



UNDERSTANDING PERCEPTIONS OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN EUROPE WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

PARTNERS: UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

PROGRAMME AREA: HUMANITARIAN ACTION



SUMMARY

As refugees and migrants travel across multiple borders, they encounter increasing protection risks, particularly when routes change, legal practices evolve and borders close. This forced displacement represents a challenge for humanitarian organizations working to provide assistance to people fleeing dangerous situations. This project used data from Twitter to monitor protection issues and the safe access to asylum of migrants and refugees in Europe. In collaboration with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Global Pulse created taxonomies that were used to explore interactions among refugees and between them and service providers, as well as xenophobic sentiment of host communities towards the displaced populations. Specifically, the study focused on how refugees and migrants were perceived in reaction to a series of terrorist attacks that took place in Europe in 2016. The results were used to develop a standardized information product to improve UNHCR's ability to monitor and analyse relevant social media feeds in near real-time.

BACKGROUND

Between 2015 and the first part of 2017, ongoing conflicts and violence around the world led over 1.4 million people to seek refuge in Europe, including a high number of families, women, and unaccompanied children. This forced displacement represented a major challenge for humanitarian organizations working to provide assistance to people fleeing dangerous situations.

Social media platforms are powerful communication tools that organizations use, both at a corporate level and at an operational level, to directly interact with affected communities. In addition, data from social media offers a wealth of information that can be parsed to better understand what people think, how they move around, and what they experience.

To date, several research projects have shown the feasibility of using social media data to identify topics of relevance for development and humanitarian action. However, little research has been conducted to extend the quantification of online sentiment to inform on interactions between refugees and service providers, and between refugees and host communities.

To validate the value of social media data in emergencies, UNHCR Innovation Service partnered with Global Pulse to explore how alternative sources of data can play a role in pursuing humanitarian outcomes.

TWITTER DATA AND FORCED DISPLACEMENT

The project explored the interactions among refugees and migrants, and between them and service providers (including smugglers) along the journey to Europe. Sentiment, i.e., attitudes and opinions of refugees and host communities towards each other, was also analysed. To confirm the value of the data, the project conducted ten mini-studies.

In the first instance, a set of taxonomies i.e., structured lists of relevant keywords, was created for monitoring both *interactions* and *xenophobic sentiment* for English, Greek, Farsi and Arabic. Social media posts from Greece – a country that hosts a large population of refugees and migrants - were analysed.

Initial findings from monitoring *social media interactions* between refugees and migrants, service providers and the general public, did not yield conclusive results. Only few tweets described access to territory, asylum conditions and the economic challenges encountered by refugees and migrants, hence the project did not pursue this analysis further.

The analysis of *xenophobic sentiment* on the other hand revealed rich insights for English and Greek in particular. Findings showed that more xenophobic sentiment was expressed in Tweets in English than those in Greek, 15% versus 5%. However, a larger number of relevant tweets were identified for Greek (248,691) in comparison to English (3,969). For Arabic and Farsi, too few tweets were extracted to be analysed.

Monitor	Unit of Analysis: Geography	Unit of Analysis: Timeframe	Language	Number of Posts ¹	Identified Opportunity
1. Interactions Arabic	Greece	February 1, 2015– April 18 th , 2017	Arabic	6,341	O ₁
2. Interactions Farsi	Greece	February 1, 2016– April 18 th , 2017	Farsi	1,483	O ₁
3. Xenophobia Greek	Greece	June 1, 2015– April 18 th , 2017	Greek / Greeklish (latin chars.)	248,691	O ₂
4. Xenophobia English	Greece	June 1, 2015– April 18 th , 2017	English	26,466	O ₂
5. Xenophobia Arabic	Greece	February 1, 2015– April 18 th , 2017	Arabic	196	O ₂
6. Xenophobia Farsi	Greece	February 1, 2016– April 18 th , 2017	Farsi	160	O ₂

Figure 1: Description of the monitors created in Crimson Hexagon

Based on the results of the first iteration, the project developed a standardized information product that was then tested to understand perceptions (sentiment) of refugees and migrants following the 2016 terrorist attacks in Nice, France (14 July), Munich, Germany (22 July), and Berlin, Germany (18 December). This second iteration measured the volume of Tweets that either blamed, or defended refugees and migrants in four languages: English, French, Greek and German.

Overall, findings revealed a low number of tweets that blamed refugees and migrants for the attacks 6% (Nice), 11% (Munich), and 5% (Berlin) respectively. In addition, a large number of tweets related to the terrorist attack in Berlin (7%) expressed explicit support for refugees and migrants, condemning racism and xenophobia.

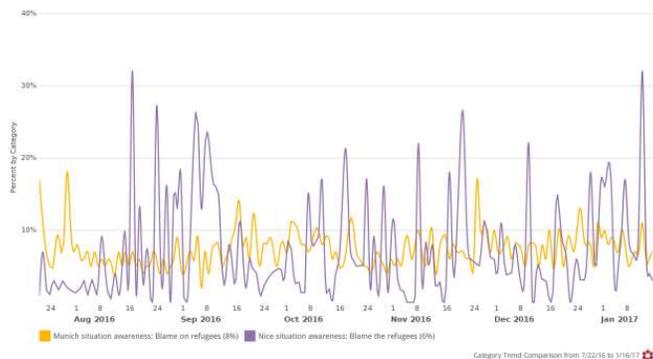


Figure 2: Expression of xenophobic sentiment after the terrorist attacks in Nice and Munich

It is important to note that while the percentage of posts blaming refugees and migrants for the terrorist incidents in the three cities was low, it is still representative of hundreds of thousands, to several millions tweets: 0.2M (Nice), 6.4M(Munich), and 17.6M(Berlin).

CONCLUSIONS

Findings demonstrated that data from social media, in this instance Twitter data, can be used to monitor protection issues and the safe access to asylum of migrants and refugees in near real-time. This information was used and continues to be used by UNHCR to develop communication strategies to mitigate potential correlations between attacks and the arrival of migrants and refugees.

Working with social media requires a dynamic mindset, where a project may need to adapt and change its initial scope, as demonstrated above. The limitations of the first iteration and the lessons learned throughout the course of the project helped reshape its purpose.

In addition, while these results provide interesting insights into the way people perceive issues related to the Europe Refugee Emergency crisis, they should be complemented by other sources of information to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of the situation on the ground.

One limitation of Twitter data is that tweets may not be representative of socio-economic and age diversity, and that Internet connectivity may not be accessible to all.

Finally, this project did not differentiate between refugees and migrants in conducting the analysis, and used both terms interchangeably.

This means that sentiment towards one group or the other could be distinguished.

IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- The project demonstrated Twitter data can provide useful insights to understand sentiment of host communities and the general public towards migrants and refugees fleeing to Europe.
- UNHCR routinely collects massive amounts of data and the integration of new data sources into its operations presents an opportunity to bring additional data-driven evidence into decision-making processes and advocacy efforts, particularly in developing institutional policies against xenophobia, discrimination and racism.
- Access to a stream of real-time information could allow UNHCR to integrate new types of insights into operational workflows, including decision-making processes, advocacy efforts and communication campaigns.
- Based on the results of this study, Global Pulse will develop a social media monitoring system, which will use streamed posts to detect signals of ongoing events. The tool will enable UNHCR, and other humanitarian actors, to continuously monitor and analyse relevant social media feeds.

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