

Humanitarian experimentation with predictive technologies

Alphoncina Lyamuya, University of Southern California

Abstract

Citing objectivity in data-driven models, bureaucratic institutions are increasingly incorporating systems of quantifications in border control processes and humanitarian management to ostensibly address challenging operational problems in the forced displacement context. This presentation examines experimentation with novel technologies and analytical techniques as the rationality for settling humanitarian emergencies and managing border movements. Focusing on the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) Innovation Service's experimentations with predictive analytics to model and forecast refugee arrivals at the borders – from the Somalia-Ethiopia border to the Venezuela-Brazil border – this research interrogates the turn to computational systems in a humanitarian organization with a mandate to protect and find relief for the forcibly displaced people. The following distinct, yet complementary questions will be explored: How does the UNHCR's use of automated systems of quantification reshape human mobility and access to legal asylum procedures? Does the agency's choice of sites of experimentation illuminate the broader power structure at and across borders? Drawing on critical data studies, science and technology studies, and postcolonial studies, the presentation will suggest that the turn to predictive technologies and machine learning techniques help to streamline some processes in humanitarian operations while also sustaining efforts by wealthy or relatively stable nations to curtail the inflow of 'unwanted' people by restructuring the border into a more complex and selective entity.

Biography

Alphoncina Lyamuya is a PhD student in Communication at the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, University of Southern California. Her research interests lie at the intersection of emerging media technologies, transnational governance, and inequality. Specifically, she is interested in the use of algorithmic decision-making systems and other digital infrastructures by governments and humanitarian agencies in border control and humanitarian management. Alphoncina holds an MA in Public Policy & Administration with a graduate certificate in Data Analytics and Computational Social Science, and a BA in Legal Studies with a minor in Political Science from the University of Massachusetts Amherst.