



Opening Remarks for World Migration and Displacement Symposium

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I doubt that anyone attending this symposium needs to be reminded that migrations and refugees are amongst the most challenging issues in the human ecosystem. But as a statistician and the Editor in Chief of Harvard Data Science Review, I want to emphasize that migrations and refugees also present some of the most challenging issues in the data science ecosystem. Data science cannot be scientific without studying the quality of data, their contextual meaning, and how they—rather than some other data—end up on our desk or disk. Deep learning can get us into deep trouble if we do not have a deep understanding of how the data are collected, who collected them, for what purposes, and what they measure or represent.

Leaving aside organized or deliberate efforts to distort, disform, or even destroy data, the collection of reliable data on anything human is a grand challenge, especially when there are multiple social, cultural, and political systems involved. The current pandemic serves as a vivid and painful reminder of this reality. For issues involving migrations and refugees, however, the experience of countering efforts to disform data or disinform through data is a routine one. I am therefore deeply grateful to USA for IOM, USA for UNHCR, and more broadly the UN migration agency and UN refugee agency for teaming up with Harvard Data Science Review to put on this much needed symposium, which brings leaders and scholars with very different backgrounds and perspectives like yourselves under one roof --- or I should say one “zooof” --- to tackle some key challenges in our human and data science ecosystems. I do not have any illusion that a three-day symposium can make any challenge disappear. But I do have 99% confidence---and, mind you, a reputable statistician never declares anything with 100% confidence---that this symposium (together with the follow-up special theme in HDSR) will be a milestone event at least with respect to the task of informing and motivating the data science community to contribute its enormous talents to help address the most challenging societal and intellectual issues in the world today and in the foreseeable future.

It goes without saying that it takes a village, or in this case, a UN to put together such a wide-ranging symposium. There are literally too many people to thank without exceeding my allotted five minutes, so please forgive me for presenting the “data” selectively. I want to start with three people without whom this symposium would not be even a concept, since *this* was their idea. They are Rita Ko, Director of The Hive, an innovation lab at USA for UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency), and a member of HDSR’s advisory board; Marie McAuliffe, Head of the Migration Research Division and Editor of the World Migration Report, International Organization for Migration, and an Associate editor for HDSR, and Liberty Vittert, Professor of Practice in Data Science at Washington University at St. Louis, board members for both USA for UNCHR and the Hive, on the international advisory council at USA for IOM and Media Feature Editor for HDSR. Rita, Marie, and Liberty, I cannot thank you enough for what you have done for this symposium and for HDSR.

Of course, events like this can never be successful without the support of a skillful and dedicated team of staff. For that, we all need to thank Maria Moreno, Head of Operation at USA for IOM, Lawrence Book McKnight, Operations Assistant at USA for IOM, Rebecca McLeod, the Managing Director of HDSR, and Nicole Smith, Manager of Analytics and Research at USA for UNHCR.

Finally, I want to thank all the speakers and panelists for your willingness to share with us your expertise and perspectives, and I am sure a bit of passion as well. And of course, my sincere thanks also go to all the symposium participants, as I know how busy everyone is, and how zoomed out we all are. I also want to mention that I know too well about how hard it is to not multi-task when attending a zoom conference, and hence I have prepared something for those who just cannot resist that temptation. If you really must distract yourself, please check out the fully open access Harvard Data Science Review, where we feature everything data science and data science for everyone. And we really mean it: in the latest issue, you will find everything from computational humor to analyzing twitter data, to building a school of data science.

But for now, let’s focus on the symposium. I want to welcome and thank you all again, and I also want to turn my podium or rather “zoodium” over to Anne-Marie Grey, the Executive Director and CEO of USA for UNHCR. Thank you all again!