forced migration. Through providing clear case studies, policy recommendations and future research directions, this book offers insight about, and approaches to, responding to an increasingly, though unevenly, connected world.

References

Long, K. (2014). Rethinking 'durable' solutions. In E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, G. Loescher, K. Long and N. Sigona (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Maitland, C. (ed.) (2018). *Digital Lifeline? ICTs for refugees and displaced persons*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Jay Marlowe
Associate Professor |University of Auckland
Rutherford Discovery Fellow | Royal Society Te Apārangi
E-mail: jm.marlowe@auckland.ac.nz