

► Episode 2

Understanding digital risks: Protecting displaced & host communities in the digital economy



Guest speaker: Aaron Martin, Assistant Professor of Media Studies and Data Science at the University of Virginia

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► Tom:

Welcome to the new ILO podcast series, “PROSPECTS: promoting decent work in the digital economy”. I’m your host Tom Netter and today we’re going to talk about digital risk and how refugees and host communities can safely navigate and work in the digital economy, in particular on platform work.

For some platform work offers flexibility and complementary income. For others, it might be the only available option, including for those affected by forced displacement. [PROSPECTS Opportunity Fund project: promotion, inclusion and protection of refugees and host communities in the gig economy](#), addressed this issue in the third instalment of the ongoing Learning Lab series. What we learned is that digital risk has many dimensions and affects people and businesses depending on their location, age, sex, and migration status. And some risks are particularly linked to the use of online technology for work. Digital risk can have a negative impact on individuals and businesses concerning data and identity theft, privacy and mental well-being, misinformation, hate speech and even can lead to physical violence.

So, what is digital risk and how do we protect workers in refugee communities and host countries in the digital world? With us today to discuss this is Aaron Martin, Assistant Professor of Media Studies and Data Science at the University of Virginia who is collaborating with the UNHCR innovation service and was a contributor to the learning lab episode on digital risk. Aaron, welcome to the podcast. So today we're going to talk about digital risks and how workers, in particular refugees, can cope with risk and realize the benefits of the digital economy. So, can you help us understand digital risk and how it affects refugees, especially those working on the online gig economy?

► Aaron:

Thank you, Tom. Indeed, digital risk is no doubt a broad, complex topic. It covers a lot of different concerns that relate to the increased exposure to dangers that result from our engagements online and with different digital technologies. We're all exposed to these risks by virtue of being netizens. Now, in the online labor context, there's a subset of risks that relate to work that can take on particular importance. For example, in the area of automation or how algorithmic precarity impacts on securing stable, well-paid work, or how platform work can be very individualized, meaning that workers are often offered very little opportunity to meet and communicate with one another, and this can undermine things like collective bargaining. Now, refugees are particularly vulnerable to many of these risks due to the challenges they face accessing and using digital technologies during displacement, but also as well as a result of their relatively weak legal standing in host countries and in particular in labor markets where perhaps they don't have the same rights as citizens.

► Tom:

Well, these risks seem to span a wide area and threaten security, privacy, trust, competitiveness and even social cohesion and mental wellbeing. I understand that you've developed a digital risk assessment framework that tries to improve our understanding on this subject, show the interconnections across different factors and find mitigation responses. So, can you elaborate a bit on this framework?

► **Aaron:**

Indeed. So first I want to acknowledge my colleague Sophie Bennani-Taylor of the Oxford Internet Institute, who was very much the driving force behind the development of the framework. She's an outstanding scholar and a dream collaborator. Now in order to demystify the complexity of digital risks, and in partnership with the UN Refugee Agency, which has a strong interest in better understanding how these issues impact on displaced people, we crafted the framework as a tool to help UN humanitarian agencies and their partners assess risk and intervene at different sites and scales. The framework covers risks at different levels, including infrastructural risks, risks that relate to trying to access digital technologies, risks that occur when digital services themselves cause harm, and finally risks that emerge when using digital technology puts oneself or others at harm.

► **Tom:**

Okay. My next question is in several parts. First of all, when it comes to work in the digital economy or when people do online gig work and try to make a living using e-market places and social media, challenges and risks might be quite different, right? Can you tell us more about where and in what kind of work refugees are particularly exposed? Also, do risks vary by various factors such as gender, age, and skills and location? I was surprised to hear that for many refugees not being paid is one of the major concerns. So, what can you tell us about this? Are there any other serious concerns also related to online recruitment platforms?

► **Aaron:**

For sure, and indeed, the challenges and risks do differ depending on the circumstances. So for refugees who are doing deliveries for platforms like those who deliver food, there are often concerns about making deliveries to certain geographic areas where the local residents are known to have extreme views on immigration, for example. This is a good example where digital risks translate into potential physical harms. A very different example is where refugees are hired to do so-called data work. This can involve cleaning and labeling data for AI systems, which is a form of labour that is in high demand these days, but it also includes content moderation for large social media platforms. Now, this work can expose data workers to very obscene, harmful imagery and content, and this work has been shown to result in very real mental health problems for content moderators. So again, a very different kind of risk that we're concerned with here.

Now, as concerns intersectional dimensions of risk, the second part of your question, indeed, I think it's incredibly important to understand risk in these intersectional terms. So, risk is mediated by different factors including race, gender, age, sexuality, citizenship status, nationality, disability, language skills, education, socioeconomic status and so forth. I am glad you mentioned the problem of people not getting paid for their work. This is a recurring problem, a recurring concern that's reported during interviews and empirical work in this space. Many refugees perform precarious platform work and they simply do not get paid. There is a few reasons for this. They differ.

In some cases, it is simple exploitation, but in other cases it is the result of refugees not being able to open local bank accounts in their own name due to legal requirements for ID credentials, for example. So they often have to turn to others to receive their funds, and of course that opens up opportunities for harm. But I have also heard anecdotes about refugees being paid in cryptocurrency because that was the easiest thing for the platform, which turns out either to be worthless or impossible to convert to real money in a local market. Regarding specific concerns related to online recruitment, there's a growing body of research about the discriminatory effects of the use of algorithms in these platforms, and we've only begun to understand the implications of these practices for refugee populations in particular.

► **Tom:**

Well, in this context, what are some of the specific hazards faced by women who are working in the digital economy, both on and offline? Are these risks related to location-based platforms such as cleaning houses or

caring for the elderly or delivering food as you mentioned before in services? How are the risks different for refugees?

► **Aaron:**

This is a great question, Tom. I appreciate you raising it. Indeed, there are lots of different factors that are important to the question of women and work in the digital economy. The first is around cultural stigmas and how owning a device in certain contexts may be frowned upon or simply just unacceptable. This of course limits women's opportunities to engage in digital work. There are other concerns. They may seem mundane, but in fact they're very important. For example, in many parts of the world, you need to travel long distances and often by foot to access connectivity, and this of course can increase risks to women, physical risk in particular. It is also worth noting gender-based pay gaps, which of course are relevant in the digital economy.

Then finally, there are a number of different scams that have been identified that are specifically targeted at women. Some of them relate to trafficking of female populations. So, in 2022, criminal gangs were found to be using websites and social media platforms to groom Ukrainian refugees for sexual and labour exploitation. This included job offers presented as photo shoots for women and offers of accommodation, which were targeted at refugees and both of which were used as a front for trafficking.

So, I think it's very important to understand how these hazards are shaped by local context and sort of local culture. As regards to sort of the differences in risks for refugee women, I think the most important point here is to understand the increased vulnerability of these populations and the ways in which that vulnerability invites additional risk. Thank you.

► **Tom:**

That's really interesting. I'd like to move to the question of how digital risks affect businesses, especially the micro and small enterprises that don't have access to specialized staff to adopt sophisticated cybersecurity.

► **Aaron:**

So, this is a major concern globally, including in advanced economies. There's an old adage that cybersecurity is a team sport, meaning everyone has a stake in the game and everyone has a role to play. This of course includes small and micro enterprises that do business with larger companies where cyber defenses might be stronger. But of course, because of supply chains and sort of interconnectedness of digital technology, weaknesses in small and micro enterprises of course matter to larger companies. I think it is safe to say that digital risk is also a team sport, but with even more players involved. So, it is essential that we do a better job of raising awareness of the key concerns in this space, that's what the framework aims to do, and how to mitigate those risks. I think the UN has an important role to play here in terms of awareness raising and convening the right stakeholders to understand this issue holistically.

► **Tom:**

Well, I mean, for example, how can individuals and businesses unlock the advantages of the digital economy while avoiding risk? Can risk be avoided?

► **Aaron:**

I think it is hard to avoid risk entirely in this space. In fact, it is I think a very common retort to the range of issues that emerge. But it worries me when people think about these issues in terms of simply disconnecting altogether from the internet or from digital technologies because in fact, I think completely ignoring or rejecting the digital economy might bring about other risks and other kinds of harm like the loss of livelihood opportunities. This is not about completely doing away with digital opportunities because of the complexity of the issues at hand. So, I think it's first about raising awareness, then increasing digital literacy, and then doing the even harder work of developing governance frameworks that help to mitigate these residual risks that will persist.

► **Tom:**

You mentioned governance frameworks. So, what is the role of regulation in all of this, and what are the gaps and are some governments taking specific action and are these initiatives also reaching out to refugees?

► **Aaron:**

Great question, Tom. So, there are a range of different kinds of regulation that are applicable here. I have mentioned some of them indirectly already. So, for example, rules specific to your customer mandates or anti-money laundering of course have an impact on the accessibility of digital services, digital financial services and digital connectivity by refugees. This is an area that we have worked on very closely with the UNHCR for a number of years. But of course, data protection rules are highly relevant here as well, as are new governance frameworks for platforms, platform regulation, and even more and more these days AI regulation. But I also think it's worth pointing out that labour regulation is still highly relevant to this conversation, right? We need to understand how all of these different existing rules and emerging frameworks in particular for things like AI and its appropriate governance come together to shape digital risks.

Unfortunately, these frameworks can be quite weak in many refugee hosting countries, and of course, reforming law takes time. It is not something that happens overnight. Unfortunately, in general, refugees are not explicitly considered in the relevant regulations where they do exist. There are a few exceptions, of course, and these are always worth celebrating, but they are still far and few between. So, we need to do the hard work of understanding how our laws and regulations shape the risk environments.

► **Tom:**

Well, that is a very good point, I think. I wanted to ask, in that context, how do we or how can we equip refugees to deal with digital risks with laws that are in place and enforced? It seems to me that prevention and awareness raising are among the most needed measures, especially amongst refugees. So, what do you see is the role of the UN system and other humanitarian organizations, and for that matter, the private sector?

► **Aaron:**

I think the UN can play an important convening role by bringing together the right stakeholders. The UN cannot solve all of these problems by itself, of course. I think there is an absolutely central role for the private sector, and in particular the various tech platforms that make possible gig work and other forms of digital work, to center refugee concerns and circumstances and to the designs of their platforms, the algorithms, the business models that make these different services possible. I do want to believe that civil society as well has an important role to play in terms of raising awareness of the variety of risks that exist and are growing in different contexts to spotlight where harms do emerge, and to feedback those concerns to both policymakers and also technology providers so that we do not miss out on opportunities to improve systems for the better.

► **Tom:**

Okay, so that's really fascinating. Just to wrap up, can you tell us what is your vision for the future? Also, do you see the pursuit of what the ILO calls decent work, helping to overcome risk in the digital economy and platform work?

► **Aaron:**

I'll address your second question first. I think this is an absolutely fundamental point. So much of the gig economy and platform work being performed around the world, including by refugees, has not been up to standard, right? It is not decent work according to common understandings of what decent work includes. So, I think groups like Fairwork, which is based at Oxford University, are shining an important light on the shortcomings in this space and working with industry to improve the status quo. But there is so much more that needs to be done to raise the bar. I am also encouraged by the fact that U.S. senators have recognized this as

an issue and are applying pressure to Silicon Valley to do better in terms of the labour conditions of their data workers, both within the U.S. and globally. So that's all positive.

In terms of my vision, I think first and foremost, we need better conceptual clarity on these issues, and in particular, the scope of digital risk. That is what the framework tries to do, and of course, we will be further developing the framework and validating it hopefully in the coming year in various refugee gig work contexts. So, I look forward to that work. Of course, long-term, I hope that we can ensure that people who are doing gig work, platform work, data work of different kinds, see the work as being decent and feel empowered to grow their careers in this very exciting new economic sector. Thank you.

► **Tom:**

Aaron, that was great. I want to thank you for sharing your very interesting and important insights with us and with our listeners today. If you want to hear more from Aaron and other speakers on decent work prospects for refugees and host communities in the digital economy, connect to the ILO Prospects Series podcasts at www.ilo.org/gigeconomypodcast.

Meanwhile, stay tuned for our next podcast coming soon. I hope you found this podcast interesting and thank you for your time.