

The legibility of asylum seeker bodies in era of datafication:

The case of smartphone screening

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Abstract

Contributing to interdisciplinary research area of digital migration studies, this paper proposes the concept of "legibility" as a lens through which to comprehend the complex interplay between asylum seekers, communities, organizations, and authorities in the digital age. Bringing critical migration studies, media and communication studies, science, and technology studies (STS) and information studies into dialogue, this paper develops the concept by drawing from an empirical case study of the screening of smartphones and other data carriers of asylum seekers in the Netherlands and beyond. To do so, the paper investigates how police and immigration officers employ smartphone screening to render asylum seeker bodies legible within bureaucratic procedures. Through the lens of legibility, it examines the ways in which government agencies create and interpret digital data-points patterns to categorize, monitor, and manage the movements of asylum seekers. Conversely, I also examine how asylum seekers navigate, negotiate, and resist these systems. By connecting with formal knowledge networks of lawyers and NGO's and engaging in informal digital practices, asylum seekers actively seek to make legible the procedures, institutions, and authorities that govern their migration journeys. Based on this critical analysis, I call for a critical examination of the power dynamics embedded within digitized asylum migration governance. I emphasize the need for more inclusive information provision and rights-based approaches to the deployment of digital solutions and tools in asylum procedures. Furthermore, by discussing the methodological challenges of producing knowledge and pursuing impact in this terrain I reflect on the politics of impact and public engagement in migration research.

Biography

Koen Leurs is an associate professor in Gender, Media and Migration Studies in the Department of Media and Culture, Utrecht University, the Netherlands. His most recent books are *Digital Migration* (Sage, 2023); and *Doing Digital Migration Studies* (Amsterdam University Press, 2024). Currently, Leurs is part of the Management Committee of the Cost-Action DATA-MIG CA22135 - Data Matters: Sociotechnical Challenges of European Migration and Border Control. Recently, Leurs was the PI of the Team Science project Co-designing a fair digital asylum procedure, funded by the Universities of the Netherlands and COMMIT/, a public-private ICT research community (2022-2023).