

PRESS RELEASE: Fellowship for Refugees Redefines the Effects of Surveillance Technologies

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+ tech
monitor

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The Migration and Technology Monitor (MTM) launches first fellowship for five refugees from all over the globe. The initiative supports projects that document the impact of technology on mobile communities, as well as the transformative potential of innovative projects designed by people with lived experience of migration. This initiative directly supports mobile communities to tell their own stories on the far-reaching effects of technologies.

Barbed wire, electronic gates, and surveillance drones: The new refugee camps in Europe resemble high security prisons. Exit and entrance is strictly limited to the holders of a digital card that contains personal data. In times of cell phone tracking, social media monitoring, and the growing presence of Artificial Intelligence, migration has become a technological issue. A current resident in the [refugee camp on the Greek island of Samos](#), who requested to remain anonymous, shares just a few examples on how technology has been used to limit his basic rights: **“When you arrive to the camp, they take your phone and all of your belongings. Without asking for permission, they browse through your phone. All of this happens before they even register you. It took them ten days to register me. They kept me in a detention room with cameras everywhere, some of them even detect movement and move along with you. I wasn’t allowed to use my phone before registering me, so I was unable to document the forms of mistreatment that I encountered from the authorities.”**

Millions are being spent on surveillance and deterrence with the help of tools that could instead well be used to provide safe passage and facilitate access to a fair asylum system. **Wael Qarssifi** is a journalist from Syria and currently resides in Malaysia. He is one of the [five MTM Fellows](#) and his project aims to produce original reporting regarding migration, surveillance, and refugees in Asia: **“Today, governments use technology and artificial intelligence to control borders and to stop people on the move from reaching places where they feel safe and can lead normal lives. Often, such technologies portray migrants as a threat based on predictive systems that fail to see them otherwise. This reality leaves so many marginalized communities as a testing ground for technologies that don’t recognize the human element and the struggle of migration and turns them into data and statistics.”**

Technology to support vulnerable communities

Another MTM Fellow has a different approach. **Nery Santaella** is a refugee from Venezuela, currently living in Colombia. Her initiative ‘Voices of Venezuela’ has allowed Venezuelan refugees to access services, programs, and protection mechanisms in their host communities through the innovative use of communication technologies such as a ChatBot. She will spend her fellowship further developing natural language processing and safety protocols for people under surveillance. **“In my experience, working with technologies like chatbots and AI can provide benefits to refugees, including accessibility, efficiency, language support, privacy and safety, availability, and cost-effectiveness,”** Santaella explains.

Based upon her work and her own experiences as a refugee, she is convinced that, by using chatbots as a data pipeline and deploying NLU models (Natural Language Understanding), it would be possible to analyze actions, rather than personal data: **“we can have a near real-time picture of refugees’ challenges during their journey and in their host communities. Especially in environments like the Venezuelan migration that receive less funding than other mobility phenomena, we may be able to help service providers allocate their limited resources more efficiently and effectively to assist a larger number of refugees. AI can help us to build better solutions for refugees, but only if we do it right, developing security protocols for this kind of tech to protect refugees.”**

Putting people in the driver’s seat

Migration is used by governments and tech companies to [test innovations on people in legally fragile circumstances](#). Countries are installing Automated Border Surveillance Systems to detect people on the move, in many cases not to assist them, but to illegally deny them access to the asylum system. Ethically questionable gadgets such as robo-dogs, AI lie detectors, and sound canons are used to deter people in need of international protection. At the same time, authorities gather and share large quantities of data of people on the move, automating immigration and asylum systems by using AI. Racially biased algorithms will decide on behalf of the authorities if a person is eligible for entry or not.

Human rights defenders have been criticizing the use of AI at borders as harmful and incompatible with international law. One of them is **Petra Molnar**. She is a human rights lawyer, anthropologist, and one of the initiators of the Migration and Technology Monitor. To her, the MTM fellowship presents an opportunity to fathom [new ways to collaborate](#) and learn from mobile communities: **“Our hope is that our fellowship creates a community which provides spaces of collaboration, care, and co-creation of knowledge. We are specifically funding people on the move who may not be able to benefit from funding and resources readily available in the EU and North America. People with lived experiences of migration must be in the driver’s seat when interrogating both the negative impacts of technology as well as the creative solutions that innovation can bring to the complex stories of human movement.”**

The Migration and Technology Monitor (MTM)

With a focus on migration, technology, and human rights, the MTM actively interrogates tech experiments on people crossing borders. Our mission is to monitor surveillance technologies, automation, and the use of Artificial Intelligence to screen, track, and make decisions about people on the move. [With a platform in Arabic, English, French, and Spanish](#), the Monitor’s aim is to highlight the far-reaching impacts that these procedures have on peoples’ rights and lives, and to support communities doing work on these issues. In 2023 we launched our first fellowship. Five people from mobile communities receive a grant of US \$50,000, supported by [Open Society Foundations](#). Our fellows will also have access to various learning opportunities on issues like project management, digital security, or public outreach.

Do you have questions about the MTM? Do you want to get in touch with our fellows? Or do you want to talk to our experts about Migration and Technology? Please send an email to our media contact **Florian Schmitz** at migrationtechmonitor@proton.me

