12-12-2021

Not another app! Digital technologies and migration

G Harindranath
Royal Holloway University of London, g.harindranath@rhul.ac.uk

Maria Rosa Lorini
Royal Holloway, University of London, mariarosalorini@gmail.com

Tim Unwin
tim.unwin@rhul.ac.uk

Not another app! Digital technologies and migration

G. Harindranath g.harindranath@rhul.ac.uk, Maria Rosa Lorini MariaRosa.Lorini@rhul.ac.uk, Tim Unwin Tim.Unwin@rhul.ac.uk

Digital technologies and migration are inextricably linked. Considerable research has highlighted the positive role of digital tech in the lives of migrants, but there is now increasing concern about its dark side that can be disempowering for vulnerable migrants (e.g. surveillance, fake news, xenophobia) often despite the good intentions of those who design it [1]. Our study is part of a larger project, Migration for Development and Equality (MIDEQ), focused on "the complex and multi-dimensional relationships between migration and inequality in the context of the Global South". Borrowing from the ICIS 2021 conference theme, our 'call to action' as an intervention work package within MIDEQ, is to work '*with*' migrants and local technology developers (not just 'for' or even worse 'on' them) to co-design digital solutions that can help address inequalities in their varied contexts. However, our challenge is to find participative and empowering ways to achieve this when most migrants do not seem to use 'migrant apps', either because of apathy or concerns about the potential harms they might cause. There are many examples of migrant apps designed to help migrants orient themselves, to access labour and government information and services, or to rate employers and recruitment agencies, but our ongoing research [2, 3] suggests that such apps are hardly ever used by migrants. Our multi-country, mixed methods research covering the migration corridors of Nepal-Malaysia, Ethiopia-South Africa, China-Ghana and Haiti-Brazil shows that migrants overwhelmingly do not use apps that have been specifically designed for them. Instead the vast majority use applications like Facebook and WhatsApp for communicating with family members and also to access information in their daily lives; some even think that these generic apps have indeed been designed specifically for migrants.

Our approach is not to reinvent the wheel by developing yet another app for migrants. Instead, we seek to: (i) work '*with*' migrants rather than 'for' them on the grounds that migrants know migration best; (ii) ensure that tech does not cause harms, exacerbate existing inequalities, or create new vulnerabilities; and (iii) partner with local, regional and international organizations working with migrants in order to build trust and understanding of context while ensuring political and social infrastructure including 'info/intermediaries' who can empower migrants to navigate the technology and build confidence. The objective of this TREO talk is to bring to the fore three fundamental questions about the co-design of digital solutions [4] with stakeholders and stakesharers in cross-cultural environments: how can we build trust with migrants and organisations working with them to co-design digital solutions; how can we protect the most vulnerable from the harms arising from digital technologies; and how can we assure that our contribution is empowering and not a new form of control?

References

1. Nedelcu, M. & Soysüren, I. (2020): Precarious migrants, migration regimes and digital technologies: the empowerment-control nexus, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2020.1796263
2. https://www.mideq.org/en/resources-index-page/uses-digital-technologies-nepali-migrants-and-their-families/
3. https://www.mideq.org/en/resources-index-page/uses-digital-technologies-nepali-migrants-malaysia/
4. Lorini, M.R. et al (2019), "Localise-it: Co-designing a community owned platform, DOI:10.1007/978-3-030-11235-6_16

Presentation at TREO Talks in conjunction with the 42nd International Conference on Information Systems, ICIS 2021
TREO Talks are not peer-reviewed and not a formal part of the ICIS 2021 Proceedings
All TREO Talks are available in the TREO Talks section of the AIS e-Library