Big Tech to the Rescue?
An Ethnographic Study of Corporate Humanitarianism in the Refugee Crisis

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SOFIE ELBÆK HENRIKSEN

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CBS

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the role and influence of Big Tech companies as humanitarian actors in refugee aid. Private sector companies are increasingly involved in responding to humanitarian crises, correlating with a growing willingness from for-profit companies to "do good" and engage in social causes. In what became known as "the European refugee crisis," tech companies played a particularly active role, for example, by partnering with humanitarian agencies to develop digital solutions to help refugees. However, Big Tech companies also increasingly develop technologies that governments and border agencies use to track and exclude migrants and refugees. Moreover, these tech companies are increasingly condemned for their questionable business operations and ethics around data collection and privacy. Therefore, their growing involvement in refugee aid prompts critical questions about how and why for-profit corporations engage in humanitarianism and what kind of help they actually offer.

In three separate empirical articles, this dissertation examines the corporate humanitarian engagement of tech companies in the global refugee crisis to understand how these practices have positioned tech companies as legitimate humanitarian actors. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in San Francisco, New York, and Copenhagen, the articles explore the convergence of Big Tech and refugee aid in three interlinked sites:

1) In a Tech for Good event at Google
2) In cross-sector partnerships (CSPs) between tech companies and refugee aid agencies
3) In refugee-themed volunteer hackathons

Article one, *Google's Tech Philanthropy: Capitalism and Humanitarianism in the Digital Age*, critically analyzes how tech companies like Google effectively link their business interests and strategies to humanitarian causes in the Tech for Good movement. The article contributes to the literature on digital capitalism and critical humanitarianism by showing that while Tech for Good is framed as an innovative and new approach to "doing good," it relies on well-known entanglements between humanitarianism and capitalism. Therefore, the opportunities in Tech for Good to challenge the power relations of digital capitalism and use technology for good are limited.

Article two, *Finding the "Sweet Spot": The Politics of Alignment in Cross-Sector Partnerships for Refugees*, approaches how for-profit and non-profit actors find alignment in cross-sector

partnerships for refugees. The article contributes to management literature on business-humanitarian engagement and cross-sector partnerships in humanitarianism by demonstrating the asymmetrical power relations in which partnership alignment is constructed. In this power asymmetry, business interests and corporate strategies become the main partnership priorities to which humanitarian and refugee needs must be aligned.

Article three, *Hacking the Refugee Crisis: Merging Refugee Aid and Digital Capitalism in Humanitarian Hacking*, examines and conceptualizes the practices of humanitarian hacking at two volunteer hackathons focused on finding digital solutions to "the global refugee crisis." The article contributes to scholarship on the digitalization of refugee aid and governance by showing how, rather than producing digital solutions for refugees, humanitarian hacking reproduces and legitimizes imaginaries of tech companies and digital technologies as important humanitarian actors and solutions at the forefront of humanitarian aid for refugees.

The dissertation makes three overarching contributions to critical scholarship on the role and influence of corporate actors and digital technology in humanitarianism. First, it contributes empirical nuance to discussions about the changing role of business in society and humanitarianism by grounding the critique of corporate humanitarianism in ethnographic data about and emic perspectives of the diverse range of "tech helpers" who aspire to develop technological solutions to humanitarian problems.

Secondly, the dissertation contributes to methodological discussions about how and where to study the digitalized, fragmented, fleeting, and inaccessible world of Big Tech. Combining methodological insights from assemblage ethnography, studying up, and digital ethnography, the dissertation offers a framework for grasping the "hot air" of corporate humanitarianism and the social imaginaries that legitimize Big Tech's role in refugee aid.

Finally, the theoretical framework I apply in this dissertation contributes a new and critical understanding of the implications of corporate involvement in humanitarianism. The articles utilize theories from critical refugee studies, the commodification of humanitarianism, and digital capitalism. In combination, these strands of literature inform the concept of corporate humanitarian solutionism, which I use to frame and connect the diverse practices analyzed in the articles.

Ultimately, my dissertation reveals that the corporate humanitarianism of Big Tech is asymmetrical, profit-oriented, and skewed toward business interests. Crucially, as a starting point,

the critique of corporate humanitarianism should not simply define profits in terms of hard cash or monetary gains because the fact that tech companies do not receive money from these engagements does not mean they do not profit from them. This dissertation demonstrates the importance of looking beyond the terminology of "good intentions," "non-profit," and "doing good" in corporate humanitarianism. Instead, my findings emphasize the need to critically and continuously question the unequal power relations and capitalist underpinnings of businesses' attempts to "help."

RESUMÉ

Denne ph.d.-afhandling udforsker Big Tech-virksomheders rolle og indflydelse som humanitære aktører inden for flygtningehjælp. Virksomheder er i stigende grad involveret i nødhjælpsarbejde og humanitære kriser. Dette sker, i takt med at flere og flere aktører fra privatsektoren engagerer sig i filantropiske og sociale formål. I, hvad der blev kendt som, "den europæiske flygtningekrise" i 2015 spillede tech-virksomheder en særlig aktiv rolle, f.eks. ved at indgå partnerskaber med humanitære organisationer om at udvikle digitale løsninger til at hjælpe flygtninge. Samtidig udvikler tech-industrien i stigende grad teknologier, som regeringer og grænsemyndigheder bruger til at spore, overvåge og holde migranter og flygtninge ude. Desuden fordømmes tech-virksomheder stadig oftere for deres tvivlsomme forretningsmetoder og manglende etik i forhold til dataindsamling og privatliv. Deres voksende involvering i flygtningehjælp rejser derfor kritiske spørgsmål om, hvordan og hvorfor kommercielle virksomheder engagerer sig i humanitært arbejde, og hvilken slags hjælp de faktisk tilbyder.

Igennem tre empiriske artikler undersøger denne afhandling tech-virksomheders humanitære engagement i den globale flygtningekrise, i et forsøg på at forstå hvordan disse praksisser har positioneret tech-virksomheder som legitime humanitære aktører. Baseret på etnografisk feltarbejde i San Francisco, New York og København udforsker artiklerne mødet mellem Big Tech og flygtningehjælp inden for tre forskellige områder:

1) I en Tech for Good-begivenhed hos Google
2) I tværsektorielle partnerskaber mellem tech-virksomheder og flygtningehjælpsorganisationer
3) I frivillige humanitære hackatons orienteret mod flygtninge

Artikel et, *Google's Tech Philanthropy: Capitalism and Humanitarianism in the Digital Age*, analyserer, hvordan tech-virksomheder som Google effektivt forbinder deres forretningsinteresser og -strategier med humanitære formål i Tech for Good-bevægelsen. Artiklen bidrager til litteratur om digital kapitalisme og kritisk humanitarisme ved at vise, at selvom Tech for Good præsenteres som en innovativ og ny tilgang til filantropi, er den alligevel rodfæstet i velkendte sammenfletninger mellem humanitarisme og kapitalisme. Derfor har Tech for Good-bevægelsen kun begrænsede muligheder for at udfordre magtrelationerne i digital kapitalisme og bruge teknologi "for good."

Artikel to, *Finding the "Sweet Spot": The Politics of Alignment in Cross-Sector Partnerships for Refugees*, beskæftiger sig med spørgsmålet om, hvordan virksomheder og nonprofit ngo'er afstemmer og ensretter deres strategiske interesser i tværsektorielle partnerskaber for flygtninge. Artiklen bidrager til litteraturen om virksomheders engagement i humanitær hjælp samt tværsektorielle partnerskaber inden for den humanitære sektor ved at demonstrere de asymmetriske magtforhold, som partnerskaberne opbygges i. I denne magtasymmetri bliver forretningsinteresser og virksomhedsstrategier de primære partnerskabsprioriteter, som de humanitære behov skal tilpasses efter.

Artikel tre, *Hacking the Refugee Crisis: Merging Refugee Aid and Digital Capitalism in Humanitarian Hacking*, undersøger to frivillige hackatons, der fokuserer på at finde digitale løsninger i "den globale flygtningekrise." Artiklen udvikler begrebet *humanitær hacking* og bidrager til forskningen om digitalisering af flygtningehjælp, ved at vise hvordan humanitær hacking ikke producerer digitale løsninger for flygtninge. Derimod reproducerer og legitimerer disse praksisser allerede eksisterende forestillinger om tech-virksomheder og digitale teknologier som værende vigtige humanitære aktører og løsninger i flygtningekriser.

Afhandlingen kommer med tre overordnede bidrag til kritisk forskning om virksomheders og digital teknologis rolle og indflydelse i humanitært arbejde. For det første bidrager afhandlingen med empiriske nuancer til diskussioner om virksomheders skiftende rolle i samfundet og transformationer i den humanitære sektor ved at forankre kritikken af virksomheders humanitarisme i etnografiske data og emiske perspektiver på den mangfoldige gruppe af "tech-hjælpere," som stræber efter at udvikle teknologiske løsninger på humanitære problemer.

For det andet bidrager afhandlingen til metodologiske diskussioner om, hvordan og hvor man kan studere tech-industriens digitaliserede, fragmenterede, flygtige og utilgængelige verden. Ved at kombinere metodologiske indsigter fra *assemblage ethnography*, *studying up* og digital etnografi præsenterer afhandlingen en metodisk ramme for at forstå den "varme luft" og de sociale forestillinger, der legitimerer Big Techs rolle i flygtningehjælp.

For det tredje bidrager den teoretiske ramme, jeg anvender i denne afhandling, med en ny og kritisk forståelse af virksomheders deltagelse i humanitarisme. Artiklerne anvender teorier fra kritiske flygtningestudier, kommercialiseringen af humanitarismen og digital kapitalisme. Tilsammen informerer disse teoretiske felter begrebet *corporate humanitarian solutionism*, som jeg bruger til at indramme og forbinde de forskellige praksisser, der analyseres i artiklerne.

Opsummeret viser min afhandling, at Big Techs humanitære engagement er asymmetrisk, profitorienteret og forvredet mod primært at tilgodese forretningsinteresser. En kritik af virksomheders humanitære engagement bør ikke blot definere profit som hård valuta eller monetær gevinst, for selv hvis tech-virksomheder ikke modtager penge gennem deres humanitære engagement, betyder det ikke nødvendigvis, at de ikke profiterer på det. Denne afhandling understreger netop behovet for at se ud over terminologien om "gode hensigter," "nonprofit" og "for good" og i stedet stille kritiske spørgsmål til de ujævne magtforhold og det kapitalistiske fundament, der ligger bag virksomheders forsøg på at hjælpe.

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PROLOGUE

"We're living during one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world," a male voice states as drone-filmed images of a dark blue ocean appear on the screen, leading viewers to the Greek Island of Lesvos. This location has become iconic to the public perception of the refugee crisis. The video in which these pictures appear is part of the promotional material created by Google for the mobile site Refugee.info that the tech giant developed in partnership with the humanitarian organizations Mercy Corps and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in response to the 2015 refugee crisis. A man in a blue shirt then appears in the video. The subtitle discloses that he is a representative from Google. With a characteristic Californian accent, he explains:

> There were people carrying their children, a few of their personal belongings, but what was interesting to see was that many of them were holding phones, mobile phones. And we thought, Well, maybe we can use our technology with the IRC and Mercy Corps' understanding of the crisis itself in order to give the refugees the information to stay safe. So, together, we made Refugee.Info Hub. It's a mobile site that gives refugees information, like where to get medical attention, how to find refugee camps, and anything else needed, all in their own language.

The mobile site was later transformed into an app, which was again expanded into a website with information articles and an interactive map of aid services along common migration routes, a WhatsApp chat, and several Facebook pages where refugees could communicate with aid agencies. A few years after its inception, Refugee.info was renamed Signpost. Several other large tech companies, including Microsoft, Facebook, Twilio, and Salesforce, joined the initiative. In the years following 2015, Signpost expanded rapidly and is now a global humanitarian tech project for refugees in Greece and 14 other locations worldwide. The IRC, which coordinates the project, describes Signpost as an initiative applying "private sector principles to solve a humanitarian problem" (IRC, 2018) but also as a "vision" for empowering refugees through access to information by "using the latest tools and expertise from the tech and media sectors."

The growth of Signpost is illustrative of a movement in which Big Tech companies are increasingly involved in humanitarian aid for refugees. Signpost is just one example of this form of involvement, which became particularly visible during the "European migration crisis" but has expanded into a broader corporate engagement with what is now commonly referred to as "the

global refugee crisis." Through this engagement, tech companies tie their business operations to humanitarian crises through partnerships with NGOs and aid agencies.

The quote above from the Google video illustrates a set of ideas underpinning this development. First is the idea that complex political crises have simple technical solutions. Because so many refugees were already carrying smartphones, giving them internet connection and access to apps and information platforms was understood as a form of aid – in fact, the tagline of Signpost later became "information as aid." Second, is the idea that combining humanitarian agencies' understanding of humanitarian crises with tech companies' technical expertise and products will generate these simple, innovative, and efficient humanitarian solutions.

But how did profit-seeking tech companies, whose business operations and ethics seem increasingly dubious, come to be perceived as valuable humanitarian partners in refugee crises? What kind of help are companies like Google and Facebook offering refugees, and should we leave the protection of vulnerable populations in the hands of these corporate actors? These questions led me to write this dissertation and to provide a critical reading of what happens and what is at stake when businesses become rescuers and rescue becomes business.

Picture 1: A Refugee.Info sign hanging on a fence in Lesvos, photographed for a promotional video about Google's efforts to help refugees in Europe in 2015. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akpe5uUKv9U, accessed October 31, 2023.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Technology companies do not randomly do something in humanitarian [aid], they do things that align with what they are doing as a company."

Senior Director, Microsoft Philanthropies, March 2020

"Tech is leading the way in showing what private sector partnerships and contributions can look like."

Senior Manager, Global Tech Partnerships, International Rescue Committee, January 2020

"We are in the middle of the largest refugee crisis since World War II. There is no better time to be a Techfugees hacker!"

Techfugees hackathon organizer, October 2019

This dissertation is about the rise of technology companies as humanitarian actors in refugee crises and the ideas and imaginaries supporting this development. It explores how, in response to what became known as the "European refugee crisis" and later the "global refugee crisis," digital technology and the business expertise from Silicon Valley tech companies came to be viewed as convincing and valued solutions to humanitarian crises. As the three quotes from my fieldwork above indicate, this perception is shared by a diverse range of actors, from tech companies and international aid agencies to volunteer hackers, who enter the scene of refugee aid from different perspectives and with different agendas. In this dissertation, I examine these various perspectives to understand the growing role and influence of otherwise widely condemned Big Tech companies in humanitarianism.

Almost a decade ago, in the summer of 2015, refugees and migrants arriving on the shores of Europe became an urgent humanitarian and political concern, capturing global media headlines and policy agendas. In addition to being a tragic humanitarian crisis costing thousands of human

lives, the crisis was political. It exposed the limitations of European migration and asylum policies and the lack of collaboration and solidarity between European Union (EU) member states (Del Monte & Orav, 2023). Thus, the 2015 refugee crisis was largely perceived as a failure of EU refugee policy and a "policy-made humanitarian crisis at EU borders" to which the EU failed to adequately respond (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2016).

Promptly, many non-state actors, including corporations, launched market-based initiatives to help refugees. The ice cream company Ben & Jerry's developed a refugee-welcome-themed ice cream flavor, IKEA partnered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to build refugee shelters, and Starbucks pledged to hire 10,000 refugees by 2022. Additionally, business coalitions, such as Tent Partnerships for Refugees, the Refugee Investment Network, and the World Bank Group project "Refugee Investment and Matchmaking Platform," emerged to coordinate private sector responses to the refugee crisis. Tech companies [1] were particularly keen to engage in this humanitarian crisis. In partnership with international NGOs, companies such as Google, Facebook, and Microsoft launched campaigns and digital humanitarian initiatives to aid refugees, such as the Signpost project described previously.

At the same time, EU governments and border agencies approached tech companies for technological solutions to "bring the refugee crisis under control." Specifically, EU states were searching for ways to track and control migrants to "prevent some migrants from coming to Europe at all, discouraging others from making hazardous sea crossings and reducing the role of smugglers." Examples of proposed solutions from tech companies included digital identification systems and efforts to "tempt refugees to download tracking apps on their smartphones by offering helpful information about sea crossings and conditions in different EU countries" (all quotes from Taylor and Graham-Harrison, 2016, cited in Latonero and Kift, 2018).

This search for technological solutions to the refugee crisis also took place within a growing movement of "hacktivists" and "digital humanitarians" (Meier, 2015): volunteer tech communities mobilizing online to develop digital lifelines for refugees and migrants (Maitland, 2018). In 2015, refugees became "a favorite subject of well-intentioned 'hackers' and 'disruptors'" (Varagur, 2016) and more than 1,500 digital initiatives were produced in collaborations between NGOs, activists, corporations, and major humanitarian agencies (Leurs,

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[1] Tech companies, in this dissertation, refer to Internet companies that develop information and communication technologies (ICTs) and "provide (often free) services, such as platforms for communication, information searches, or social connections" (Flyverbom et al., 2019, p. 7).

2018, p. 266) as ways to improve refugees' integration, livelihoods, and employability (Hatayama, 2018). For instance, the global volunteer design and technology collective EmpowerHack launched the smartphone app Hababy to provide pregnant refugee women with prenatal care information and directions to healthcare in the country they arrived in. Similarly, Techfugees, a global NGO and community of volunteers, was established in 2015 to develop digital solutions for refugees through volunteer hackathons. Thus, in the European refugee crisis, smartphone apps and internet access were proposed as aid or possible solutions by various actors.

This dissertation presents a critical reading of these developments. Ultimately, my findings show that the corporate humanitarian practices of Big Tech, and the proliferation of digital and corporate solutions for refugees, promote a type of refugee aid that is asymmetrical, profit-oriented, and skewed toward business interests. In doing so, the dissertation emphasizes the importance of critically analyzing corporate forms of helping, even when such practices are framed in the terminology of "good intentions," "non-profit," and "doing good."

1.1 Corporate Humanitarian Solutionism

This dissertation explores how the people in this diverse group of "tech helpers" are connected through the practices and ideas of *corporate humanitarian solutionism*. This concept brings together three distinct literatures on critical refugee studies, humanitarianism, and digital capitalism to understand the convergence of Big Tech and humanitarian aid in the global refugee crisis. When I refer to the global refugee crisis, it is both as an actual historical and ongoing event of protracted displacement and as a discourse in which the mobility of migrants and refugees is framed and problematized within a "crisis" narrative that legitimizes specific solutions over others (I return to my use of the term in sections 2 and 2.1.2).

I focus on the concept of corporate humanitarian solutionism as an overall frame for my dissertation to describe and analyze the empirical phenomena I study, which are not confined to one coherent activity, geographical location, or group of people. Instead, the concept captures a range of different activities done by different actors by focusing on the underlying ideas and rationales that connect these activities and people. While the term solutionism has popularly been used to critique the Silicon Valley start-up culture's "urge to fix problems that don't exist" (Morozov, 2013), I use the concept to understand the application of technology to fix problems that are very real and complex but have not been solved through political solutions. As such, I

expand the concept of solutionism by integrating it with a theoretical and empirical context of corporate humanitarianism and migration politics. Using ethnographic methods, I explore this corporate humanitarian solutionism in three interlinked sites: 1) in a Tech for Good event at Google, 2) in partnerships between tech companies and refugee aid agencies, and 3) in refugee-themed volunteer hackathons. In all three sites, I examine the practices, discourses, and imaginaries of the people and organizations who aspire and attempt to develop digital solutions to the global refugee crises.

As the three articles of the dissertation show, corporate humanitarian solutionism describes a form of humanitarian helping that centers, materially and discursively, on fixing problems with business and technology "solutions." In its simplest form, this helping maintains an apolitical understanding of the refugee crisis as a technical "problem" that can be fixed with the right tools. Of course, as this dissertation highlights, the reality and actual expression of solutionism is more complex. Corporate humanitarian solutionism also describes a form of business engagement in humanitarianism that grows out of a particular Silicon Valley brand of capitalism. In this corporate humanitarian engagement, "doing good" has become a profitable and valuable commodity in itself, which produces different kinds of value for the people and organizations involved. The concept of corporate humanitarian solutionism highlights these entanglements of contemporary humanitarianism and digital capitalism.

Analytically, corporate humanitarian solutionism draws on various conceptualizations of *assemblages* as sets of "practices that encompass things, subjects, and organizations as well as various systems of knowledge, objectives, and regulations" (Schwittay, 2011a, p. 383; Ong and Collier, 2005; Li, 2007). In recent years, critical border studies have advanced our understanding of how migration and humanitarian politics are shaped by new constellations of actors, political rationales, technologies, data, and mobility practices which assemble into power regimes that cannot be located or studied in delineated spaces, but exist across global and digital scales (see for example Düvell, 2019; Rozakou, 2019; Rothe, Fröhlich and Rodriguez Lopez, 2020; Pallister-Wilkins, 2022). While the articles in this dissertation do not use the notion of assemblage explicitly, the attempt to link various loosely connected actors, practices, and ideas of corporate humanitarian solutionism into "an identifiable terrain of action and debate" (Li, 2007, p. 266) has shaped my analysis both theoretically and methodologically (see also sections 3.1 and 4.1.1).

By combining the concepts of solutionism and corporate humanitarianism, I synthesize separate literatures into one coherent framework. This theoretical framework is necessary to analyze the myriad and ambivalent practices, imaginaries, motivations, and tensions that shape the convergence of Big Tech and refugee aid. The people who engage in corporate humanitarian solutionism do so from different positions and with varying motivations. For some, this engagement is about doing business or "capitalizing" on a movement. For others, it is about making an impact or "doing good." For most, however, it is a complex mix of these and other motivations. Corporate humanitarian solutionism thus illustrates a dynamic field of convergences and tensions between capitalism, humanitarianism, migration, and technology. Below, I highlight three central tensions.

First, as for-profit corporations increasingly engage in humanitarian action, attempts to combine profit maximization with humanitarian helping intensify. As reflected in the rise of *philanthrocapitalism* (Bishop & Green, 2008) and *cause-related marketing* campaigns (Hawkins, 2012; Richey & Ponte, 2011), humanitarianism has become a profitable business case for the private sector. This corporate interest in aid is not new. Companies have long engaged in various humanitarian, development, and charitable causes with differing motivations and rationales. Indeed, humanitarianism, understood broadly as an institutionalized practice of emergency intervention (Barnett & Weiss, 2008; Calhoun, 2004), a political mode of governance (Barnett, 2013; De Lauri, 2016), and a set of moral principles and ethical claims (Bornstein & Redfield, 2011, p. 17), has never been entirely free from market interference (Lago & Sullivan, 2017). However, the methods and scales of business engagement in aid are changing, and the frankness with which for-profit actors present their dual aim of doing good and doing business is unprecedented (McGoey, 2016, p. 17).

In recent decades, an institutional discourse has supported and propagated this involvement of private sector actors in humanitarian and development aid. Through frameworks such as the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals, partnerships between humanitarian organizations and businesses have become legitimate and mainstream and uncontroversial aid practices (Olwig, 2021). These partnerships reflect ideas of win-win solutions and "sweet spots" where business and humanitarian interests perfectly align. Humanitarian sentiments of care and compassion have thus become openly profitable as "doing well by doing good has essentially collapsed and is no longer a processual relationality" (Richey et al., 2021, p. 2). Consequently, the 2015 migration crisis in Europe was portrayed in media and corporate circles as a business

opportunity (Kartallozi, 2019; Legrain, 2016; Marcus, 2015; Martinez, 2018), an investment case (Chiu, 2019; Philippe Legrain, 2016), and an opportunity for companies to leverage their core business while helping refugees by, for example, partnering with humanitarian agencies and NGOs.

Secondly, the development and implementation of tech solutions from for-profit companies unfold in a humanitarian system that is increasingly recognized by scholars as a regime of both care and control (Hyndman, 2020; Pallister-Wilkins, 2020; Ticktin, 2011). Critical humanitarianism studies have shed light on the violence of humanitarian care as a *politics of life* (Fassin, 2007; Mavelli, 2019; Ticktin, 2006) as well as the entanglements between humanitarianism and colonialism (Baughan and Everill, 2012; Budabin and Richey, 2021). The duality of care and control has been evident in European refugee governance, where humanitarian care has openly and explicitly overlapped with political agendas of migration management and border policing (Cuttitta, 2018; De Genova, 2013; De Lauri, 2019; Pallister-Wilkins, 2015; Plambech, 2014). Digital technologies and data-based practices are increasingly part of these humanitarian efforts, where they stimulate both promise and concern. Internet connectivity and blockchain technologies hold the potential to empower refugees by enabling free access to information and education as well as access to cash transfers through digital identification (Cheesman, 2020a; Maitland, 2018). Artificial intelligence (AI) and biometric technologies have been deployed as instruments to improve governments' and NGOs' provision of humanitarian protection (Jacobsen, 2017; Olwig et al., 2019). However, these technologies have also been portrayed as a threat to refugees' autonomy and freedom, and critiqued for "datafying" refugee bodies, making them both targets of surveillance and commodification (Latonero, 2019; Lemberg-Pedersen & Haioty, 2020; Madianou, 2019b; Martin, 2023). Moreover, AI technology is now a critical tool in EU migration management and the externalization of EU borders (Molnar, 2019; Napolitano, 2023).

Finally, tech companies themselves have become contentious actors. Tech giants like Google, Meta, and other members of "Big Tech" – a term describing the largest and most dominant technology companies – have been at the center of ongoing discussions and lawsuits about the excessive corporate accumulation of wealth and power and the increasing influence of corporations in spheres traditionally separated from business. As a result of the growing public disenchantment with Silicon Valley, or "tech-lash" (Smith, 2018), Big Tech has come to embody a widespread fear of corporate power reaching too far and threatening democratic processes. At the same time, tech companies are gaining influence in humanitarian and development sectors

through their large-scale philanthropic efforts and as partners of an increasing number of aid organizations (Madianou, 2019a).

A recent and prominent example of this development is the much-debated partnership between the World Food Program and the data analytics company Palantir. This partnership was established in 2019 and sparked controversy in humanitarian and human rights circles because of Palantir's questionable data privacy practices and contracts with authorities of the United States (US), through which Palantir's technology facilitates immigration raids, mass deportations, and police surveillance (Mijente et al., 2018). Thus, while Big Tech firms experience increasing public and political condemnation, these same companies have simultaneously become visible and active in the humanitarian responses to refugee crises.

This dissertation explores this growing role of Big Tech in refugee crises and humanitarianism, not just in expanding the practices of corporate humanitarian aid but also in shaping the imaginaries that justify such practices. In three separate articles, I explore the practices, promises, and imaginaries through which digital technologies and the companies that sell them become convincing humanitarian solutions to refugee crises.

1.1.1   How Do They Profit?

The senior director at Microsoft Philanthropies, quoted at the beginning of this introduction, emphasizes that tech companies do not engage in humanitarian aid unless it somehow aligns with their business strategy. So how do tech companies actually benefit or profit from participating in humanitarian aid for refugees? How do the companies make money from these activities? These questions, which I have asked myself and been asked many times during this Ph.D., are rooted in a widely held suspicion and assumption that tech companies, like other for-profit companies, only really care about making money and will only "do good" if it somehow also generates a profit. Obviously, businesses must be profiting from helping refugees, or why else would they do it?

Over the course of my research, it became clear to me that the companies' humanitarian engagement is quite explicitly driven by self-interest, following the increasingly mainstream notion that "doing good" should be mutually beneficial for the giver and the receiver (I return to this notion in section 1.2.1 below). However, I found it difficult to provide evidence for how exactly the companies benefit materially. My critical speculations included questions such as: Are

they selling private data about refugees to governments? Are they using the insights from their humanitarian partnerships to develop and sell technologies to border agencies? Are they donating funds to receive tax benefits? Are the humanitarian efforts a smokescreen for unethical and exploitative business practices? Or are the companies simply trying to improve their image to their employees and the public? Answering these questions would require a type of research access into the inner workings of tech companies that I, and most other ethnographic researchers, will likely never have.

The question of how these companies make money from their humanitarian engagement is therefore one of the known unknowns that I have had to sit with in my research. Accepting this *not knowing* pushed me to focus on other questions and possible explanations for why companies get involved in humanitarian aid. As researchers, we participate in the construction of our objects of study as particular kinds of objects. That is, by focusing on the parts of technological systems or corporations that seem "unknowable," we take part in creating an understanding of these objects as secret and inaccessible "black boxes." On studying algorithm as culture, anthropologist Nick Seaver argues that:

> A great deal of information about algorithmic systems is available to the critic who does not define her object of interest as that which is off limits or intentionally hidden. If our interest is not in the specific configuration of a particular algorithm at one moment in time, but in the more persistent cultural worlds algorithms are part of, then useful evidence is not bounded by corporate secrecy. (Seaver, 2017, p. 7).

Following this argument, this dissertation is not about whether or how tech companies make money from rescuing refugees. Instead, I focus on other forms of value that are extracted from these activities: access to new markets and consumer bases, good publicity, and the acquiring of power and influence in new political and social spheres. One of my interlocutors from the humanitarian organization the IRC, who worked with tech company partnerships, expressed: "It's a difficult balance, you know, building a partnership and having the autonomy to run the programs. The more corporations want to get involved, the more they control within our systems." This dissertation zooms in on this increased involvement and influence of Big Tech in refugee aid to understand how tech companies' corporate humanitarian practices shape and legitimize the possibilities of Big Tech as humanitarian actors.

1.1.2   The "Hot Air" of Corporate Humanitarian Solutionism

My own experiences of not knowing were not unique to me as a researcher, as I entered a field characterized by multiple layers of not knowing. In his study of algorithm developers, Seaver (2017) writes:

> Although it often felt like I was being excluded as an outsider ethnographer, this situation was not unique to me. For people all over the company and the industry more broadly, everyday work was marked by varying levels of access and obscurity (…) Not even people on the "inside" know everything that is going on, both because algorithms can be quite complex and distributed and because that is how human social life works more generally. (Seaver, 2017, p. 7).

In this work, Seaver draws on Casper Bruun Jensen's analysis of the "asymmetries of knowledge" that characterize ethnographic studies of the internet and other technologically-mediated arenas (Bruun Jensen, 2010), in which he argues that limited access to knowledge is not a barrier but a part of the field and the experiences of all involved actors, not only the ethnographer.

Thus, my sense of not being able to know all the practices in my field, was also related to the nature of the field itself. The development of technology is often surrounded by imaginaries, speculations, and hype. The performative effects of this hype has been analyzed through the concept of *hot air*, which is simultaneously vacuous and productive (Hockenhull & Cohn, 2021). This concept resonates with the feeling I grappled with throughout my research of studying air. The practices, partnerships, activities and language of my interlocutors felt intangible, fluffy, and hard to grasp but at the same time very real, as they connected and mobilized a wide range of influential actors around them.

A lot of the time, I found it difficult to understand what people in my field – from NGO workers to tech company managers and volunteer hackers – were actually doing. It was not difficult to understand what they hoped to do, as they were usually very skilled in presenting these visions, but to understand what they were actually doing and gaining from it. In the beginning, I approached this sense of hot air with resistance. I sought to dig beneath it or transform it into something tangible. In other words, I was approaching the field assuming I would find a "stable core" of practices, definitions, and meanings that could be recorded and documented empirically.

However, I realized that the sense of hot air in my field was not rooted in a lack of access to the "real practices" and it did not mean that nothing substantial happened in the interactions between interlocutors. Rather, the fluffiness of the field reflected the heterogenous and diffuse nature of technological and corporate worlds, in which hot air, speculations, and imaginaries are generative. Thus, I began considering this hot air as an object of analysis to understand how imaginaries, which can feel slippery when studied ethnographically, participate in shaping and legitimizing Big Tech as valuable humanitarian partners in refugee crises.

1.2 Literature Review

In this dissertation, I situate the rise of Big Tech companies as humanitarian actors within broad societal transformations of capitalism, humanitarianism, and migration politics. The dissertation thus merges and contributes to ongoing academic debates on the changing role of business in society, the technologization of humanitarianism and migration management, and the implications of social imaginaries of "the digital" for how we understand the present and hope for the future.

1.2.1 The Changing Role of Business in Society

The rise of tech companies as humanitarian actors occurs within a large-scale transformation of the role and responsibilities of business in society. For-profit corporations are increasingly expected to incorporate a social mission or purpose into their business models (Mayer, 2021) and to address grand societal challenges as good "corporate citizens" (Matten & Crane, 2005). As such, corporations have become explicit political actors that aim to fill governance gaps and provide public good in global crises (Eberlein, 2019; Rasche, 2015; Scherer et al., 2014). Capitalism, as the economic and political system through which for-profit businesses operate, is also being redefined. This transformation is not new in itself, as capitalism tends to constantly transform, often fueled by crisis and social critique (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007).

However, what is striking about capitalism's current crisis of legitimacy is the widespread consensus about the need to redefine capitalism's purpose and conditions. Even mainstream business circles are voicing their skepticism and calling out the failures of the capitalist economic model. These include Klaus Schwab, the Chairperson of the World Economic Forum, who in his 2021 book *Stakeholder Capitalism* urges us to reimagine capitalism to benefit both people and the

planet. Likewise, a 2019 campaign from the *Financial Times* called "The New Agenda" was launched with the headline: "Capitalism: Time for a Reset." At the launch, Lionel Barber, the editor of the *Financial Times*, explained that "in the decade since the global financial crisis, the [liberal capitalist] model has come under strain, particularly the focus on maximizing profits and shareholder value. These principles of good business are necessary but not sufficient. It's time for a reset." Thus, what were previously considered anti-capitalist notions have moved into the capitalist heartland.

Within business circles and beyond, it has become common sense that businesses have social rather than purely economic responsibilities (Dolan & Rajak, 2016, p. 2). The vast literature on corporate social responsibility (CSR) demonstrates the manifold and diverse arguments for how and why corporations should include social issues in their business operations (Carroll, 1999, 2021; Rasche et al., 2017). Garriga and Melé (2013) propose four different rationales for business's CSR engagement: *Ethical CSR theories* argue that companies' social responsibilities are grounded in ethical obligations towards society, whereas *political CSR theories* focus on the responsible enactment of businesses' political power. *Integrative theories* view CSR as a way to respond to the social demands of the societies and consumers that companies depend on for their existence. *Instrumental theories* consider CSR only in terms of benefits to the business: "any supposed social activity is accepted if, and only if, it is consistent with wealth creation" (Garriga & Melé, 2013, p. 52). Integrative and instrumental CSR theories thus view social engagement as a means to wealth creation.

This instrumentalist notion is also at the core of a growing business management literature on *philanthrocapitalism* (Bishop & Green, 2008). Philanthrocapitalism (along with similar managerial concepts like *shared value creation* (Porter & Cramer, 2011) and *bottom of the pyramid* (Prahalad & Hart, 2002)) maintain that profit maximization and social improvement can and should be combined not just for the sake of business, but because it is the most efficient way to create social change. In this sense, philanthrocapitalism proposes to apply business principles and practices to "doing good," highlighting a classical liberal view of capitalism itself as "naturally philanthropic" (McGoey, 2016, p. 7).

The ideas and practices of philanthrocapitalism have been particularly pronounced in the Silicon Valley tech sector by influential CEOs and philanthropists like Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, and Peter Thiel, founder of Palantir (Giridharadas, 2020). Silicon Valley tech companies have

presented themselves to the public as driven primarily by a desire to make the world a better place. Google's former corporate motto "don't be evil" is an often-cited example of this tendency, along with Zuckerberg's statement that the ambition of Facebook (now called Meta) is not to "build services to make money, but make money to build better services" (Gannes, 2012). In this sense, tech companies have tried hard to be perceived as an "alternative, humane, Californian antidote to the 'bad' capitalists of New York and London finance" (Atal, 2020, p. 4).

However, the perception of tech companies as more devoted to solving global issues than making money has faded in recent years as these companies have engaged in ruthless struggles for market domination (Frenkel & Kang, 2021). A decade ago, *Economist* columnist Adrian Wooldridge predicted that "the Silicon elite will cease to be regarded as geeks who happen to be filthy rich and become filthy rich people who happen to be geeks" (Wooldridge, 2013). As such, tech companies straddle the perceptions of conventional capitalism and the promise of a new and more ethical capitalism, where businesses are the main drivers of social change.

While the corporate world and large philanthropic foundations have embraced optimistic views on aligning profits and purpose, critics highlight the unoriginality and lack of accountability and consideration for power inequalities in these approaches to corporate responsibility and philanthropy (Crane et al., 2014; Olwig, 2021). Although practitioners often present philanthrocapitalism as a novel approach to philanthropy, its underlying philosophical tenets can be traced back to the practices of Carnegie and Rockefeller and even further back to the origins of modern political economy (McGoey, 2016, pp. 15–17). Others critique the ways in which philanthrocapitalism increasingly turn development and humanitarian issues into sites for capital accumulation (Burns, 2019b) through a "marketization of poverty," which curiously leads to neither the eradication of poverty nor a corporate fortune (Schwittay, 2011). What does philanthrocapitalism do then and for whom? Building on these discussions, this dissertation explores the power relations and the kinds of value imagined and produced when corporations engage in refugee aid as humanitarian actors.

1.2.2 The Technologization of Humanitarianism

The aid sector is undergoing a process of *datafication*, in which aid organizations are increasingly using big data to make operational decisions, monitor the impacts of their crisis response, predict future crises, and evaluate their efforts (Greenwood, 2020). Scholarship on humanitarian

innovation and technology (Jacobsen, 2015, 2017; Sandvik & Lohne, 2014) has analyzed how digital technologies are used by humanitarian organizations to aid refugees (Cheesman, 2020b; Pascucci, 2019; Read et al., 2016b; Roth & Luczak-Roesch, 2018). However, scholars have also documented how digital technologies are employed by governments and private sector actors to manage, control, and surveil migration flows (Bircan & Korkmaz, 2021; Lemberg-Pedersen & Haioty, 2020; Nedelcu & Soysüren, 2022; Seuferling & Leurs, 2021). As part of this development, tech companies become crucial actors in the humanitarian space as the producers of these digital technologies and as experts in analyzing big data. This development is conceptualized as the *technocratic turn* (Read et al., 2016a) or the *innovation turn* (Scott-Smith, 2016) in humanitarianism.

A recent stream of critical literature has focused on the effects of *data extraction* in humanitarian and development contexts, which continues colonialist legacies of labor exploitation and technological experimentation on migrants and the poor (Aradau, 2022; Cieslik & Margócsy, 2022; Fejerskov, 2022; Martin et al., 2023; Taylor & Broeders, 2015). Madianou examines this form of data experimentation, or *technocolonialism* in her terms, in refugee camps and argues that:

> Refugees, through their data practices and participation in humanitarian experiments, produce value which is extracted for the benefit of other stakeholders. Feedback datasets are used to justify the funding of aid projects; refugee camps are used as testing grounds for innovation and the scaling up of business models. Private companies extend their reach while appearing to provide market solutions for political problems. (Madianou, 2019a)

Similarly, Taylor and Meissner (2020) demonstrate how the particular "crisis" framing of migration that was deployed in Europe in 2015 enabled processes of datafication by creating a market demand for big data analysis of migration statistics.

However, this digital transformation of the aid sector extends beyond the use of digital technologies. It represents a new form of rationalization and problematization in humanitarianism, which Abdelnour and Saeed (2014) term the *technologization of humanitarian space*. This process refers to the infusion of engineering approaches into the aid sector, in which complex crises are construed as "manageable problems." Abdelnour and Saeed analyze the example of fuel-efficient stoves which were developed as solutions to rape in refugee camps in Kenya and Sudan, based on

the logic that the stoves would reduce the time women needed to leave their homes to collect firewood and thereby reduce their risk of being raped. This application of engineering solutions and the promotion of technical panaceas in humanitarian and migration crises has also been described as *technocratic solutionism* (Taylor & Broeders, 2015), "where developers first create technological systems and then look for problems to solve" (Taylor & Meissner, 2020, p. 272).

In the introduction to his 1995 edition of *Engines of Culture*, historian Daniel Fox defines technocratic solutionism as "a rejection of politics" through which "experts (…) insist that problems have technical solutions even if they are the result of conflicts about ideas, values, and interests" (Fox, 1995, p. 2). Later popularized by technology scholar Evgeny Morozov (2013), the term is now often used to critique the idea that social and political problems have technological fixes, emphasizing the promises of innovation and disruption for creating social change (Johnston, 2020). However, in the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe, the language of "tech solutions" entered the global media coverage in a way that differed from previous media work on refugees (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016, p. 20). Thus, this humanitarian crisis prompted a discourse of solutionism in a context where any language of technical solutions might not have made much sense previously (Taylor & Broeders, 2015, p. 236).

Critical scholars have described solutionism as a neoliberal capitalist logic (Madianou, 2019b) and a problem-solving approach rooted in Silicon Valley visions of fast and disruptive market responses to crises in contrast to slow state laws and regulations (Ferrari, 2020; Martin & Taylor, 2020; van Doorn, 2017). The "marketization of humanitarianism" (Madianou, 2019a; Richey, 2018) is believed to intensify the spread of solutionism in humanitarian aid: "The desire for efficiency and audit trails, often demanded by donors, finds the perfect match in the logic of solutionism which is often pushed by large technology companies that seek branding opportunities and visibility for their products" (Madianou, 2021, p. 862). The critique of solutionism in and beyond the aid sector focuses on three central and overlapping claims: 1) solutionism normalizes technological experimentation on vulnerable populations and stabilizes power inequalities (Madianou, 2019a); 2) solutionism constitutes subjects and problems in ways that fit with the proposed technical solutions (Sadowski & Bendor, 2019, p. 553; Taylor & Meissner, 2020, p. 283), for example by reframing "migration as a governable 'problem' amenable to techno-solutionist interventions" (Singler, 2021, p. 15); and 3) solutionism promotes a sociotechnical order in which solutions to global problems are found "outside the reach of democratic politics"

(Ferrari, 2020, p. 122). Solutionism thereby shrinks the space for collectively imagining alternatives to corporate solutions (Sadowski & Bendor, 2019).

However, scholars have also shown how solutionism emerges as an appealing problem-solving approach in the absence of clear paths of action to complex problems, such as rising economic inequality (Greene, 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic (Madianou, 2020; Morozov, 2020), and refugee governance (Singler, 2021). Adopting quick and simple technical solutions offers something tangible. Solutionism has the performative benefit of casting states and organizations as "taking action" and providing the people within these organizations a sense of "doing something." In this sense, solutionism emerges as a response to the complexity and tensions of global humanitarian crises.

This debate on solutionism and the technologization of humanitarian aid has become polarized between a tech-hype and a tech-doom perspective (Givoni, 2016, p. 1029). In response, scholars are calling for nuanced perspectives and empirical evidence to bring out the ambivalent ways in which humanitarianism is being transformed by digital technologies (Weitzberg et al., 2021). In this dissertation, I seek to provide such empirical nuance to the concept of solutionism to understand the complexity of why people engage in it and how it has supported the rise of tech companies as humanitarian actors.

1.2.3 Social Imaginaries of the Digital

In *The Promise of Access: Technology, Inequality and the Political Economy of Hope*, Daniel Greene examines the transformation of poverty into a problem of technology and the emergence of Internet access as a commonsense solution, which he terms "the access doctrine". The access doctrine declares that poverty can be solved by the provision of new technologies and technical skills, "giving those left out of the information economy the chance to catch up" (Greene, 2021, p. 5). Greene's ambition is not simply to disprove this imaginary of "a digital divide" but to understand how the logic is reproduced every day, "failing on its own terms, but surviving nonetheless" (Greene, 2021, p. 13). In doing so, he argues that by "spending time with the people and places that act on poverty with technology, we can begin to understand the attraction of this simple, powerful story – even for those who know reality is more complicated" (Greene, 2021, p. 5).

I build on this work as I engage with those who act on refugee crises with technology to understand how imaginaries about technology as humanitarian solutions are produced and reproduced even among people who are acutely aware of the complexity of the problem and the problematic aspects of the proposed solutions. Thus, this dissertation does not seek to portray this group of tech helpers as naïve or oblivious. Instead, I take their perspectives seriously to understand how the promises and imaginaries of digital technology continue to inspire and mobilize people and resources despite the tensions and growing disenchantment with Big Tech.

In doing this, the dissertation engages with scholarly debates about the imaginaries, hopes, and promises of technology. Although the articles in this dissertation do not use this framing explicitly, they address various imaginaries and ideals around technology, business, and humanitarianism. Moreover, all three articles speak to the idea that digital technologies are a product of, and produce, social imaginaries. The concept of *imaginaries* became particularly relevant to me analytically, as I realized that often what I was observing in the field was, in fact, the collective generating of ideas and imaginaries rather than the deployment of actual technologies.

In anthropological and social theory, imaginaries and the imagination have long been recognized as essential elements in the constitution and reproduction of social and political life. Inspired by Benedict Anderson's seminal work on imaginaries as constitutive of national and political communities (1983), Arjun Appadurai writes: "The image, the imagined, the imaginary – these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as a social practice. No longer mere fantasy (…) the imagination has become an organized field of social practices" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 31). Imaginaries gained popularity in anthropology as a concept for understanding collective assumptions and "shared mental life" at a time where previous and similar terms like "cultural beliefs" or "cultural meanings" fell out of favor for being too "redolent of Otherness, fixity, and homogeneity" (Strauss, 2006, p. 22).

Since then, however, the concept has been criticized for being analytically vague and overused in anthropological theory (Axel, 2003; Sneath et al., 2009; Stankiewicz, 2016). Various reviews outline how the concepts of imagination and imaginaries are used in anthropological scholarship, including imaginaries as fantasies, as cultural models, as images, as links between the individual and the social, and as horizons of possibility (Stankiewicz, 2016; Strauss, 2006). While the concept has become so widespread that a source is rarely cited by scholars using it, the definitions offered by Taylor (2002) often form the basis of anthropologists' understanding of imaginaries.

Taylor distinguishes between social imaginary and social theory to explain how imaginaries develop from theories, which are usually held by smaller and often elite groups of people, into "common understandings that make possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (Taylor, 2002, p. 23). Social imaginaries thus develop from social practices but also shape and legitimize practices as they convey a sense of "how things usually go (…) interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go" (Strauss, 2006, p. 330; Taylor, 2002, p. 23). This conceptualization of social imaginaries, however, has been critiqued for merely performing the role of "culture" in new clothes (Sneath et al., 2009, p. 5) and for defining imaginaries in too holistic and instrumental terms.

Within critical humanitarianism, imaginaries have commonly been understood as forms of "moral order" that guide collective modes of action to "shared problems" (Wilkinson, 2013, p. 263). Scholars of humanitarian communication particularly have critically analyzed the role of imaginaries in the visualizations and representations of suffering in humanitarian campaigns. For example, Calhoun (2004) argues that the widespread "emergency imaginary" that dominates humanitarian representations normalizes the view of global crises as unforeseen and unavoidable. Humanitarian crises are thereby depoliticized as "emergencies," which prompts a focus on the effective management of crisis rather than a political effort to scrutinize the role of global capitalism in the production of human suffering. Chouliaraki (2013) theorizes the production of "the humanitarian imaginary" through representations and spectacles of suffering and argues that this imaginary has shifted away from a theatrical mode of communication towards an ironic distance. Drawing on Ponte and Richey's (2014) conceptualization of new consumption-centered imaginaries of development, Budabin (2017) analyzes the commodification of humanitarian engagement through the construction of humanitarian imaginaries in "buy one give one" donation campaigns. In these usages, imaginaries are thus linked to representations (both material and symbolic) and the power relations that shape and legitimize these representations. In response to this critical work, scholars have argued that studies of humanitarian communication should consider the humanitarian social imaginary not only as a (flawed) moral guide to social action, but also as a form of provocation to "think about the conflicted moral terrain on which we are required to act" (Wilkinson, 2013, p. 273).

Science, technology and society (STS) scholarship has studied the role of imagination in the production of science and technology and in shaping and legitimizing practices and norms (Marcus, 1995). Analyses of *socio-technical imaginaries* capture how imaginaries of technology

and science are imbued with implicit understandings of the social world, the public good, and the role of science and technology in realizing it. Jasanoff and Kim define these as "collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology" (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015, p. 4). Similar to Taylor's definition, these imaginaries are at once descriptive and prescriptive: "in guiding the making of things and services to come, imaginations of the future are co-producing the very future they envision" (Mager & Katzenbach, 2020, p. 1).

While the concept of socio-technical imaginaries has mostly been used to analyze state-led imaginaries articulated in national policies and regulations (Sadowski & Bendor, 2019, p. 543), scholars are increasingly studying the societal influence of digital technologies and the companies that sell them by examining how the technologies produce and work in connection with imaginaries, speculation, and hype (Beltrán, 2018; Hansen & Souleles, 2023; Hockenhull & Cohn, 2021; Kværnø-Jones, 2022; Lehtiniemi & Ruckenstein, 2019; Mansell, 2012). Despite the anthropological critique of imaginaries as a concept, anthropologists have also recently studied digitalization as a collective imaginary, promoted at both national levels and by corporations, that invokes ideas of innovation, disruption, and rapid transformations driven by technology (Bruun & Krause-Jensen, 2022; Jensen & Lauritsen, 2005). Indeed, scholars have pointed to how "digital technologies seem to have turbo-charged our fantasies, fears, and hopes" (Bruun & Krause-Jensen, 2022, p. 492). This capacity of digital technologies to contain, generate, and mobilize various hopes and fears is a key source of technology's societal influence and has catapulted technology to the top of current political, cultural, and academic agendas (Hockenhull & Cohn, 2021).

In my use of the term imaginaries, I borrow from these diverse literatures to examine how collective and shared, but not singular or necessarily coherent, ideas about technology, business, and refugees can bring together a diverse set of actors in an effort to act on refugee crises with technology. Importantly, these ideas are often not yet realized in action or fully materialized, but they mobilize action and resources through imaginaries of Big Tech and digital technology as humanitarian solutions to the global refugee crisis.

1.3 Research Question and Contributions

To understand how profit-seeking tech companies became humanitarian partners in refugee crises, this thesis will engage with the following research question:

How are Big Tech companies engaging in humanitarian aid for refugees and how do their corporate humanitarian practices shape and legitimize the possibilities of Big Tech as humanitarian actors?

I address this question in three individual articles that focus on different empirical sites to illustrate the various forms of corporate humanitarian engagement of Big Tech in refugee crises. Overall, the dissertation contributes to a growing interdisciplinary body of literature that examines the changing role of businesses in humanitarianism, particularly focusing on the deployment of "tech fixes" in humanitarian and development contexts, such as Fintech and financial inclusion agendas (Bernards, 2022; Schwittay, 2011a), crypto currencies (Howson, 2023), ICTs (Schwittay, 2008), blockchain (Cheesman, 2017; Coppi & Fast, 2019), AI (Madianou, 2021), Big Data (Hosein & Nyst, 2013), and Internet connectivity schemes (Greene, 2021). These technological initiatives are all implemented as grand solutions to social ills with promises of alleviating poverty, enabling free access to information, facilitating fair distribution of resources, and strengthening democracy. However, as these studies reveal, such technological fixes are often embedded in and reproduce colonial, capitalist, and extractive power dynamics. My contribution is three-fold:

First, the dissertation makes an *empirical* contribution by offering an empirically grounded analysis of how solutionism is expressed and practiced in the field of humanitarianism and refugee aid. Importantly, my study contributes to understanding *who* is performing this solutionism. Because while it is important to include the perspectives of the people who are supposed to benefit from digital aid solutions, I argue that it is equally essential in critical research to examine the perspectives of the people we critique or those who represent the systems we critique. As argued by Archer and Souleles (2021), anthropologists' tendency to focus on the relatively powerless has led to conceptualizations of power as a homogenous, amorphous, and impersonal force with no indication of who is exercising this power and why. Similarly, critical accounts of solutionism often lack empirical perspectives from those who practice these beliefs. As a *New York Times* reviewer notes about Morozov's critical analysis of solutionism, "readers see programmers only through the eyes of an anthropologist, as if technical people belonged to some just-discovered

aboriginal tribe and cannot speak for themselves" (Ullman, 2013). This dissertation offers emic perspectives from the people who imagine and develop technological solutions to humanitarian problems to understand the culturally-specific logics that guide them in these efforts. In doing so, I show that while scholars have pointed to the overreliance on tech fixes among corporate CEOs and elite philanthropists of Silicon Valley (Callahan, 2017; Giridharadas, 2020; Johnston, 2020; McGoey, 2016; Morozov, 2013), corporate humanitarian solutionism occurs across a broader spectrum of actors.

Secondly, the dissertation makes a *methodological* contribution by providing an ethnographic study of the hot air of technological promises. While studies of humanitarian innovation, humanitarian technology, and digital humanitarianism have provided important insights into the increasing use of technologies such as blockchain, drones, and AI in humanitarian settings (Jacobsen, 2015; Sandvik & Lohne, 2014; Tazzioli, 2019), my dissertation examines a different layer of this development. Rather than focusing on specific technologies, I focus on those who imagine and design these technologies. A colleague described this layer to me as "the speculative bubble": where the big ideas are formed, imagined, and circulated. By exploring three sites where ideas about the role of Big Tech in humanitarianism are generated and shape social practice, this dissertation contributes to understanding *how* and *where* solutionism can be studied ethnographically. This ethnographic study, however, required methodological strategies for capturing a field that was fluffy and ephemeral. Based on this experience, I argue that while examining the hot air of solutionism requires careful ethnographic attention, embracing the *not knowing* is another crucial component of studying digital worlds and corporate humanitarian solutionism.

Finally, the dissertation makes a *theoretical* contribution by focusing on the concept of corporate humanitarian solutionism, which combines literatures usually considered in separation. Previous work on solutionism often assumes profit and market dominance as the primary motivations for corporations to promote their solutionist views and ideas (Madianou, 2019b). However, the range of people and actors, including nonprofit organizations and volunteer hackers, that engage in this solutionism suggests that other and more ambivalent motivations and forms of value are at play. To understand *why* different actors subscribe to the ideas of corporate humanitarian solutionism, and how they navigate the tensions in this field, I bring distinct literatures from critical refugee studies, humanitarianism, and digital capitalism studies into dialogue. In doing so, I examine how

solutionism is expressed in a particular context with its complex set of actors, practices, and politics.

1.4 Overview of Articles

Table 1: Articles

	Article	Authors	Journal and status	Methods and data sample	Theories and concepts
1	Google's Tech Philanthropy: Capitalism and Humanitarianism in the Digital Age	Co-authored with Lisa Ann Richey	Published in *Public Anthropologist* (2022)	Fieldwork at Google AI event; interviews with tech and humanitarian stakeholders; document and video analysis	Tech for Good; digital capitalism
2	Finding the "Sweet Spot": The Politics of Alignment in Cross-Sector Partnerships for Refugees	Single authored	Published in special issue of *Business & Society* (2023)	Fieldwork at the IRC; interviews with tech and humanitarian stakeholders	Cross-sector partnerships; interest alignment
3	Hacking the Refugee Crisis: Merging Refugee Aid and Digital Capitalism in Humanitarian Hacking	Single authored	Submitted to *Journal of Refugee Studies* (2023)	Participant observation at two hackathons	Imaginaries; humanitarian innovation; corporate humanitarianism

The dissertation consists of three individual articles published or aimed at journals in three distinct fields. Article one is published in an anthropological journal, article two is published in a management and business ethics journal, and article three has been submitted to a refugee studies journal. All three articles are qualitative empirical rather than conceptual or review articles and are based on data collected during my fieldwork. Article one, of which I am the first author, is co-authored with Lisa Ann Richey, while the other two are single authored. The three articles apply different analytical frameworks and literatures, and they analyze different actors or practices involved in corporate humanitarian solutionism. As such, the articles make individual arguments

and contribute to each of their theoretical fields (see Table 1). Article abstracts are presented below.

Article 1. *Google's Tech Philanthropy: Capitalism and Humanitarianism in the Digital Age*

Transnational tech companies have become important actors in global philanthropy. Led by tech giants such as Google, this tech philanthropy consists of donating funds to expert organizations and NGOs and, importantly, using the companies' expertise and products to create social impact. This philanthropy is celebrated as innovative and criticized as exploitative for its novel ways of combining capitalism with global helping. But in what way is tech philanthropy novel and to what extent does it continue the well-worn historical trajectory of humanitarianism and capitalism? In this paper, we analyze Google's philanthropic practices, focusing on the company's current attempt to link philanthropy to the big business of artificial intelligence (AI). Based on ethnographic data collected at the "Google AI Impact Challenge Summit" in San Francisco, and interviews with tech and humanitarian stakeholders, we highlight the entanglements of capitalism and humanitarianism in tech philanthropy.

Article 2. *Finding the "Sweet Spot": The Politics of Alignment in Cross-Sector Partnerships for Refugees*

Cross-sector partnerships (CSPs) between nonprofits and businesses are increasingly implemented in response to humanitarian crises. These partnerships are motivated by alignment ideals as stakeholders strive to find the "sweet spot" between humanitarian and business interests. However, this article shows that the ideals of alignment differ from the actual practices of alignment in the CSPs, and sweet spots are not merely found but constructed in, and through, changing relations of power. Based on an ethnographic case study of partnerships between a global humanitarian organization and five technology companies, the article deploys a theoretical lens from critical humanitarian studies to analyze how alignment in CSPs comes about in practice. This analysis demonstrates that in the construction of alignment, the companies' interests become the priorities to which humanitarian organizations must align their and their beneficiaries' needs. Consequently, while the discourse of sweet spots perpetuates an ideal of alignment where all partners benefit equally from the partnership, it legitimates power imbalances and asymmetrical alignment in practice.

Article 3. *Hacking the Refugee Crisis: Merging Refugee Aid and Digital Capitalism in Humanitarian Hacking*

The so-called European refugee crisis in 2015 prompted a rush of digital initiatives for refugees organized by NGOs, activists, and humanitarian agencies. Hackathons, which refer to multi-day events where volunteers compete in teams to design digital technology prototypes, quickly became popular for helping refugees. However, such initiatives have been criticized for not providing beneficial or sustainable solutions for refugees. Using ethnographic data collected at two "refugee hackathons" in Copenhagen, Denmark, this paper proposes to examine hackathons as sites for producing imaginaries around technology and refugees rather than producing actual technologies. The paper develops a theoretical framework of humanitarian innovation to analyze the imaginaries produced at the hackathons about refugees and the role of technology and businesses in helping them. These imaginaries place digital technology and businesses at the center of humanitarian action and reaffirm policy agendas emphasizing innovation, digital technology, and private-sector engagement in the humanitarian sector.

1.5 Structure of the Dissertation

The remainder of this dissertation is structured as follows.

Chapter 2: Empirical Context introduces the events and sites that form the empirical context for my analyses in this dissertation. First, I describe the convergence of Big Tech and aid in the "European refugee crisis" and relate these developments to the broader innovation turn in refugee aid. I then discuss the transition in corporate humanitarian engagements from the European refugee crisis to the "global refugee crisis" and reflect on my own and my interlocutors' use of this term. Finally, I present my three main empirical sites: the Tech for Good space and AI philanthropy event at Google, partnerships between the IRC and tech companies, and the volunteer refugee-themed hackathons organized by the NGO Techfugees.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework presents the main literatures that I draw on in analyzing the practices and ideas of corporate humanitarian solutionism. First, I discuss literature from critical refugee and border studies that analyze the political implications of the growing and changing intersections of migration, humanitarianism, borders, and technology. I also reflect on the role of hackathons in this development and link the emergence of humanitarian hackathons to the

humanitarian innovation policy agenda. Secondly, I discuss literature on the commodification of humanitarianism, which theorizes the ways in which the fields of humanitarianism and business are blending. I pay particular attention to a stream of critical literature within this scholarship that analyzes the power relations and political implications of partnerships between non-profit and for-profit actors in humanitarian and development aid. Lastly, I review literature on digital capitalism, in which scholars examine how digital technologies, big data, and algorithms increasingly define the practices and power hierarchies of global capitalism.

Chapter 4: Methodology outlines the methodological framework of this dissertation and the methods applied in the collection and analysis of data. First, I present the overall research design in which I draw on the concept of "assemblage ethnography" to study the hot air of corporate humanitarian solutionism. I also reflect on my positionality in the field, my relations to interlocutors, and ethical dilemmas throughout the project. Then I describe my fieldwork experiences before providing in-depth information about my data sample, consisting of interviews, observations, documents, and online communications. Finally, I describe my analytical process.

Chapter 5: Articles presents the three articles of this dissertation.

Chapter 6: Conclusions summarizes and discusses the findings of each of the articles and how they inform the overall framework on corporate humanitarian solutionism. Lastly, I reflect on directions for future research.

2. EMPIRICAL CONTEXT

The arrival of an unprecedented number of migrants and refugees on the shores of Europe in 2015 quickly became known as "the European refugee crisis," a name that has been, and should be, critiqued; see, for example, migration scholars Koen Leurs and Kevin Smets:

> The "European refugee crisis" is a problematic term given to a period beginning in 2015 when an estimated number of 1,000,573 asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Eritrea arrived in the European Union (…) This is not a crisis which belongs to Europe. It is a crisis experienced by those who are forced to flee their homes, a traumatic experience which is aggravated by being met with hostility and aversion after making a dangerous journey and when trying to claim asylum, a universal human right. The mass movement of forced migrants was only discursively constructed as a crisis when refugees entered Europe, although proportionally much more substantial groups of, for example, Syrian refugees were already living in Lebanon, Turkey, and Egypt, sometimes for years. Many stated one million newcomers in 2015 would be 'too many' for Europe to handle, but it is important to consider this number adds up to less than 0.5 per cent of the EU population. (Koen Leurs & Smets, 2018, p. 4)

As suggested by these authors, the European refugee crisis was both an actual crisis for the people fleeing and migrating and a particular problematization of mobility and displacement, in which Europe is portrayed as a victim that must be protected from the threat of migrants. This crisis narrative has supported and legitimized the development of increasingly restrictive migration policies (Bamberg, 2019, p. 12), as well as humanitarian responses (De Lauri, 2019; Pallister-Wilkins, 2020). The narrative is part of a "border spectacle" that far precedes the 2015 refugee crisis, in which colonialist and racial practices and politics of exclusion are reenacted through the illegalization of migrants (De Genova, 2013, 2018).

When I use the term crisis in this dissertation, I am conscientious about the risks of reproducing this spectacle. At the same time, the framing of the 2015 migration events as a crisis provides an important context for understanding how and why a vast humanitarian response emerged and connected the different actors I study in this dissertation. Although my own views align with critiques of the terms "migration crisis" and "refugee crisis," I agree with migration scholar Rozakou (2019) who emphasizes the usefulness of examining the crisis as a rupture "particularly

if our research participants (border crossers, police officers, civil servants, locals, solidarians and humanitarian workers) experience it as such" (Rozakou, 2019, p. 70).

2.1 The Convergence of Big Tech and Aid in the Refugee Crisis

In a broad sense, technologies and innovation have always been part of humanitarian responses to crises (Collier et al., 2017; Sandvik, 2017; Scott-Smith, 2023). When the 2015 refugee crisis emerged, digital technologies had already begun transforming the humanitarian sector through, for example digital crisis-mapping (Meier, 2011). The 2010 Haiti earthquake is often referenced as "the game changer in the chronicles of humanitarian technology" (Sandvik et al., 2014, p. 2). However, the 2015 refugee crisis highlighted a new and more active role for technology companies in humanitarian aid.

Various political and humanitarian actors were calling on the private sector to "step up," take responsibility, and turn the refugee crisis from a problem into an opportunity by viewing refugees as potential employees (World Economic Forum, 2015). Humanitarian organizations launched pledges and ethical frameworks to further encourage the development of private sector partnerships and solutions to the refugee crisis (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2018; UN Global Compact, 2015). Private sector stakeholders called for a move beyond traditional CSR and philanthropic responses and argued that in order to have sustainable impact, business support for refugees must be incorporated into core business processes (Dyssegaard Kallick & Roldan, 2018; ICC, 2019).

The role of businesses in the refugee crisis was not merely to support financially. Rather, they were expected to provide logistic and management expertise to governments and NGOs, hire and train refugees, and develop innovative market-based solutions to "mitigate the negative effects of the migrant crisis" (PwC Global Crisis Centre, 2017, p. 18). In 2016, then US President Obama issued a call for action for the private sector to make measurable and significant commitments to helping refugees (The White House, 2016b). Out of the 51 companies that responded with pledges to help, 23 were from the tech sector (The White House, 2016a). Furthermore, in 2018, the World Refugee & Migration Council hosted a workshop in California on The Role of Technology in Addressing the Global Migration Crisis. The workshop aimed to "canvass the views of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, technology experts and civil society" for how to solve the migration crisis

(World Refugee & Migration Council, 2018). Thus, forced displacement had come to be perceived as a problem suitable for innovation and technological solutions.

2.1.1 The Innovation Turn in Refugee Aid

The growth of *digital humanitarianism* (Aradau et al., 2019; Duffield, 2016; Rothe et al., 2020) must be understood as part of a broader movement, in which innovation has become a key term and policy theme in the humanitarian sector. A deep concern with change and escaping status quo has flooded the sector and strengthened the belief that humanitarian organizations need to constantly innovate in order to be fit for contemporary challenges. This innovation turn (Scott-Smith, 2016) involves two concurrent and overlapping developments in humanitarianism: 1) the increasing use of digital technologies and data practices, and 2) the expansion of private sector actors, logics, and practices. Both of these developments are founded on promises of increased efficiency, accuracy, and accountability in aid delivery. In a recent report from the UN Office for the Coordination for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), named "From Digital Promise to Frontline Practice", technologies such as mobile applications, chatbots, biometrics, and digital cash are said to "lead to better access to information, assistance, and livelihoods, and facilitate stronger, more relevant needs analysis, a more prioritized and people-centered response, and more meaningful and systematic monitoring" (Strohmeyer et al., 2021). Behind these promises lies the idea that digital technology has a liberating force:

> They free people from suffering while also emancipating the aid industry from top-down bureaucracy. Examples abound. Big data promises a quick and comprehensive mapping of the physical and social world. Drones allow the smooth transportation of objects over difficult terrain (…) These products are all designed to free individuals from cumbersome systems and channel market innovation toward the more efficient delivery of basic needs. (Scott-Smith, 2023, p. 238)

The international refugee regime, or what has controversially been deemed "the broken refugee system" (Betts & Collier, 2017), has become a main reference to illustrate the failure of contemporary humanitarianism and its need for innovation (Müller & Sou, 2020, p. 2). The 2015 crisis in the Mediterranean exposed the limitations of the international refugee regime in managing and protecting the large flows of asylum seekers, but these limitations reflect a longer history of refugee policies that have struggled to deal with the increase in protracted displacement.

Since 1950, the UNHCR has been a key organization in the refugee regime, enacting the principles, norms, rules, and policies upon which international refugee protection and governance is based. Originally, the UNHCR was established on a three-year mandate to "coordinate international efforts to protect refugee rights and well-being and find solutions to refugee situations" (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2015). This mandate was extended in 2003 "until the refugee problem is solved" (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2015). Throughout the past four decades, however, this refugee regime has come under pressure due to a continuously declining willingness of states to provide asylum to refugees (Crisp, 2003).

As a result of this pressure, a new asylum paradigm emerged within the refugee regime that shifted focus from the protection of refugees to deterrence policies aimed at minimizing the number of admitted refugees and asylum seekers (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2014). In the years after 2015, such deterrence policies have come to dominate the international and national responses to asylum seekers, despite facing increasing criticisms for violating international law (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Tan, 2017). The emergence of this deterrence paradigm has also been visible in the proliferation of humanitarian policies focusing on refugee entrepreneurship (Rosamond & Gregoratti, 2020; L. Turner, 2019) and building "self-reliance" and "resilience" among refugees (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018; Hilhorst, 2018; U. Krause & Schmidt, 2020; Skran & Easton-Calabria, 2020) to keep them in their home countries and decrease their dependency on traditional aid (Pascucci, 2019; Ramsay, 2020).

Against this backdrop, the innovation agenda has been particularly visible in the context of refugee governance and protection. While the literature on migration industries has documented a long history of private sector involvement in various forms of migration management, facilitation, and rescue (Cranston et al., 2018; Nyberg Sørensen & Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2013), partnerships with private sector actors have been heavily promoted in recent years as ways to "fix" and mitigate the limitations of the current refugee regime, by offering "creative and sustainable alternatives to state-led humanitarian dependency" (Betts et al., 2012, p. 3).

This innovation agenda "represents an ideological departure from long-held humanitarian principles" (Müller & Sou, 2020, p. 1), which are replaced with a *humanitarian neophilia* approach to aid that "combines an optimistic faith in the possibilities of technology with a commitment to the expansion of markets" (Scott-Smith, 2016, p. 2230). Establishing partnerships between NGOs and private sector actors is often presented as an innovative approach in itself, but

humanitarian innovation also incorporates a particular private sector language (e.g., aid recipients are increasingly referred to as "clients") and logic in which the market is assumed to be the main driver of innovation and social good (Sandvik, 2017). Humanitarian innovation is thus more than the development of humanitarian technologies or the rise of new private sector actors in humanitarian action but a policy area promoting a distinct humanitarian ideology.

2.1.2 From the European Refugee Crisis to the Global Refugee Crisis

When I began this Ph.D. project in 2019, the European Commission had declared the European migration crisis over (Bamberg, 2019). Nevertheless, corporate engagement with the issue of migration and refugees continued. In September 2019, I traveled to New York City to participate in a global summit organized by the Tent Partnership for Refugees. This non-profit organization, with more than 300 businesses as members, was started in 2016 by Chobani founder Hamdi Ulukaya to mobilize the business community to "improve the lives and livelihoods of refugees" (The Tent Partnership for Refugees, 2023). With the crisis in Europe declared over, the 2019 Tent summit focused instead on refugees in and from Latin America. In the following years, the organization hosted events focusing on refugee women, refugee entrepreneurs, and LGBTQ refugee communities.

In a livestreamed panel conversation in 2021 titled "Stepping up for the Global Refugee Crisis," the Tent founder joined actress and UNHCR Special Envoy Angelina Jolie to talk about how businesses can help address the refugee crisis (McCain Institute, 2021). Drawing on her experience with the UNHCR, Jolie noted that while the number of refugees worldwide had doubled over the past decade, displacement remains an underfunded humanitarian issue. In this and other contexts the term "global refugee crisis" is used to describe the current mass displacement of more than 100 million people, (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2022) resulting from geographically dispersed conflicts such as civil wars in Syria and South Sudan, economic collapse in Venezuela, and the violent persecution of Rohingya in Myanmar (UNHCR, 2020, p. 6). The term also refers to the aforementioned crisis of institutionalized refugee governance, in which the growing numbers of refugees are met with a concurrent decline in states' willingness to provide asylum and humanitarian assistance to refugees (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Tan, 2017, p. 29).

Throughout my Ph.D., new regional refugee crises emerged, for example in Afghanistan and Ukraine. These developments created a context of overlapping crises that together formed a sense

of permanent global refugee crisis. When speaking to interlocutors in the field, the "global refugee crisis" was used as a general and generic way to describe the global problem of displacement. When I refer to the global refugee crisis in this dissertation, I use it as an emic term that influenced how my interlocutors engaged with each other and thought about their own actions. I also use the term to describe a global discourse on refugees and displacement that shapes a continuous transnational and decontextualized form of helping, which grew out of the corporate humanitarian response to the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe. Drawing on Schwittay (2011a), global in this sense refers not only to a geographic condition, but to the "distinctive capacity for decontextualization and recontextualization, abstractability and movement, across diverse social and cultural situations and spheres of life" (Ong and Collier, 2005, p. 11; cited in Schwittay, 2011a, p. 383). The crisis narrative of 2015 thus grew into a social imaginary: "a discursive order that encompasses the totality of public representations within which we are collectively invited to imagine what migration means for 'us' as western publics" (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2022, p. 11). It is in this global and discursive, rather than locally specific, context that I situate my study.

2.2 Field Sites

The three articles explore three different sites: a Tech for Good event, partnerships between tech companies and refugee aid agencies, and volunteer hackathons. In this section, I provide some background to each of these contexts.

2.2.1 Tech for Good and Google.org

The term *Tech for Good* is sometimes used to describe a movement among IT programmers to use their coding skills to solve social problems (Roberson, 2018), but is also used as a stand-in term for social enterprises in the tech sector (Hull & Berry, 2016) and in global summits focusing on mitigating the risks and harms of technology (Dillet, 2018). It is connected to other equally elusive terms such as *Tech for Social Impact* (Buluswar, 2020), *ICT4D* (Information and Communication Technologies for Development) (Heeks, 2007) and *AI for Social Good* (Madianou, 2021). In the context of my fieldwork, Tech for Good and the related term Tech for Social Impact refer to a discourse and movement around using the unique skills and resources of tech companies to transform and improve the delivery of humanitarian aid.

This discourse unfolds both online through social media, blog posts, and virtual events, and also offline as physical events and corporate social impact programs. Thus, I chose to focus on the Tech for Good space as a site to observe how the particular Silicon Valley tech sector imaginaries of helping are put into practice. In my fieldwork, I engaged with the Tech for Good space through events (physical and virtual), social media, YouTube videos, and company reports. I also interviewed social impact teams at six tech companies and representatives from the consortia NetHope, which is a network of almost 60 non-profit organizations focusing on providing development and humanitarian aid through digital technology.

In 2020, I attended NetHopes online global summit, where humanitarian NGOs and tech companies gathered to discuss how to implement digital technologies in humanitarian aid. Speakers from companies like Microsoft, Cisco, and Salesforce presented their social impact visions and projects. The global summit is described by NetHope as a place where "solutions are developed and strategic partnerships are created." The organization encourages us to "engage with leading humanitarian nonprofits, prominent technology companies, government officials, social impact leaders, and philanthropists on the latest issues facing our sectors today while envisioning the impact we can have together" (Nethope, 2023). While a key theme of the summit is "Digital Inclusion: Furthering justice, equity, and opportunity," registration fees for NGO, university, or government staff are more than $1,000 and even more for corporate representatives.

The Tech for Good movement has also expanded into a coherent business model for tech companies. In an interview I conducted in March 2020 with a manager at Microsoft Philanthropies we talked about how the field of Tech for Good (which Microsoft terms Tech for Social Impact) had changed in recent years. He explained:

> It's been shifting over the past couple of years. If we look at the Syrian refugee crisis, years ago when it first started, we didn't have Tech for Social Impact (…) one of the areas that we supported our nonprofit partners was large software grants. But there was no additional support behind it (…) we didn't really go much deeper beyond that. But today if we look at the Tech for Social Impact model, there's this full 360 piece that's brought to bear. So, there are now tech experts and architects and people that can actually work with the nonprofits to design out appropriate technology solutions internally and help them transform to be more secure, more stable, more kind of forward thinking in their tech. So even for us it has shifted over time as we look at how Tech for Social Impact has scaled over the past couple of years.

In this quote, the manager points to an escalation of the Tech for Good practices at Microsoft, which mirrors the movement in the tech industry at large. In this development, corporations shifted from being donors to partners of humanitarian agencies. They transitioned from primarily giving grants to actively designing aid solutions as part of their philanthropic engagements (Burns, 2019a).

Through Tech for Good, corporations take a more active role in humanitarian aid than previously, going beyond traditional CSR attempts to "do better" (Kirsch, 2016, p. 58). Rather, Tech for Good is a form of philanthrocapitalism where tech companies aim to "do good" in humanitarian crises through their products, expertise, and for-profit business operations. Compared to other private sector actors in humanitarian aid, tech companies are perceived by nonprofits to be very "active partners" who "like to see their technology utilized in addition to their funds and very often lead with their tech" (Culbertson et al., 2019, p. 14). On the other hand, tech companies working in this space often stress that "if we are going to work together, it's not just our money (…) but it's our expertise, our voice" (Culbertson *et al.*, 2019, p. 14).

Central to the Tech for Good movement is the absence of government involvement. This absence is not coincidental. Rather, it reflects a pervasive representation of corporations as separate from, and even in opposition to, governments. Historically, business corporations were not perceived to be in opposition to government and before the nineteenth century they were not viewed as private (Ciepley, 2013, p. 139). The idea of corporations as distinctly non-governmental is particularly prevalent in Tech for Good and in the Silicon Valley tech industry and has evolved from what Barbrook and Cameron (1996) termed the "Californian ideology". A key component of this ideology is the belief that "big government should stay off the backs of resourceful entrepreneurs who are the only people cool and courageous enough to take risks" (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996). This ideology thus deliberately erases the role of government in the narrative of success of the tech industry (Burrell & Fourcade, 2021, p. 214; Ferrari, 2020, p. 122).

In this dissertation, I pay particular attention to the Tech for Good activities of Google.org, the charitable arm of tech giant Google. Google.org was founded in 2005 by Larry Page and Sergey Brin as an experiment in how to do "for-profit philanthropy" (Rana, 2008). By establishing Google.org as a hybrid fund within the company, the Google founders diverged from the more common corporate philanthropic foundations, which were founded as non-profit entities separately from the firms. The hybrid format allowed Google.org to lobby, develop products, hire

consultants, and invest in for-profit companies and channel the profits back into Google.org. The organization is not obliged to disclose spending publicly and is not limited to supporting certain charitable causes as nonprofits usually are, which means that Google.org can decide more freely which causes count as "doing good."

In February 2020, I attended Google.org's AI Impact Challenge Summit in Redwood, California. At the event, representatives from nonprofits and tech startup companies gathered to build networks and learn about the winners of the Impact Challenge. These winners included 20 nonprofit projects that had successfully applied Google's AI tools "for social good." I was invited to the event by my interlocutors from the IRC, who were there hoping to connect with tech companies and startups to partner with. Daniel, a partnership officer at the IRC specializing in tech sector partnerships, had spent more than two hours in the California morning traffic from Oakland to Redwood City to attend the summit. He told me during lunch that he was there to find inspiration for new collaborations and to stay updated on technological developments in the Tech for Good field but, most importantly, to represent the IRC and make sure it was visible in this space. As such, the event was an interesting case for studying the interactions and networks created through and around corporate humanitarian solutionism. In addition, the event provided insights into a particular elite level of tech helpers and how this group imagined and articulated corporate technology as solutions to humanitarian crises.

Picture 2: The stage at the Google AI Impact Challenge, where a keynote speaker presented Google's visions for using "AI for Social Good." Photo taken by author, February 2020.

2.2.2 Cross-Sector Partnerships and the International Rescue Committee

As a second field site for studying how tech companies engage in the refugee crisis, I focused on partnerships between refugee aid organizations and tech companies. In business and management circles, such partnerships are often termed public-private partnerships (Stadtler, 2016), business-NGO partnerships (Pedersen & Pedersen, 2013), or cross-sector partnerships (Selsky & Parker, 2005). In this dissertation, I use the term cross-sector partnerships (CSPs).

CSPs are increasingly implemented in response to humanitarian crises as part of a growing corporate engagement in humanitarian action (Hotho & Girschik, 2019). For businesses, the motivations for engaging in CSPs can include reputational benefits such as good publicity and increased employee satisfaction or the opportunity to build relationships with governments, local communities, and international organizations (Pedersen & Pedersen, 2013). For tech companies specifically, engaging in humanitarian action has been a way to test and experiment with new technologies, attract consumers in "untapped markets," and offset negative publicity (Cinnamon, 2020; A. M. Fejerskov, 2017; Schwittay, 2008). From the NGO perspective, CSPs can be a way to acquire funding, goods, and operational expertise that will improve efficiency in aid delivery (Nurmala et al., 2017; Thomas & Fritz, 2006). NGOs often seek out partnerships with tech companies specifically due to a perceived need for innovation and digital technologies in humanitarian assistance (Bryant, 2022; Culbertson et al., 2019).

I chose to focus on the CSPs of one humanitarian agency in particular, the IRC. This organization is one of the largest humanitarian aid organizations specializing in refugee relief and operates on an $1 billion budget annually. In recent years, the organization has developed a reputation in the aid sector of being particularly open to corporate partnerships and ambitious about the implementation of digital technology and data-based tools in their humanitarian operations. Thus, as both a state-funded refugee resettlement agency and non-governmental emergency relief organization with strong links to the spheres of government, business, and humanitarianism, the IRC aptly illustrates the contemporary linking of humanitarian aid, migration politics, and capitalism.

The IRC was founded in 1933 as a US branch of the European organization International Relief Association, to provide relief to refugees from Germany. In the US today, the IRC primarily works with refugee resettlement as one of nine official resettlement agencies appointed by the US government (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2012). Outside of the US, the IRC focuses on

emergency relief for refugees and operates in more than 40 countries. Overall, the organization manages aid programs focusing on health, gender-based violence, emergency response, education, refugee advocacy, livelihood strategies, and economic recovery. In recent decades, the IRC has been part of the EU's coordinated resettlement programs and is also a certified humanitarian partner of The European Commission's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO), which means that the IRC is eligible for EU funding for the implementation of humanitarian aid actions (European Commission, 2021). The IRC, currently the second-biggest implementation partner of DG ECHO (International Rescue Committee, 2021), has become a key actor in European migration management as EU resettlement and asylum frameworks are increasingly linked to migration management efforts (Bamberg, 2018).

Most of IRC's funding comes from EU and UN agencies as well as US government agencies. About 30 percent of their funding comes from foundations, individual donors, and corporations (International Rescue Committee, 2020). David Miliband, the chief executive of the IRC since 2013, formerly worked as advisor to the United Kingdom's Prime Minister Tony Blair before joining Parliament and serving as foreign secretary under Prime Minister Gordon Brown for the Labour Party. From these positions, Miliband brings to the IRC a political philosophy that enthusiastically embraces the role of the private sector in solving social, environmental, and humanitarian challenges. In an interview with *Fast Company*, Miliband explains that he has pushed his staff to pull in more private funds, because government grants are too restricted: "The private money has greater leverage. It is our venture fund" (Shaer, 2016). The IRC has a long history of engaging with private sector companies, and this engagement has traditionally consisted of philanthropic donations and fundraising campaigns. For example, according to the senior director of global corporate partnerships, the IRC has partnered with Johnson & Johnson for more than 20 years and with Google since 2012. However, as part of its financial strategy, the organization is prioritizing partnerships where businesses assume a more active role in the design of aid solutions.

On my first day of fieldwork at the IRC headquarters in New York City, I had a long meeting with Julie and Natalie, two IRC employees who worked with private sector partnerships from two different departments in the organization. In the meeting, the two women described their work and introduced me to the overall strategy of IRC for partnering with businesses. Natalie began drawing on a white board to visualize the three main ways businesses contribute to the IRC: 1) by

donating resources, including in-kind donations, expertise and funding; 2) by using their brand to influence other businesses to donate to the IRC or become partners; and 3) by developing market-based solutions, which can include the development of new products for the IRC or their beneficiaries, adjusting existing products to fit the needs of refugees or engage in partnerships with the IRC to unlock funding that requires private sector partnerships. Market-based solutions can also include job placement or skill development programs or initiatives to include refugees in the value chains of businesses. The three forms of contributions often overlap, and partnerships can include elements of all three.
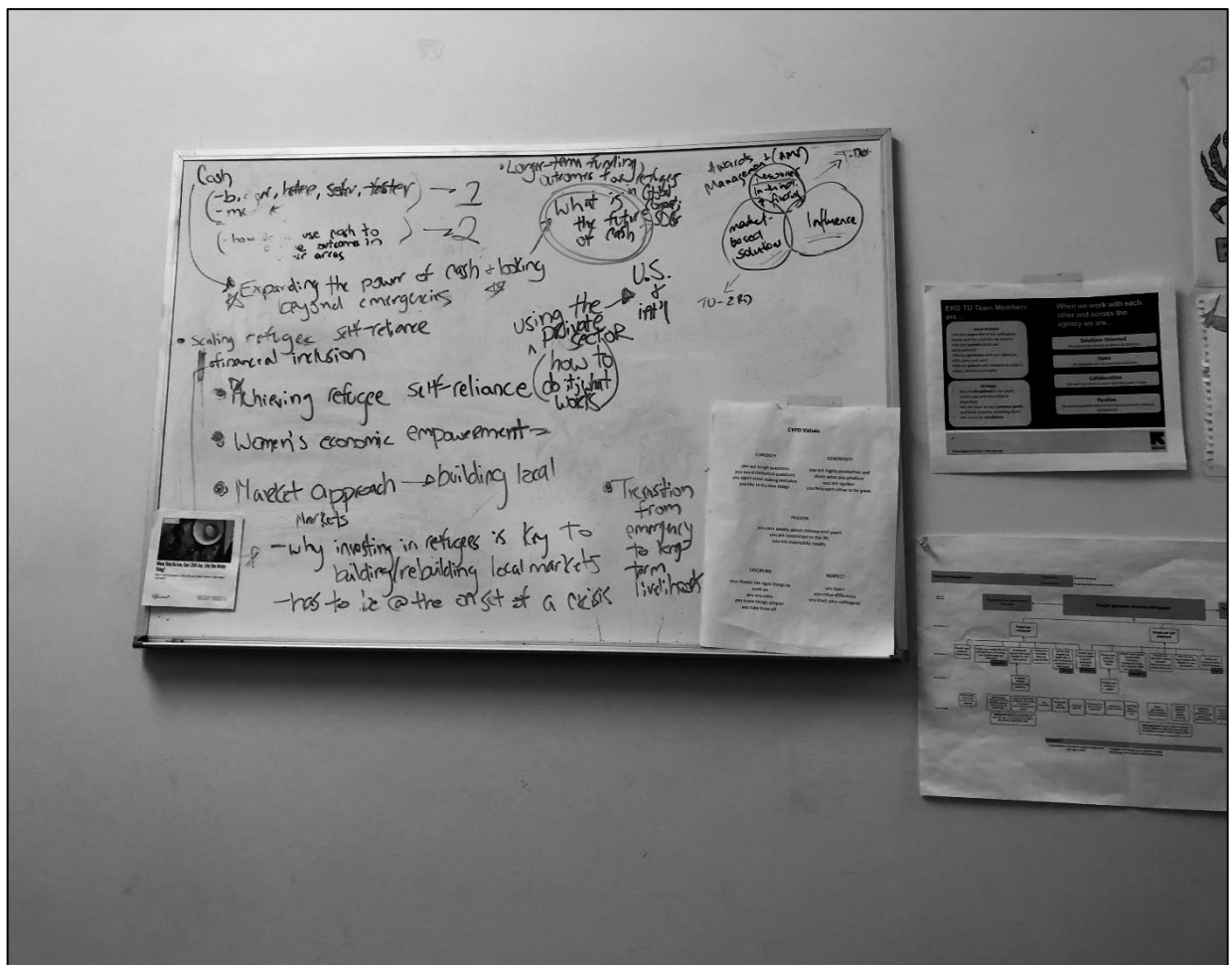
Picture 3: The white board Natalie used to explain how the IRC partnered with tech companies, during my first week of fieldwork at the IRC headquarters in New York. Photo taken by author, January 2020.

In management literature, CSPs are often divided into philanthropic or integrative partnerships (Thomas & Fritz, 2006). In my fieldwork, these terms corresponded to what informants called philanthropic and operational partnerships. Philanthropic partnerships are characterized by a low level of corporate engagement primarily focused on cash donations and provisions of goods, whereas operational partnerships are characterized by a high level of corporate engagement focused on utilizing core business competencies.

Operational partnerships are more strategic and long-term than philanthropic partnerships and often combine several elements such as donations, grants, advocacy work, and business expertise, but they can also include product development and sale. For example, Microsoft engages in so-called "360 partnerships" with a select group of humanitarian organizations. Through these partnerships, Microsoft makes donations, provides business expertise, and engages in advocacy campaigns. It also offers customized software solutions at discounted prices and collaborates on product development. The product development can focus on technologies to support the work of the NGO internally (e.g., software solutions for NGO staff) or technologies for a humanitarian program area (e.g., developing cash transfer technologies for refugees).

Philanthropic partnerships generally focus on indirect engagements understood as contributions that aim to improve the capacity of other humanitarian actors to deliver aid (Hotho & Girschik, 2019). Google, for example, donated more than $20 million to non-profits providing aid to refugees between 2015 and 2017 (Maganza, 2017). In operational partnerships, on the other hand, corporate engagements can be more direct and include the development of technologies with more immediate benefits for refugees. Mastercard, for example, collaborated with the humanitarian organization Mercy Corps to develop and distribute prepaid debit cards for refugees in Europe (Grimes, 2016).

CSPs with businesses are becoming increasingly important for the IRC, not least because of the political climate around refugees in the US and globally. As a resettlement agency in the US, the amount of public funding the IRC receives is based on the actual numbers of refugees and migrants arriving in the country. When fewer refugees are granted asylum, the funding decreases. Private sector funding is therefore needed to close the funding gap, as Julie explained it. Yet while the IRC has prioritized private sector partnerships in recent years, the organization still relies mainly on government and public funding. According to Julie, this means that the organizational

structures and workflows are still set up to accommodate public funding infrastructures, and employees are still hesitant of seeking funding in the private sector.

This hesitation is rooted in several concerns. First, partnering with businesses creates more work for employees. The application procedures for private sector funding are new and unfamiliar, whereas employees have all the experience and contacts needed for public funding procedures. Shifting to private sector funding requires new networks, new workflows, and new mindsets. For this reason, Natalie added, private sector partnerships are generally more popular at headquarter levels than in local country offices. Second, some IRC employees have moral concerns about partnering with profit-driven businesses and tech companies in particular, because they are skeptical of their motives and wary of their potential negative impact on the IRC's credibility to the public. Third, Julie called tech companies "a big investment" because "it takes time and education to make them good partners" (I return to this issue in article two).

Despite this internal resistance, the IRC has developed a broad portfolio of tech partnerships with companies such as Google, Microsoft, Facebook, Accenture, AirBnB, MasterCard, Salesforce, Twilio, Intel, and more. According to Julie and Natalie, the tech sector is a major priority in the IRC's private sector engagement strategy, because of its highly skilled employees and vast resources. Julie emphasized that the tech sector is filled with young people with an entrepreneurial and "do good" approach to doing business, which makes it easier to find common ground on humanitarian issues. In addition, partnering with the tech sector opens possibilities for further digitalizing the IRC. Julie called this "a digital transformation" of the IRC, a process they are only just beginning. In some local field offices, employees are still using paper and pens, Natalie explained, and therefore a lot of potential in making their work more efficient. For these reasons, the tech sector is a priority for the IRC even though the partnerships will require a "culture shift" in the organization and a lot of effort to adapt to using new technologies. From conversations with other stakeholders in the field, I learned that the IRC is known in the NGO sector to be technologically and digitally ambitious with a goal of becoming the "gold standard for the nonprofit sector of having data driven decisions". [2]

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[2] Interview with employee at Microsoft Philanthropies, Mar. 2, 2020
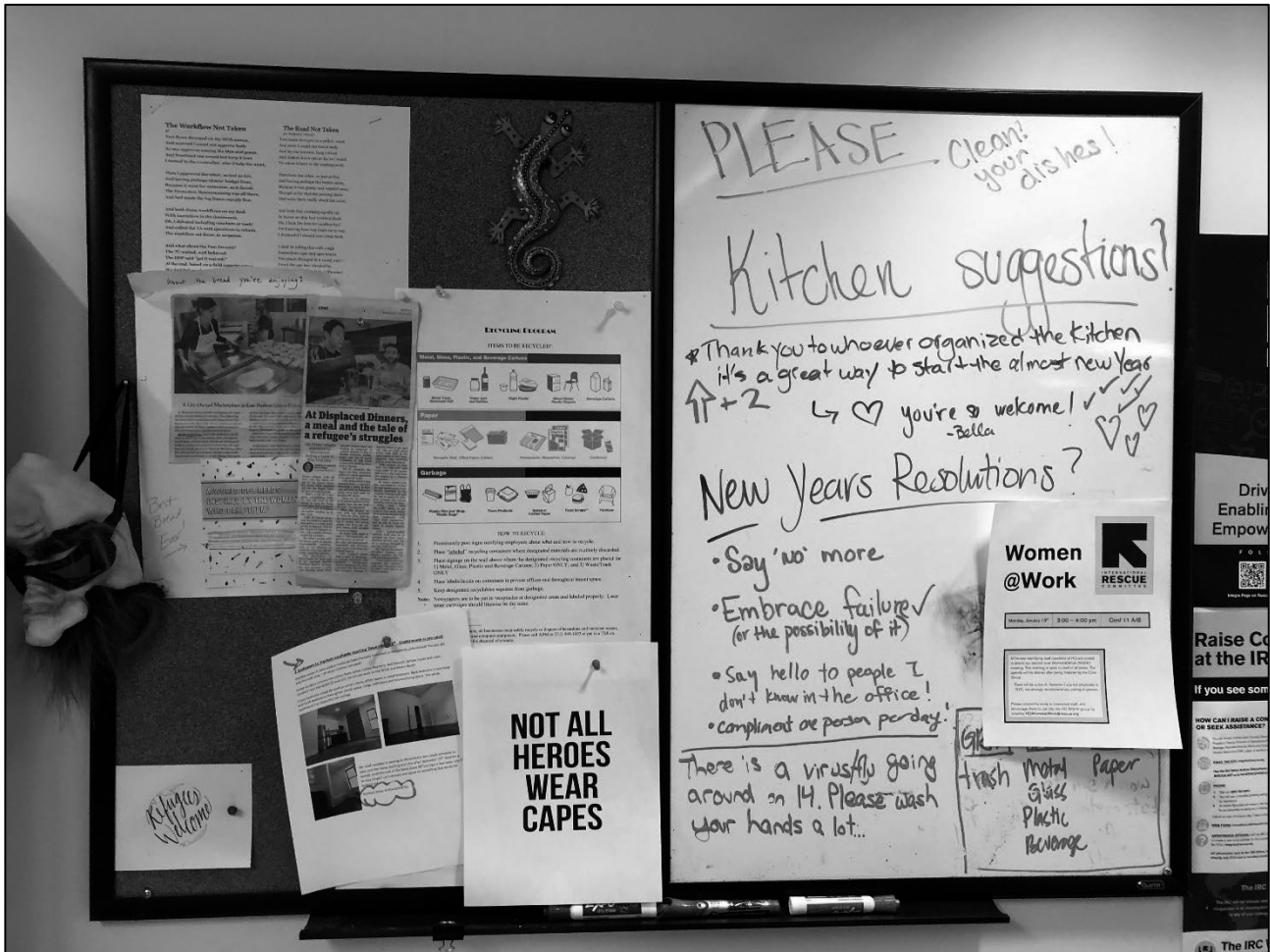
Picture 4 (top): The bulletin board of the IRC headquarter office with inspirational quotes, new years resolutions and early warnings of a contagious flu spreading. Photo taken by author, January 2020.

Picture 5 (left): The office cubicles at the IRC, where I interviewed staff members. Photo taken by author, January 2020.

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2.2.3 Hackathons and Techfugees

Hackathons are multi-day events in which volunteers compete in teams to design software prototypes that solve problems defined by the event organizers. Over the past decade, they have become increasingly popular formats for volunteer engagement and collective problem-solving in the humanitarian sector. I did fieldwork at two refugee-themed hackathons organized by the nonprofit organization Techfugees. This organization was founded in 2015 in response to a Facebook post from the tech journalist Mike Butcher, who is also the editor of the online magazine *TechCrunch*, which reports on technology, startup business, venture capital, and Silicon Valley. The call from Mike Butcher came in response to the tragic image of the lifeless child, Aylan Kurdi, on a Turkish beach, which stirred global outrage and compassion and became a symbol of "deservingness" in the Syrian refugee crisis (Adler-Nissen et al., 2020; Holmes & Castañeda, 2016). In the Facebook post, Butcher writes:

> READ BEFORE POSTING: This group is a tech community response to the European refugee crisis, involving a network of concerned individuals and organizations (…) Please post projects, products, hackathons, events, etc. relevant to the topic. Try not to use it as a platform for opinion, but more SOLUTIONS. (cited on the website of Techfugees, see Techfugees, 2023).

The explicit call for *solutions* rather than *opinions,* signifies the group's orientation towards problem-solving. Members connected via a Facebook group and a few days later the first Techfugees conference and hackathon was held in London.

Since then, the organization has expanded rapidly. By 2023, Techfugees operates in eight locations (Germany, Canada, France, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Australia, and Lebanon), but in 2020 the organization had 14 active "chapters," including in Turkey, Ireland, Serbia, Thailand, the UK, and Denmark. Over time, the mission of Techfugees has transformed from an emergency response to a specific crisis to a long-term effort to "enhance resilience and preparedness" by "building scalable, ethical and sustainable tools" to tackle "one of the biggest challenges of our century". On the website, the organization proclaims that the forced displacement of millions of people should no longer be viewed as a temporary crisis, but as a new reality (Techfugees, 2023). Thus, the Techfugees organization illustrates the transition from the European refugee crisis to the global refugee crisis as a more permanent state of crisis.

In choosing the Techfugees hackathons as field sites, I drew on Pascucci's (2019) notion of humanitarian hackathons as "the space where a new technological frontier of global humanitarianism materializes into an event" (Pascucci, 2019, p. 580). As such, hackathons are central to the practices and imaginaries that I analyze in this dissertation as corporate humanitarian solutionism, because they exemplify the urge to act on refugee crises with technology. Importantly, these hackathons illustrate a different end of the spectrum of corporate humanitarian solutionism than the Tech for Good event at Google. At the hackathons, volunteers engaged in the same solutionist practices as tech companies but from very different positions.

Picture 6: Hackathon participants brainstorming digital solutions to the refugee crisis at Techfugees hackathon in Copenhagen. Photo taken by author, March 2020.

Furthermore, the hackathons became spaces to observe activities and interactions that usually take place in people's individual homes behind their computer screens. As field sites, hackathons have been theorized as "microcosms" (Jones et al., 2015, p. 341), "microworlds" (Irani, 2015, p. 814), and "privileged observational sites" (Cruz & Thornham, 2016). As noted by Cruz and Thornham [(2016)], hackathons are places to observe "technologies in the making" and the "imaginative and

practical activities through which socio-material relations are reproduced and transformed" (Suchman et al., 2002, p. 164). In my project, the hackathons became sites to observe the imaginative and practical activities of finding technological solutions for refugees and thereby a way to grasp the hot air of corporate humanitarian solutionism. At the hackathons, this solutionism was expressed as a social practice of imagining, which I could document through participant observation and ethnographic interviews.

Picture 7: The entrance to the Google offices in Copenhagen, where the Google-sponsored Techfugees hackathon took place. Photo taken by author, March 2020

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The articles of this dissertation draw on theories from three distinct bodies of literature that all contribute to understanding the rise of technology companies as humanitarian actors in the refugee crisis. In the section below, I outline how these literatures and the main discussions within them have informed my analysis in the articles.

3.1 Critical Refugee and Border Studies

Digital technology and data-based practices are increasingly part of international refugee governance and migration management. In a broad sense, data increasingly "determine how we can or cannot move through the world and whether we are considered to be threats, risks, victims, or assets" (Leese et al., 2022, p. 2).The field of critical refugee and border studies has examined this development from a range of perspectives, by focusing, for example, on the emergence of *digital passages* and *digital borders* (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019; Latonero & Kift, 2018).

Digital passages refer to the digital infrastructures and artifacts, such as social media, smartphones, and other digitally-networked technologies that refugees and migrants increasingly rely on before, during, and after their journeys. However, these infrastructures are not only used by migrants, but emerge as "sociotechnical spaces of flows in which refugees, smugglers, governments, and corporations interact with each other and with new technologies" (Latonero & Kift, 2018, p. 1). Similarly, the concept of the digital border encompasses a range of activities and rationales that together form what Chouliaraki and Georgiou term *techno-symbolic assemblages of power* (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2022). Importantly, the concept of the digital border highlights how media narratives and the framing of migration as "crisis" is connected to other material forms of "borderwork" through regimes of power and knowledge (Savio Vammen et al., 2022; Vaughan-Williams, 2008).

Both concepts draw on a long tradition of migration and media studies and the more recent field of digital migration studies, which examines a broad range of digital migration practices (Koen Leurs & Smets, 2018; Koen Leurs & Witteborn, 2023). One strand of this literature focuses on the ways in which migrants and refugees use digital technologies to communicate, share information, and sustain transnational networks and identities (Gillespie et al., 2018a; Ponzanesi

& Leurs, 2022; Şanlıer Yüksel, 2020). Digital migration studies also highlight how "digital technologies reshape not only every phase of the migration process itself—by providing new ways to access, share, and preserve relevant information—but also the activities of other actors, from solidarity networks to border control agencies" (Sandberg et al., 2022, p. 2).

The concepts of digital passages and digital borders thus exemplify a growing tendency among digital migration scholars to analyze the complex web of practices, actors, technologies, relationships, and political rationales that has developed with the convergence of migration, humanitarianism, and digital technology. These conceptualizations draws on notions of assemblages, understood in relation to borders as "heterogeneous and open-ended groupings of elements that do not form a coherent whole that helps explain how different meanings emanating from various actors may interact and endure in a contingent and provisional way" (Sohn, 2016). For example, Madianou (2019b) coins the term *biometric assemblage* to analyze the convergence of humanitarianism, biometric registration, surveillance and data extraction in contemporary refugee governance. The biometric assemblage is shaped by five competing logics of accountability, audit, capitalism, solutionism, and securitization*,* which simultaneously depoliticize displacement and reproduce power inequalities between humanitarian agencies, "Western saviors," and refugees as "the suffering former colonial subjects" (Madianou, 2019a).

The use of digital technology and data-based practices in the humanitarian response to refugee crises expands concurrently with a governance paradigm that Chouliaraki and Georgiou call "humanitarian securitization" (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2022); that is, the merging of border control, migration management, and humanitarian interventions as the securitization of national borders increases (Aas & Gundhus, 2015; Chemlali, 2023; Cuttitta, 2018; Pallister-Wilkins, 2022; Plambech, 2022). The process of humanitarian securitization, as well as earlier paradigms for refugee governance, is part of a longer evolution of *the refugee regime*.

The refugee regime refers both to the institutionalized governance of refugees centralized in the UNHCR, but also to "the norms, rules, principles, and organizations that support a system of governance relating to the production of people as refugees" (Betts, 2010; Morris, 2021, p. 3). Critical scholars have demonstrated how the refugee regime is implicated in the extraction of value from migrants. Morris argues that "crucial to the profitability extracted from migrants as refugees has been the humanitarian industry for whom refugees have become a popular marketable commodity, in terms of both financial rewards and moral capital" (Morris, 2021, p.

8), while Ramsay notes that "the refugee protection regime has been transformed into a 'humanitarian marketplace' that increasingly collapses the humanitarian vision of care and protection with market-based visions of propagating autonomous and productive entrepreneurial subjects" (Ramsay, 2020, p. 17). Thus, this literature analyzes the intersection between humanitarianism, refugee protection, securitization, and capitalist processes of value extraction.

3.1.1 Hackathons as Humanitarian Innovation

In article three, I examine how humanitarian hackathons emerge as spaces to create and imagine solutions to the global refugee crisis. I combine recent literature on humanitarian innovation in the refugee regime with critical literature on corporate humanitarianism in what Burrell and Fourcade (2021) call the "spirit of Silicon Valley". In doing so, I highlight three points of convergence between the Silicon Valley corporate humanitarianism and the paradigm of humanitarian innovation: 1) the belief in the promise of digital technology and innovation as solutions to the refugee crisis; 2) the embrace of the market as the primary space for "doing good"; and 3) the glorification of entrepreneurship and emphasis on the "refugee entrepreneur" as the ideal humanitarian subject (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016; Pascucci, 2019; Turner, 2019).

The refugee hackathons I analyze illustrate these convergences, but they also raise questions about what innovation is and who it is supposed to benefit. Hackathons are historically and ideologically related to the open-source culture of the 1980s, and have been shaped by cultural notions of sharing, decentralization, world improvement, free speech, and a mistrust in state authority (Coleman, 2013; Levy, 2010). On one hand, hackathons are pragmatic, problem-solving formats focused on fixing technical or social problems. On the other hand, hackathons are spaces for collectively testing, experimenting, prototyping and generating ideas, which can take priority over producing something tangible (Endrissat & Islam, 2022; Irani, 2015).

This experimental element has led to the popular critique that "nothing useful is ever created at a hackathon" (Broussard, 2015). However, scholars argue that while hackathons may not produce actual things, they *do something* (see, for example, Irani's analysis of how hackathons produce entrepreneurial subjects (Irani, 2015)). In the context of humanitarian aid, hackathons have been critiqued as unproductive, as a form of humanitarian engagement that primarily makes the participant "feel good" without actually helping, and as events that exacerbate the experimental and solutionist logic that saturates contemporary humanitarianism (Madianou, 2019a). While the

experimental spirit of hackathons has been theorized as providing affective spaces for new forms of organizing (Endrissat & Islam, 2022), scholars of critical refugee studies highlight the risks and potential harms for refugees and unequal power relations that characterize such experimentation in a refugee and humanitarian context. Thus, hackathons emerge within, and become part of, the assemblages of practices, actors, imaginaries, and rationalities that constitute corporate humanitarian solutionism.

3.2 The Commodification of Humanitarianism

When I refer to corporate humanitarianism, I draw on the vast and diverse literature on the commodification of humanitarianism. This interdisciplinary literature, which includes scholarship from political science and international development studies to media studies and critical feminist geography, examines various practices and processes of marketization, professionalization, and privatization as they play out in humanitarian and development aid (Richey, 2018). Broadly, the literature examines two overlapping phenomena: 1) the various intersections between the NGO and business sectors and how these interactions shape humanitarian communication (Chouliaraki & Vestergaard, 2019; Richey & Atal, 2021), logistics (Pascucci, 2021), and project management (Krause, 2014); and 2) the commodification of humanitarian sentiments of compassion and solidarity and how "doing good" is transformed into a marketable, profitable, and individualized product (Chouliaraki, 2013; Richey, 2019; Richey et al., 2021). Thus, this literature studies how humanitarianism – as a professionalized sector and a form of transnational helping that also unfolds outside of this formal sector (Richey, 2018) – is increasingly infused with business practices, discourses, values, and logics.

Barnett (2022) defines three central elements of this contemporary "business model" of humanitarianism: 1) the changing landscape of humanitarian finance under neoliberal capitalism, in which various forms of private sector funding is increasingly essential to NGOs; 2) the growth of philantrocapitalism and the increasingly active role of businesses in addressing emergencies (see also McGoey, 2016; Burns, 2019); and 3) a growing corporate culture and rationalization of the humanitarian sector (see also Joachim & Schneiker, 2018). Together, he argues, these elements explain how and why the relationship between humanitarian and corporate worlds has flourished in the past two decades. Importantly, what these three elements highlight is that the interactions between business and humanitarian sectors is not only driven by businesses' instrumental

rationales, but also by aid agencies and NGOs that seek funding, technical expertise, political connections, and branding opportunities (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2022; M. Barnett, 2022, p. 235; Sampson, 2017). Thus, corporate humanitarianism does not refer exclusively to the practices of corporations. Rather, this particular form of humanitarianism is practiced and initiated increasingly by NGOs and humanitarian agencies.

Scholars have also examined the historical links between capitalism and humanitarianism to understand this new humanitarian business model (Budabin & Richey, 2021; Hopgood, 2008; Lago & Sullivan, 2017; Sasson, 2016), and showed that the merging of these two domains is far from new. Historians have analyzed how capitalism – through the spread of capitalist markets (Haskell, 1985b, 1985a) and the turn to wage labor (Ashworth, 1987) – led to the Western humanitarian sentiments that surrounded the eighteenth-century movement to abolish slavery. Others have linked the origins of humanitarianism to processes of colonialist and imperialist governance that followed capitalist motives to seek out new markets (Skinner & Lester, 2012), and emphasized "the primary importance of capitalism as a source of specific motivations and interests in humanitarian action" (Lago & Sullivan, 2017, p. 7).

Similarly, international development policies have been theorized as modern forms of imperialism aiming to expand capitalist exploitation through the promotion of free market ideologies (Escobar, 1995). In these free market ideologies, and the burgeoning Fair Trade and Brand Aid schemes, capitalism is perceived not as the cause of social problems but as their solution (Goodman, 2004; Richey & Ponte, 2011). Scholars of economic anthropology have documented these shifting ethics and moralities that historically have permeated and constituted, rather than stood in opposition to, markets and economic interactions (Berlan, 2008; Carrier & Luetchford, 2012; Dolan & Rajak, 2016). Thus, the market has always been a domain for expressing care, compassion, and solidarity (e.g., through consumer protests and boycotts (Berlan, 2012; Sasson, 2016)), and humanitarianism has similarly been a domain in which to pursue business or political interests.

However, despite these historical entanglements between capitalism and humanitarianism, something is different about the present forms of corporate humanitarianism. CSR and CSPs have become mainstream in international aid as well as business school syllabi, and the desire to combine humanitarianism and profit maximization has become a visible and explicit part of organizational branding strategies. An emerging stream of critical literature, which I describe below, has analyzed this turn.

3.2.1 Partnerships and Power

In article two of this dissertation, I examine CSPs between the IRC and the tech sector. CSPs have received much attention in management and business ethics literature as promising mechanisms for addressing "grand challenges" or "wicked problems" too complex to solve by one sector (Pedersen et al., 2020; van Tulder et al., 2016; Vestergaard et al., 2019). In the article, I focus on the concept and practices of alignment, which is a central concept within CSP literature, to understand how business and humanitarian interests are negotiated in CSPs for refugees. While the management literature recognizes that CSPs are shaped by power relations, negotiations, and conflicting values (Cloutier & Langley, 2017; Dewulf & Elbers, 2018; Eden & Huxham, 2001), the normative ideal of finding alignment is persistent. Underlying this ideal is the assumption that CSP stakeholders share common goals and have even levels of power. Yet asymmetric power levels are in fact often the reason why CSPs frequently fail to effectively address the challenges they aim to resolve (Gray et al., 2022).

Therefore, I combine these theoretical insights with critical and anthropological literature that analyzes how power operates through CSR initiatives and CSPs (Blowfield & Dolan, 2014; Dolan & Rajak, 2016; Garsten & Sörbom, 2017). Through a multi-sided ethnography of the CSR practices of a transnational mining corporation, Rajak (2011) argues that the CSR movement, which has shifted from a "do no harm" appeal from anti-corporate campaigners to a discourse of unity and partnership led by corporations themselves, has become a platform for corporations to actively set and implement development agendas. Rather than supersede the state, CSR has become a mechanism for negotiating business-state relations and influencing economic policies to benefit the corporation (Rajak, 2011, pp. 232–233).

Correspondingly, Garsten and Sörbom (2017) understand CSR and corporate "good-doing" as new ways for businesses to gain political influence and to achieve legitimacy as actors in the global political domain. The growing field of political CSR (Frynas & Stephens, 2015; Rasche, 2015; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011; Whelan, 2016) has also debated the political role businesses do and should play as part of their CSR efforts, including the extent to which CSR research itself should take normative stances on the political responsibilities of corporations (Scherer, 2018). However, CSR extends corporations' authority not only over local and global economic orders but also social and moral orders (Rajak, 2011, pp. 2–3).

The literature on new actors and alliances in aid similarly theorizes how businesses access new forms of power and influence by entering the sphere of humanitarianism, a sphere that was previously limited to NGOs, nonprofits, and governments (Fejerskov et al., 2017; Richey, 2014). Through a range of modalities – from cause-related marketing (Hawkins, 2012) to Brand Aid campaigns (Richey & Ponte, 2021) – businesses increasingly participate in defining humanitarian problems and their solutions. That is, businesses are increasingly able to shape what "doing good" means and who is included and excluded in this vision. Within these moral discourses, their own business activities are framed and depoliticized as virtuous (Cinnamon, 2020; Rajak, 2011, p. 18). Consequently, as partnerships with businesses are increasingly positioned as the universal and only legitimate way to do good, recent scholarship has highlighted the need to analyze how humanitarian problems and solutions are narratively constructed in such partnerships (Olwig, 2021b; Richey et al., 2021).

3.3 Digital Capitalism

In her analysis of mass digitization, Thylstrup (2018) demonstrates how the large-scale digitization of cultural artefacts has enabled corporate extraction of value and brought the politics of cultural memory into the particular capitalist system of the digital age. Thylstrup describes this contemporary socio-political environment as one where:

> … vertical territorial hierarchies and horizontal networks entwine in a new political mesh: where solid things melt into air, and clouds materialize as material infrastructures, where boundaries between experts and laypeople disintegrate, and where machine cognition operates on par with human cognition on an increasingly large scale. These assemblages enable new types of political actors – networked assemblages – which hold particular forms of power despite their informality vis-à-vis the formal political system. (Thylstrup, 2018, p. 22)

I draw on Thylstrup's insights about this particular political mesh to discuss not whether the increasing use of digital technology has brought refugee aid into a capitalist system, but to consider *what kind* of capitalist system refugee aid is increasingly entangled with. The use of "smart" technologies, digital media, and big data in most areas of society is inextricably linked to global capitalism. Companies today rely increasingly on the collection, storage, and analysis of data about consumers' online and offline behavior (Sadowski, 2019). As such, the application of

technologies that generate these data in new areas of social life expands the profit possibilities for businesses. In recent years, a dynamic field of study has emerged to investigate these particular configurations and expressions of capitalism in the digital age (Pace, 2018). Often building on Marxist theories, the literature on digital capitalism seeks to understand this current economic model, including its new power hierarchies and societal orders in which big data and algorithms increasingly define the relationship between labor, commodities, and capital (Burrell & Fourcade, 2021). My theoretical framework takes inspiration from this literature to reflect on the forms of value that are produced, pursued, and imagined by the businesses and people who engage in corporate humanitarian solutionism.

3.3.1 Value and Power in Digital Capitalism

In article one, we situate the analysis of Google's AI philanthropy in a framework of digital capitalism, to understand the current entanglements between humanitarianism and capitalism as one point in a longer history of interlinkages. In this form of capitalism, data is the primary commodity and form of capital (West, 2019), online surveillance is the logic of accumulation (Zuboff, 2019), platforms and algorithms are new workplaces and managers (Srnicek, 2017), and digital networks and information technologies are privately-owned commercial infrastructures and means of production (Fuchs, 2007, 2013; Schiller, 1999).

In one of the most widely-debated and influential accounts of capitalism in the information age, Shoshana Zuboff (2019) theorizes digital capitalism's recent turn to a new logic of accumulation. This logic, which she calls surveillance capitalism, predicts and modifies human behavior to produce revenue. Businesses operating within this logic accumulate wealth via a new market form where data become surveillance assets, which attracts surveillance capital. Profits are generated by extracting user data, which is used to feed algorithms that can target advertisements. Data is thus a core component of the political economy in the 21st century, not only as a new valuable commodity or raw material, but also as a form of capital. In this form, data collection is a form of investment: "smart" technologies like cellphones, fridges, and watches are valuable commodities not because consumers will pay money to own them, but because they enable the collection of data that can continue to generate wealth (Sadowski, 2019).

Zuboff argues that this particular form of capitalism was invented in Silicon Valley and led by Google, although the effects of it are globally experienced (Zuboff, 2019, p. 24). West similarly

traces the current version of digital capitalism to Silicon Valley in the mid-1990s, when tech companies began experimenting with data tracking and surveillance to make internet businesses profitable (West, 2019, pp. 25–26). Other scholars link the emergence of digital capitalism to a longer history of the "hi-tech gift economy" (Barbrook, 1998) and a particular capitalist "spirit" of Silicon Valley (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007; Burrell & Fourcade, 2021). According to these theories, the gift is critical to the cultural imagination of digital capitalism, which has historical roots in the 1960s northern California counterculture (Turner, 2006) and the 1980s hacking movement (Levy, 2010). Pioneers of these movements took inspiration from early anthropological accounts of gift economies (Mauss, 2016) to envision a "digital utopia" with the Internet as a platform for the free circulation of information without government or corporate involvement (Barbrook, 1998; Fourcade & Kluttz, 2020, p. 3).

In this digital utopia, the symbolic benefits of the exchange of online information are prioritized over the monetary gains: "Because they are explicitly removed from systems of market exchange, gifts can come back to participants not as money, but as reputation, artistic pleasure or friendship or all three" (Turner, 2006, p. 80 cited in Fourcade and Kluttz, 2020, p. 4). Thus, the central role of the gift also highlights how values such as community, reciprocity, and emancipation from state and market control were important cultural components in the evolution of digital capitalism.

However, as the technology companies of Silicon Valley grew larger, backed by increasing amounts of venture capital, these companies began to incorporate the "free software" and gift-giving ideas into their corporate strategies (Fourcade & Kluttz, 2020). The gift, exemplified by companies offering their customers free services, like translation software from Google, social media profiles from Meta, or email accounts from Microsoft, is now a critical component in what Fourcade and Kluttz call "the Maussian bargain" (Fourcade & Kluttz, 2020). While the offering of these free services frames the exchange relationships in digital capitalism as gift-like, it is exactly through the acceptance of this "free gift" that consumers trade their data, which becomes a valuable commodity. In this sense, the emergence of digital capitalism is a story of "the darkening of the digital dream" into a "voracious (…) commercial project" (Zuboff, 2019, p. 7).

Zuboff's theory has received criticism for placing too much emphasis on the practices of surveillance at the expense of a more fundamental critique of capitalism. According to Morozov, Zuboff wrongfully views surveillance capitalism not as a continuation of global capitalism with extended surveillance methods, but as a "new economic order" and he critiques her work for not

connecting empirical examples analytically to the core relations of class, capital, and production (Morozov, 2019, pp. 8, 23). Instead, Morozov argues that the surveillance strategies of tech companies are merely local effects of a global and familiar capitalist cause to ensure long-term profitability in the face of competition. That is, surveillance capitalism is first and foremost capitalism albeit in new clothes:

> Surveillance capitalism must be theorized as "capitalism" – a complex set of historical and social relationships between capital and labor, the state and the monetary system, the metropole, and the periphery – and not just as an aggregate of individual firms responding to imperatives of technological and social change. (Morozov, 2019, p. 39)

Scholars of critical data studies have provided such analyses of how big data shapes the relations between capital and labor within and across global power hierarchies. In these analyses, as in Zuboff's (Zuboff, 2019, p. 8), data is considered a form of power (Iliadis & Russo, 2016) and this power is distributed overwhelmingly to the actors who "have access and the capability to make sense of data" (West, 2019, p. 23). Although the papers in this dissertation do not consider specifically how tech companies harvest and extract value from data in their corporate humanitarian practices, the literature on digital capitalism was instrumental in shaping my analytical lens on the forms of value in, and the power relations engendered by, digital capitalism.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This dissertation applies a critical, explorative, and ethnographic methodology. The length of this methodology chapter is intentional. I have deliberately chosen to include many details about my field sites, interlocutors, data collection, and analysis to emphasize the importance of conducting careful ethnography in field sites that are digitalized, fragmented, and constantly changing. In order to understand the fragmented bits of information I could access, the evolving group of actors, and the slippery language of my interlocutors, I had to pay careful attention to every interaction. In this field, even a short Uber ride with an interlocutor became meaningful data. I argue in this chapter that because contemporary social and digital phenomena are not easily studied through traditional ethnographic methods like participant observation and long-term fieldwork, these phenomena require us to sharpen our ethnographic attention and consider other and new forms of data as meaningful. However, doing fieldwork in such settings also requires ethnographers to sit with the *not knowing* and embrace the vagueness and ambiguity of studying what feels like hot air.

4.1.1 Assemblage Ethnography

The anthropological study of the patterns and systems that structure human societies – systems of kinship, economic exchange, and political authority for example – was traditionally carried out as ethnographic studies of particular villages or societies. But in the 1990's, a new style of ethnography emerged. The emergence of what Wahlberg (2022) terms *assemblage ethnography* involved a shift towards studying infrastructures (Larkin, 2013), assemblages (Ong & Collier, 2005), discourses (Bernstein, 2018), apparatuses (Ferguson, 1994), and global processes, connections, and networks (Marcus 1995; Tsing 2004) rather than isolated groups of people or societies as such.

Assemblage ethnography is proposed as a broad term to capture a wide range of ethnographic strategies. For example, in his ethnography of the EU migration management apparatus, Feldman (2012) develops a strategy of non-local ethnography to illuminate the organizing logics and heterogenous practices of the different actors that create the conditions for mobility in and out of

Europe. These practices take place across disparate spheres and domains and as such "do not lend themselves easily to thick description" (Feldman, 2012, p. 180). Consequently, Feldman collects data not only from participant observation with one particular group, but by following the rationales, discourses, and narratives that connect these actors and practices. Similarly, Shore and Wright (2011) propose an anthropology of policy as a research strategy that centers on the study of policies as "windows onto political processes in which actors, agents, concepts, and technologies interact in different sites, creating or consolidating new rationalities of governance and regimes of knowledge and power" (Shore & Wright, 2011, p. 2). These studies share an empirical point of departure in particular "regimes of practice." As such, assemblage ethnography "seeks to map out the *configurations* [patterns of knowledge-practice] found within the *dispositifs* that coalesce around and thereby shape particular social 'problems'" (Wahlberg, 2022, p. 127). Such social problems include "crime," "poverty," "migration," or "human trafficking." Processes of problematization and the power/knowledge configurations that construct social problems are thus central to assemblage ethnography.

I drew on this methodology in studying how digital technology and the tech companies that produce them come to be understood as humanitarian solutions and actors in the refugee crisis. Rather than examining the use of technology by a particular group of refugees, I explored how the refugee crisis is constructed as a particular "social problem" in need of technical fixes and private sector innovation. This research strategy took me from hackathons in Copenhagen to humanitarian headquarters in New York City and tech company skyscrapers in San Francisco, as I describe in the following pages.

4.1.2 Ethnographies of Tech Helpers and Humanitarian Headquarters

> *Julie was 45 minutes late. I was 15 minutes early. Thus, an hour had gone by since I entered the lobby in the enormous glass and steel skyscraper named The Salesforce Tower, the second tallest building west of the Mississippi River, located in the heart of the financial district of San Francisco. Julie was at a meeting in one of the rooms upstairs and had asked me to meet her in the lobby to join her for a lunch meeting with a tech company with which the IRC had just started partnering. Actually, all I knew as I sat in the lobby was that we were going to lunch. Julie was never very informative in her text*

messages and I had quickly become so accustomed to her ways of communicating and the hectic work lives characterizing this field that her delay was no surprise to me. During her meeting, she regularly kept me updated on WhatsApp: "Meeting running late. Make yourself at home in the lobby – there's free coffee!", "Be there in 10, then we'll go to lunch", "Coming down now". When she appeared by the elevators, she rushed towards the front doors of the lobby while looking around in the room. "There you are!" she said and greeted me with a hug. She apologized for being late while already on her way out of the door. I followed her and tried to make small talk but it did not seem to register. She looked frantically down at her phone and then up at her surroundings, muttering that the car should be here. "What street are we on?" she asked. I turned my head to look for a street name and when I turned back, she was already long gone in the other direction. I ran after her as she turned to cross the street and a car almost hit us. "Sorry about that" she said and finally spotted the Uber car. We got in, she leaned back in the seat, crossed one leg over the other and exhaled deeply, which seemed to indicate that now she could talk.

Field note excerpt, January 23, 2020.

Picture 8: The lobby of the Salesforce Tower, where I waited to meet with Julie. Photo taken by author, August 2021.

Throughout my fieldwork, I interviewed and spent time with a wide range of people involved in Tech for Good and CSPs for refugees, including NGO workers, tech company employees, software developers, and hackathon participants. What tied this diverse group together was their belief in the power of technology as a solution to the refugee crisis and their motivation for creating these tech solutions. In other words, they were all "tech helpers" in the sense that they aspired to use technology for good. As such, I placed my analytical attention with the people attempting to rescue rather than the people in need of rescue. In the words of Greene (2021), my aim was to study "the right side of the digital divide" – the "information haves" rather than the "information have-nots."

The vignette above describes a typical encounter with informants in my field, who were often dressed in formal business wear and rushing from one meeting to the next in urban financial districts. However, these people might not be who typically come to mind when we think of humanitarianism and refugee crises, which conjure up images of frontline aid workers, NGO rescue ships, and crowded refugee camps. Yet, to study the workings of corporate humanitarian solutionism in the refugee crisis, I chose to focus on the people who aspire to design and develop digital solutions for refugees. In doing so, I found methodological inspiration in the field of organizational anthropology (Garsten & Nyqvist, 2013), and in particular the subfields of business anthropology (Foster, 2017; Moeran & Garsten, 2012) and ethnographies of NGOs (also known as "NGOgraphies" and sometimes "aidnographies") (Lashaw et al., 2019).

Anthropologists have a long tradition of doing fieldwork with, for, and in NGOs. Early on, these studies were focused on studying NGOs as organizations such as, for example, missionary organizations and voluntary associations (Lewis, 2017, pp. 27–28). In the 1990s, anthropologists began doing fieldwork in NGOs, not to study the NGOs per se but to use the NGOs as portals for studying the logics, rationalities, and problematizations of "development" or "humanitarianism" (Sampson, 2017, p. 6). In fact, Wahlberg (2022) identifies Ferguson's (1994) influential work on *the anti-politics machine* in the development sector as one of the first examples of an assemblage ethnography. In this work, Ferguson focuses his study not on the people "to be developed" but on the project of development. As such, the study of NGOs became a way for anthropologists to study broader configurations of power and knowledge.

Recently, scholars have studied the production of power and knowledge in humanitarianism with particular attention to the operation and implication of projects as the primary vehicle for

humanitarianism and development (Krause, 2014; Mosse, 2004). In a similar vein, scholars have turned their attention away from the people "to be developed" and onto the people doing the development projects, i.e., the people working at NGOs as professionals or volunteers (Malkki, 2016).

I build on this scholarship on NGO professionals. However, I focus on the people working at the humanitarian headquarters (the people who develop and manage projects), rather than the humanitarian field staff (the people implementing projects). In focusing on headquarters, I am not merely referring to a physical place or office, but to an organizational level of humanitarian agencies, at which directors and managers work. Although not all of my interlocutors were directors or top-level staff, the majority were somehow involved in management work on private sector partnerships and this work predominantly took place at headquarter levels rather than in country offices and among field staff. Similarly, my interlocutors from tech companies were all involved in the management of partnerships.

This focus on NGO and business headquarters brought methodological challenges familiar to anthropologists studying businesses and large organizations. The tech company and humanitarian employees were difficult to access. Information about their partnerships and the people who work on the partnerships was scarce. The IRC and their business partners did not provide any concrete information on their websites or social media about where their projects take place, who works on them, their timelines, or which tasks are included in the work. The only sources of information were press releases and social media posts to announce new partnerships.

Therefore, I applied a strategy of "studying up" (Nader, 1972) to locate and access these groups of informants. The practices I wished to observe took place in board rooms, conference centers, and headquarter offices, and accessing these places and the elite networks that work in them is difficult, often impossible, and requires anthropologists to rethink which methods are appropriate. This means abandoning the idea that participant observation is the only viable method and pursue what has been called a "polymorphous engagement" with the field (Gusterson, 1997).

In my fieldwork, this polymorphous engagement included a combination of in-person and online observations, interviews, email correspondences, and document analysis (see section 4.3 for detailed data sample). To find observable practices and sites, I took inspiration from Ortner's concept of "interface ethnography" and Souleles' idea to look for "interstitial spaces." These concepts encourage scholars to attend events where the inner world of the elite network and the

outer world of the public interface (Ortner, 2010, p. 221). That is, one needs to find and attend "events and sites at which a population that is hard to access presents itself to the public" (Souleles, 2018, p. 53). I used the social media platform LinkedIn as one such interstitial space, because it works as a platform for professionals to present themselves to the public. As such, LinkedIn became a site to both locate and access informants, as I describe in more detail in section 4.3.

4.1.2.1 What About the Migrants?

In focusing on the perspectives of these tech helpers, I simultaneously excluded others, most notably from the refugees and migrants on the receiving end of the digital humanitarian initiatives. These migrant perspectives and experiences are in no way unimportant or irrelevant. However, practical circumstances (such as pandemic-related travel restrictions) made it logistically difficult to include migrant perspectives with the level of ethical consideration and care that such data collection requires. Moreover, my aim was not to produce an ethnography to contrast and compare the claims of the people trying to help with the experiences of the people being helped. Rather, I wanted to emphasize and take seriously the perspectives of the people working to develop digital humanitarian solutions.

In doing so, my study reflects the ways refugees and migrants are included and excluded in the Tech for Good space. For example, article three highlights the role of the refugee Mahdi as a guest speaker and "case story" at the Techfugees Hackathons, while refugees were noticeably absent in the decision-making practices at the IRC and tech company partnership meetings that I analyze in article two. Although my study portrays the actual distances between tech helpers and the refugees they seek to help, the lack of migrant perspectives leaves out an important part of the conversation: not only about how solutionism is experienced as the receiver of "tech help," but also about the ways in which people use, resist, and contest forms of helping in the refugee regime.

Furthermore, I am aware that by not including migrant perspectives I risk reproducing the same erasure of these perspectives that I critique in the Tech for Good space. Rozakou (2019) highlights this risk as the "burden of epistemological complicity with the very phenomena [we] seek to scrutinize" (Rozakou, 2019, p. 78). This burden is familiar to anthropological researchers but also in recent critical border and migration studies, which have been found complicit in reproducing dominant narratives about the refugee crisis through a particular genre of "crisis scholarship" that

portrays the suffering of migrants and the violence of the migration regime (Cabot, 2019). Rather than ignoring this complicity, I follow Rozakou's argument to "turn our critical scrutiny to the aesthetics of our representations and the ways in which our knowledge partakes in the very border and migration regimes we critique" (Rozakou, 2019, p. 78). I acknowledge my own research as part of this crisis scholarship, not because I reproduce a dominant narrative of "the suffering migrant" but because by leaving out the perspectives of migrants I do not actively challenge this narrative either.

4.1.3 Studying Hot Air

… what I really struggle with is to define what data can be in this project. The work the IRC does with their tech partners is so difficult to access and to make concrete. It feels unorganized and messy, dispersed across teams and locations that are not necessarily communicating, and it is so unstable and fluffy. It changes all the time, and I just can't pin it down. It feels impossible to establish a regular engagement with a bounded field over time – it's always one interview here, one interview there and no long-term coherence. It makes it so difficult to define my project, my questions, my answers, and my data. If it's not possible to collect observations and interviews over time, what could be data instead?

Excerpt from my fieldwork journal, March 29, 2021,

Throughout the project, I grappled with methodological and practical issues of how to grasp the field and the people in it. Doing fieldwork was often a frustrating experience of studying hot air – something intangible, fluid, and slippery that I could not get a hold on. There was no obvious place I could go, no coherent group I could engage with, and no particular thing I could observe or follow through a multi-sided ethnography (Marcus, 1995b). Oftentimes it seemed like the corporate humanitarianism I was interested in only existed in social media posts and corporate branding material and never in actual observable places or among actual people. Sometimes it felt as if the partnerships and the aid initiatives they aimed to develop for refugees only existed as

speculations and promises, but not as actual things. Indeed, sometimes it seemed like these partnerships were not really about refugees at all.

This challenge is not unique to my fieldwork. As pointed out by Wahlberg (2022), assemblage ethnography grew out of methodological questions about where anthropologists should and could go to study social organization in an increasingly globalized world, where social phenomena forms across scales, sites, and practices (Wahlberg, 2022, p. 126). The difficulty of pinning down the field in which one can observe concrete and continuous practices is a condition of contemporary anthropological fieldwork in which oftentimes "there is no there, there" (Feldman, 2012).

The idea of "the field" as a single bounded place, spatially separated from the ethnographer's home, where anthropologists can stay for extended periods of time to observe, has thus been challenged over the past decades (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). Additionally, the growing role of digital technologies in most areas of social life has influenced the practices of ethnographic research. Emerging technologies and digital media are drastically changing the social relations, processes, and environments that anthropologists study, while also becoming the objects of study themselves and novel tools for data collection and analysis. Consequently, the growing interdisciplinary field of digital ethnography (Hjorth, 2017; Pink, 2016) has provided new insights into how anthropologists and other ethnographers can grasp the digital.

In my own fieldwork, the practices of my interlocutors were often digitally mediated (for example, by virtual meetings), my data collection was conducted in large part through digital means (for example, via Zoom interviews, WhatsApp messages, and social media) and my subject of study was linked to ideas and imaginaries of digital technologies. Thus, digital technology shaped my field and interlocutors, and influenced how I engaged with them methodologically and analytically. However, my primary interest was not the technology in itself or how people in the field interact with digital technologies practically. Rather, I was interested in the ways in which digital technologies were imagined as solutions to refugee crises and the kinds of practices that emerged from these imaginaries. In doing so, I followed a *non-digital-centric approach* to the study of a digitalized field and topic, in which the digital is understood as part of something wider rather than the center of study (Pink, 2016, p. 9). Importantly, this approach "acknowledges the intangible as part of digital ethnography research, precisely because it invites us to consider the question of the 'digital intangible'" (Pink, 2016, p. 7).

In my fieldwork, the "digital intangible" was on one hand a condition of the digitalized nature of the field, the practices in it, and my way of engaging with them. On the other hand, what made the digital so intangible was also a condition of the vagueness and opacity of Big Tech. This field is ripe with technological hype and speculation (Hockenhull & Cohn, 2021) as well as secrecy and non-disclosure agreements (Bruun Jensen, 2010; Burrell, 2016). These conditions made it difficult to obtain detailed information about the practices of tech companies in a way that would satisfy the anthropological desire for *thick descriptions* (see also section 4.2.3). Thus, my feeling of studying hot air was not only related to common anthropological challenges of studying globalized and fragmented social processes, but also to the digitalized nature of the field and the particular group of people I studied.

In her book *Race after Technology*, scholar of race critical code studies Ruha Benjamin critiques the anthropological worship of thick description and argues for *thin descriptions* as a humble, but no less ambitious, method that respects particular kinds of boundaries in knowledge production. This approach embraces the impossibility of complete and total knowledge as a way to push against the all-knowing and extractive practices of Big Tech: "Thinness is not an analytical failure, but an acceptance of fragility (…) a methodological counterpoint to the hubris that animates so much tech development" (Benjamin, 2019, p. 46). The feelings of studying hot air and the frustrations that followed were unresolved in my fieldwork, and therefore I came to view this *not knowing* as part of my field rather than a barrier to it.

4.1.4 Being In and Out of the Field

I decided to travel to New York City and San Francisco in January 2020 for an introductory and exploratory fieldtrip to scope out exactly what practices were observable in the field. This five-week field trip, during which I spent time in the IRC headquarter offices and its regional office in San Francisco, and attended meetings with their corporate partners, gave me an understanding of the activities my informants engaged in, which practices I could observe, and how I could supplement participant observation with other sources of data, e.g., online communications such as emails, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp messages. I returned from this field trip in February 2020, ready to plan my next and longer fieldwork, but less than a month later all of my informants and I went into coronavirus lockdowns, and digital methods became even more necessary.

The pandemic restricted data collection in several ways. International travel restrictions forced me to postpone my plans of doing more in-person fieldwork in the US I had previously discussed with my informants the possibility of visiting a few IRC field offices to observe how digital initiatives were implemented on the ground and to learn about their partnerships with local rather than transnational businesses. These trips became impossible during and after the pandemic. Even before the pandemic, I had learned that these partnerships were difficult to observe in one physical place, because the work is done by teams dispersed across multiple locations. Moreover, very few employees worked on these partnerships fulltime, and they would mostly collaborate with partners via email rather than in-person meetings. That is, the practices of the partnerships I wanted to study were to a large extent digitalized and fragmented, which is a well-known challenge for researchers conducting organizational ethnography (Akemu & Abdelnour, 2020).

With the pandemic, the few opportunities for in-person observations at meetings or events instantly turned virtual, which also inhibited informal conversations with informants over coffee or the spontaneous encounters fieldwork usually presents. When doing fieldwork in work environments, the researcher is usually able to supplement the observations at meetings with being present in lunch breaks and by the coffee machine to capture some of the informal, non-work interactions that shape workplace dynamics. With the transition to virtual meetings, the in-between interactions and opportunities for small talk were gone. Among my interlocutors, online communication was already becoming the norm, but the pandemic promptly erased the last possibilities for meeting face to face. To make up for the lack of informal interactions and lunch break conversations, I made sure to arrive early at online meetings. In the first few minutes of these meetings, there was usually some small talk going on. I also waited to be the last person to log off so as to capture the last bit of "coffee machine talk" if there was any.

However, the shift to online work also opened new possibilities for data collection. As all in-person meetings in the IRC teams were converted to Microsoft Teams calls, I was able to participate in some of them even while being "out of the field." The kind of work that was happening in my field, while difficult to observe in-person, could relatively easily be continued and converted to online work. Thus, I continued to engage with my informants, conducted interviews, and participated in meetings online while I was under lockdown in Copenhagen. At the same time, when I eventually did manage to travel to a field site far away from home, most of my interactions with interlocutors continued to happen online.

When international travel restrictions were lifted, I traveled to San Francisco to continue my fieldwork, but arrived at a field that had drastically changed. All over the US, a post-pandemic exodus from the large cities had taken place with San Francisco as one of the most striking cases. The company buses that had previously transported "Googlers" and other tech workers from their homes in San Francisco to the corporate campuses south of the city in Silicon Valley were gone. Employees not only worked from home, but from new homes outside of the city or in different states. Several of my key informants had moved out of the big cities in the US to live closer to family, escape large crowds, and avoid the high rent.

One of my key informants moved from Brooklyn to Nebraska, one moved to Massachusetts to live with her parents, one moved to Oregon, and another moved temporarily to upstate New York. Two of my informants from the IRC office in Oakland quit their jobs at IRC as I arrived to continue fieldwork and others transitioned to part-time positions. Moreover, the IRC headquarter offices in New York were under construction, which dragged on for months longer than employees had expected and delayed their return to their offices. Thus, while I was *in* the field in a traditional sense, I engaged with interlocutors in almost the same way as when I was *out* of the field.

This prompted reflections about what being in and out of the field means for data collection. Does a distinction between in and out even exist when you engage with informants online? When are you doing fieldwork and when are you not? Looking back through my field notes, I realized that these questions were constantly present in my mind as I struggled with a feeling of not doing "real" fieldwork. On April 9, 2021, I wrote in my journal: "Yesterday, I participated in an internal IRC meeting and it was such a relief to finally feel like I was doing 'real fieldwork.'" Clearly, I was guided by normative ideas about what counts as fieldwork and what does not.

Feminist scholars have recently begun challenging these normative ideas in the manifesto on *Patchwork Ethnography*, in which they emphasize how researchers' professional and personal commitments shape their opportunities and methods for producing knowledge (Günel et al., 2020). This manifesto contributes to the concept of assemblage ethnography important discussions about the gendered, racial, and classist challenges of doing traditional anthropological fieldwork. For example, long-term uninterrupted fieldwork far away from home might be more difficult for people with childcaring responsibilities. In their own words, "the methodological innovation of patchwork ethnography reconceptualizes research as working with rather than against the gaps, constraints, partial knowledge, and diverse commitments that characterize all

knowledge production." As a white woman with an EU passport, I start from a privileged position. However, re-thinking what counts as research and "real fieldwork" in a discipline that continues to perpetuate "the gendered (masculinist) assumptions of the always available and up-for-anything fieldworker" (Günel et al., 2020), resonates with my fragmented and interrupted experiences in the field and my own preconceptions about what counts as real data.

I do not argue that what you do and where you do it has no importance when doing ethnographic fieldwork. Being present physically in San Francisco and New York provided me with important insights about the environment of my interlocutors, even while I continued to interact with them mostly online. Likewise, the type of data collection that was possible during my fieldwork has certainly shaped my understanding of the field. However, the coronavirus pandemic emphasized methodological questions about how and when to do "real" fieldwork and challenged the sometimes-arbitrary distinctions between being in and out of the field. By combining online and offline methods, and moving in and out of the field, I was able to "patch" together various forms and bits of data into a patchwork of knowledge.

4.1.5 Field Relations, Positionality, and Ethical Considerations

From November 2019, I had regular contact with two interlocutors, Julie and Natalie, who became my fieldwork *gatekeepers*. Julie was head of the Global Technology Partnerships team at the IRC. Natalie worked as a senior technical advisor for the Economic Recovery and Development department. Both of them were in their 30s and lived in New York City. They were friendly and easy-going, and our conversations were energetic and characterized by a mutual interest in the topic of corporate partnerships and the tech sector. In fact, our relation was formed because they contacted me. One of their colleagues from the IRC office in London, whom I had met with one year earlier, had forwarded them my request to do research with the IRC. Julie and Natalie were both interested and in different ways involved in partnerships with the tech sector and my research had sparked their curiosity.

We set up a Teams meeting a few weeks later to discuss the details of my research. They were excited to have this research done because corporate partnerships, and especially involving technology companies, were a growing priority at the IRC. In one of our early meetings, Natalie explained that her team knew very well what was not working in their partnerships. What they did not know was how to make them work better. Thus, their interest in facilitating my research

was rooted in an ambition to apply the learnings to their own work. Julie also explained that having such research findings come from a neutral person who was not employed at either a tech company or an NGO would strengthen the legitimacy and usefulness of the research. We agreed that in addition to my dissertation, over which I had full ownership, I could potentially produce an output for them at the end of the project. Thus, our respective objectives for the research were made clear from the beginning.

Throughout the research, we checked in regularly and I requested access to various people and sites. Many of the plans we made for visiting sites were canceled due to the pandemic. Most of my regular communication with Julie and Natalie consisted of emails, WhatsApp messages and Teams calls. As COVID-19 lock downs continued, communication became less regular and more sporadic, and I interpreted this as a result of changes in their work. As a humanitarian organization, the IRC became extremely busy adjusting programs to new pandemic contexts, and facilitating my research became less of a priority for Julie and Natalie. I continued to contact them regularly but tried to be mindful of not taking up too much of their time. Thus, the contact I had with my gatekeepers became less close as time went by.

As researchers, we are always engaging with our fields, thinking, and writing from particular positions. I began this research from a critical standpoint. This standpoint is shaped by my personal experiences and professional background as a scholar who has engaged with critical, feminist, and postcolonial theory. From this standpoint, I brought an inherent skepticism about capitalist solutions to humanitarian crises. However, as an anthropologist I was also taught to try to understand the world from the perspective of my interlocutors (Souleles, 2021, p. 214). Throughout the research, I struggled with the tension of being critical of the corporate humanitarian solutionism as a "project" but empathetic towards my interlocutors as individuals. While my aim was never to reveal or expose the practices of my interlocutors as particularly wrong or devious, I wanted to ask critical questions about the broader systemic dynamics they were engaging and participating in. But how do you study people that you disagree with? How do you write critically about people that provide you with their time, energy, and access to a field? How honest can and should we be as researchers when studying elites?

In his reflections on studying up, Souleles (2021) argues that anthropologists should reconsider disciplinary ethics when studying elites. Drawing on the American Anthropological Association's (2012) Principles of Professional Responsibility "Do No Harm", "Be Open and Honest Regarding

Your Work", and "Obtain Informed Consent and Necessary Permissions", he writes: "In my own research practice, this training and ethical stance has led me to fall over backwards to explain what I'm up to, to seek permissions that allow people to opt out of my projects at various points and, finally, to allow people the opportunity to review my scholarship if their data is used" (Souleles, 2021, p. 217). Thus, Souleles argues that anthropological ethics need to catch up with the study of elites: "Informed consent or doing no harm is likely not possible if the object of study is some exercise of power we object to, or even simply one that we want to scrutinize" (Souleles, 2021, p. 220).

The common anthropological ethical principles also shaped my engagement with, and relations in, the field. For example, I shared project descriptions and research questions with interlocutors to be as transparent as possible about my research interests. Throughout the project period, I would send my key interlocutors project updates and findings both as a way to discuss these findings with them, but also to include them in the research process. Usually, however, they were too busy to read what I sent them. I also made sure that I was always presented as an individual researcher not affiliated to any of the organizations I was researching. I promised anonymity for all interviewees and would always ask permission to record interviews. However, in taking these measures, two main dilemmas followed me through the fieldwork: 1) How can I be transparent and honest about my critical perspectives without compromising research access? 2) How can I balance my theoretical critique to reflect the varied forms of power and "eliteness" of the people I study?

The very limited visibility of the organizations and tech companies I wished to study is a well-known challenge in studies of powerful groups of people who "do not want to be studied" (Souleles, 2018). According to Souleles, elites such as hedge fund managers and company CEOs "structure their worlds in such a way that the only obvious, advertised way to reach them is through intermediated channels (…) that allow them to ignore most people who want to talk to them" (Souleles, 2018, p. 157). In my field I did not get the feeling that interlocutors were intentionally hiding or did not want to talk. However, they were extremely busy, which was often the main reason why people did not want to talk to me.

IRC employees shared confidential documents and often voiced critical opinions with me, which suggested to me that they were not trying to hide or conceal something. In a conversation about the Signpost platform, which the IRC had created in collaboration with a handful of tech

companies, the project manager, Mark, encouraged me to speak to the IRC head of IT security, because Signpost had just had its first data breach. Mark did not comment more on what this breach entailed but noted that it was "exciting." I was puzzled by this casual openness about a potentially serious issue, and I wrote in my notes: "I am getting the impression that such data breaches should be understood as normal or expected. Is Mark performing some kind of transparency or why is he not more worried about a data breach involving refugees' data?"

When I finally spoke to the head of IT security at the IRC, he was a lot more hesitant to share information with me. In fact, he was one of the only people who refused to let me record the interview, "in case this conversation doesn't go well," he said. It did not. In the interview, I asked about the IRC's digital security procedures and whether the IRC or the tech companies owned and stored the data from the Signpost platform. While I tried my hardest to build rapport during our talk, the IRC employee was unreceptive, and the interview ended with him asking if I had signed a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) with the IRC. I had not. "I'll look into that", he said. However, I was never asked to sign an NDA.

Other times in conversations with interlocutors, I would share my critical reflections with them and realize that they were just as critical, if not more so, than me and had no problem being open about it. Thus, my experiences with doing critical research among the people whose work you are critiquing were mixed. In some cases, being transparent about my research aims might have compromised access or limited the information I could obtain, but in general my fear of sharing critical reflections and questions with my interlocutors was unfounded.

Power is always relative, relational, and contextual (Archer & Souleles, 2021). Therefore, it is important to consider the scales and types of power held within the broad group of people we study when we "study up," also in relation to our own position. My interlocutors from the IRC and tech companies might be considered "up" in relation to anthropology's traditional commitment to studying the marginalized and suffering subjects (Robbins, 2013). However, relative to academics from Western universities, who would similarly be difficult to obtain research access to, the study of this group might instead be considered "studying sideways" (Ortner, 2010, p. 221). Furthermore, the volunteer hackers at the two Techfugees hackathons could even be considered less powerful than me. They were younger, mostly unemployed, and some with non-permanent residency in Denmark. Thus, I struggled with how to differentiate between the diverse levels of power in the broad group of tech helpers I was studying and in relation to my

own position as a researcher. It felt wrong to apply the same critical lens to the practices of volunteer hackers, looking for jobs and friendships at hackathons, and those of senior directors and project managers at Microsoft and the IRC. Including these different groups of people in my study thus forced me to pay attention to the tensions of doing critical research and, rather than necessarily resolving them, understanding how these tensions are part of and inform my understanding of the topic I study.

4.1.5.1 Anonymity in the Articles

While I always promised anonymity to interviewees, the three articles in this dissertation reflect different degrees of anonymity. All three articles use the actual names of organizations, i.e., Google.org (article one), the IRC and their partners from Google, Microsoft, Accenture, Zendesk and Box (article two), and Techfugees and Google (article three). I decided not to anonymize these organizations and businesses because the events and partnerships I study have all been publicly advertised on social media. In article two, I ensure the anonymity of my interviewees from tech companies by not linking employee quotes to specific firms. In all articles, I use pseudonyms rather than people's actual names. I, and my co-author Lisa Ann Richey, make an exception in article one, where we use the actual names of Jacqueline Fuller and other key employees from Google.org, because their quotes are collected from presentations in publicly available videos, which we link to in the article. Some internal documents from the IRC were sent to me in confidentiality. I have not quoted directly from these documents but have used the information in them as background knowledge and have referred to their general content (e.g., the fact that the IRC produces quarterly market analyses).

4.2 Fieldwork

In 2020, I did five weeks of fieldwork in New York and San Francisco, followed up with 10 months of fieldwork in San Francisco in 2021. In this section, I describe these trips focusing on San Francisco and the IRC. Finally, I describe some of the sites I was not able to secure access to.

4.2.1 IRC Headquarters

As pointed out by Wright (2011), Feldman's strategy for studying EU migration policy "was to choose an agency in which to locate himself, not to generate place-bound descriptions of the officials' daily work, but to *catch a glimpse* of the process of aligning the hitherto separate policy domains" (page 28, my emphasis). I identified the IRC as such a vantage point. I highlight the phrase "catch a glimpse" because it resonates with my experience of a field that is open to observe only in glimpses, as I describe at the end of this section.

As my primary fieldwork gatekeepers, Julie and Natalie quite literally opened the gates at the IRC and invited me to spend a week at the New York headquarter offices in January 2020. I first went there in September 2019, before I had established enough contacts to get in. The ground floor of the large office building, which housed several businesses and organizations, had a front desk and security guards by the elevators. The IRC offices were located on the 12th and 14th floors. I walked into the lobby and took out my phone to photograph the impressive room, but a security guard stopped me: "No pictures, ma'am!" he said firmly.

When I returned in January, Natalie came to pick me up in the lobby. She took me to the front desk, checked off my name on a guest list, and I received a guest card, which gave me access to the offices for the day. For the next week, my access to the offices was mediated through Natalie and Julie. They introduced me to their networks and colleagues at the IRC and partner organizations, they offered me a vacant office in the building as a workspace while I did interviews, and they forwarded invitations to events. Julie invited me to join her lunch meeting with a tech partner of the IRC while Natalie shared reports and documents with me from the IRC's own research on corporate partnerships. As such, their help in establishing contacts in the field was instrumental.

Picture 9: The office I used during my fieldwork at the IRC headquarters in New York. The office belonged to a colleague of Julie and Natalie, who was doing fieldwork at the time. Photo taken by author, January 2020.

After my trip to the IRC offices in New York, I continued to engage with employees mainly from two teams, described below.

1. The IPP Tech Team. This team became a key informant group, with which I had regular contact. I also attended several of their meetings and was invited to attend events with team members. The team sits within a larger team called International Development (in daily talk referred to as IPP), which is situated within the department for Global Philanthropy and Partnerships. The department is divided into four pillars focusing on 1) marketing, 2) strategic growth, 3) US philanthropy, and 4) international development. The IPP team focused on partnerships and fundraising from global corporations, global foundations, and individuals outside of the US The IPP Tech Team, headed by Julie, focused on establishing and maintaining partnerships with transnational tech companies.

The team usually met twice a month to discuss its joint strategy as well as individual tasks. The strategy was based on quarterly reports, which laid out how much they had fundraised in the previous quarter and how much they needed to raise to reach their annual goals. The reports also described the funding priorities of the tech sector, developments in the CSR landscape, and other contextual information upon which the team could plan a strategy for sustaining partnerships or engaging in new ones.

The main responsibility of the IPP tech team was to fundraise and attract large donations through corporate partnerships. It was a growing frustration among team members that the dominant metric used to evaluate their work and success was how much money they could collect, because the tech companies they were partnering with were less interested in donating money and more eager to donate products and volunteer hours. This affected the kinds of partnerships the team could establish, because a corporate partnership had to include a financial component, whereas other departments were able to form partnerships with businesses based on different metrics and approaches.

The people on the IPP tech team were employed as "partnership officers" and they each had a portfolio of tech companies that they were either pursuing partnerships with or maintaining existing partnerships with. My key informants from this group were Daniel, Jessica, and Anna; they were all in their 20s, educated, very ambitious and driven, and with already impressive CVs. When Julie went on leave in 2021, Jessica took over most of her tasks and became my main point of contact for the IPP tech team. About the same time, Daniel left his job at the IRC, and when I talked to Anna, she told me that during this period it was more or less only herself and Jessica that were working on the team.

The role of the partnership officers was to find partnership opportunities, negotiate the conditions, and maintain close relationships with the companies in their portfolio. During a lunch break meeting with Jessica and Daniel, Jessica described her job as "figuring out what the companies want from a partnership, go to the IRC field staff and discuss how this aligns with their needs on the ground, and then draft a strategy for how to partner in a way that works for both." Drafting a strategy, Daniel continued, involved a large amount of "creative thinking" in figuring out how to translate and align the needs of each partner. He added that "we are the bridges between the IRC and the companies, but also interpreters." The IPP tech team introduced me to contacts at tech company partners at Google, Microsoft, Zendesk, Box, and Accenture.

2. The Signpost Global Team. The second group of key informants at the IRC was the Signpost Global Team, which during the majority of my fieldwork consisted of three IRC employees and one Mercy Corps employee (a partner NGO). I spoke to all four team members several times and followed up with them regularly about their work. Later in my fieldwork, some employees left the team and others joined, characteristic of the high turn-over in this field. Mark, the director of Signpost, joined the team in 2020. He was in his 30s and had a career in the humanitarian sector as well as in the tech sector. He had recently moved to Oregon where he owned and managed a coffee roasting company on the side. Mark was energetic, well-spoken, and enthusiastic about explaining Signpost and its mission. In nearly all my meetings and interviews with him, he was multi-tasking, either cooking or eating his lunch, grocery shopping, or doing some other everyday activity. He was ambitious and had the aspirational rhetoric of a tech entrepreneur, talking about scaling, growth, and "transforming the international aid information architecture" or Signpost being an "information revolution." He was open and trusting in his communication and appeared to find pride in sharing also (some of) the failures or lessons learned in Signpost.

Halfway through my fieldwork, Mark asked me if I would be interested in helping his team do a case study of Signpost, which would be used to promote the project internally in the IRC and possible also externally as a series of blog posts targeted at the humanitarian and Tech for Good communities. I agreed to this task, thinking that it was a good way to collect data and reciprocate by producing something of value to the team. However, over the course of the few weeks I was preparing the case study, Mark's plans changed and I never heard back about what Signpost ended up using the study for. Besides Mark, the Signpost Global team included a product manager, a protection specialist, and a monitoring and evaluation specialist. All three were young women in their 20s or early 30s, living in New York. In interviews, they were helpful and open, but always extremely busy.

4.2.2 San Francisco: The Heartland of Tech and Compassionate Capitalism

Near the end of my fieldwork in San Francisco, I was driving into the city on the 101 highway from San Jose. Close to the city, I saw a huge billboard, placed on top of the AirBnB headquarters building on 888 Brannan Street in San Francisco. The ad read "Help Us Host Afghan Refugees" and featured AirBnB's logo and distinctive red color. This billboard vividly illustrated not only

the dominant presence of tech companies in the city, but also the prominent positioning of humanitarian and refugee-related sentiments in these companies' advertisement and branding. AirBnB used its prime advertisement space for this exact message, signaling the importance of humanitarian sentiments in its branding and external communication. Facing the 101 highway, one of the main infrastructures leading into the city, this billboard welcomed people to San Francisco and to its particular mix of business, tech, and "doing good."

Picture 10: AirBnB advertises its support for refugees. Source: https://news.airbnb.com/how-airbnb-org-and-airbnb-employees-continue-to-support-afghan-refugees/

San Francisco has a long history as a US Western capital of counterculture, technological innovation, and progressive politics (F. Turner, 2006). With the growth in size and wealth of the Silicon Valley tech sector, which became a global center for the computer industry in the 1980s, San Francisco became one of the wealthiest cities of the nation and a financial hub comparable to New York City. However, the countercultural roots are still present in the kind of idealistic and "compassionate" capitalism that characterizes the San Francisco Bay Area, in which corporate

charity is the norm and making money is always linked somehow to an explicit desire to make the world a better place (Alfrey & Twine, 2018). The connections between tech companies and philanthrocapitalism is thus very visible in San Francisco, making it a suitable location for my fieldwork.

My first trip to San Francisco was in January 2020, when I arrived after having spent one week in New York City at the IRC headquarters. I stayed in Oakland, across the East Bay from San Francisco, for five weeks before returning to Copenhagen. During this trip I met with Julie and other IRC employees as well as employees from the tech companies that partnered with the IRC. I also visited the local IRC office in Oakland, participated in meetings (both offline and online), and attended a Tech for Good event in Silicon Valley (see article one).

When I returned to San Francisco in March 2021, I stayed in the city in an affluent area called Lower Pacific Heights. This area, known as "Pac Heights," is situated right between the ultra-wealthy part of San Francisco with the notorious "Billionaires Row" of spectacular homes overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge to the north and the extremely poor and gritty Tenderloin neighborhood to the south, where homelessness and drugs dominate the streets. The contrast between the rich and the poor areas of San Franciso is stark and the city has the third-highest income inequality of the 10 most populated cities in the country (Rezal, 2022). This socioeconomic division between the northern and southern parts of the city is part of a *racial geography*, in which San Francisco's Black population is increasingly forced by rising real estate prices and eviction policies away from the affluent north to the poorer south-eastern neighborhoods of San Franciso with less infrastructure and higher levels of pollution (Whitacre et al., 2021). Lower Pac Heights and the neighborhoods north of it are thus primarily populated by White and Asian residents.

However, within this "anti-Blackness" of San Francisco, progressive politics were always explicit and visible. Black Lives Matter signs and rainbow-colored pride flags were displayed in the windows of million-dollar homes and shiny Tesla cars. Locals complained, in newspaper columns and in checkout lines at Whole Foods, about the homelessness crisis and the rising economic inequality. This display of progressive political views amid obvious racial and economic inequality has been called out as a particularly Californian brand of hypocrisy which is "progressive in principle, but 'not in my backyard' in practice" (Burrell & Fourcade, 2021, p. 216). Others critically argue that the acknowledgment of injustice serves as an alibi for actively

benefitting from, and retrenching, the systems that produce this injustice (Whitacre et al., 2021, p. 1398). San Francisco's problems with homelessness and poverty are often cast (including by some of my interlocutors) as a problem created by the tech companies, their resistance to paying corporate taxes, and the flow of young, well-educated, and wealthy citizens they attract, pushing house prices up and lower-income citizens out (Alfrey & Twine, 2018). At the same time, these local problems provided a strange contrast to the humanitarian engagements of tech companies, as interlocutors questioned why tech companies would focus on saving refugees in Europe instead of helping the homeless people in their own neighborhoods.

Picture 11: Outside the Salesforce Tower in the financial district of San Francisco, where I accompanied Julie to her meetings with IRC's tech partners. Photo taken by author, August 2021.

This view was expressed by an IRC employee in Oakland, as we sat in her office talking about how she had experienced partnering with tech companies in the Bay Area. She said that in her experience "purpose is the new currency" but that a lot of companies actually do want to have a positive impact. "But it's just not working!" she proclaimed. "All you have to do is stick your head out of the window here and in San Francisco to see that it's not working." She then explained:

> Corporations are built to make money. They shouldn't be ashamed of that. But especially in the Bay Area it's [presented as being] about "they're not there to make money. They're there to save the world. Social impact." But they're just still there to make money and that's OK.

Thus, San Francisco as a field site highlighted some of the tensions that surround the growing corporate humanitarian engagement of tech companies.

4.2.3 Access Denied: Catching Glimpses of a Closed Field

As with most ethnographic research, I encountered several closed doors and sites I was not allowed to access. In January 2020, the IPP tech team organized a tech partner workshop for all the tech partners in the Signpost project. The goal of the workshop was to convince tech partners to "re-commit" and donate more money to the project. I asked Julie if I could attend this workshop, and she first told me that she would consider it, but that the tech partners would most likely require me to sign NDAs. A few days later, I asked her again, and she told me that the partners had declined my request. I regularly asked Julie or Natalie to be introduced to their tech partners, which they usually agreed to. Sometimes, however, this request was declined either by the tech company (this happened, for example, with the companies Salesforce and Meta) or by the IRC, because they considered the partnership "too fragile" or in a too-vulnerable position to ask for favors (this happened, for example, with the companies Twilio and Cisco). The vulnerability consisted mostly in the fact that the IRC was in the process of applying for large grants with these companies.

These challenges of gaining access and the feeling of research access being "fragile" shaped how I engaged with informants and how I interpreted the practices I observed. Below is an excerpt from my field journal, where I describe some of my personal reflections about this:

Before the meeting I noticed that I felt nervous and excited. Case and I were in Klitmøller watching baseball on the couch, but mentally I couldn't relax because I knew I was about to participate in the IRC meeting that Julie had invited me to a couple of days earlier. Now, about half an hour before the meeting, I started to feel excited and a little anxious, which was a familiar sensation. This is what I felt like the other times I had the chance to participate in something like this or was about to conduct an interview with a person that I had categorized in my head as someone who was difficult to access. It's as if this feeling comes from finally accessing something – catching a glimpse of something which is otherwise very closed off. For me, these meetings are an opportunity to participate, to gain insight, to be included in something that is not open and available to me the majority of the time. That makes it an exciting moment. But perhaps I need to consider how this excitement shapes my observations. Like I noted after the last meeting, it was clear that Jessica was bored. This was just another meeting in a long workday for her. So perhaps I shouldn't assume that everything really is as exciting as it is for me. Maybe not all words need to be taken so literally, because they might not be as "secret" or "exclusive" as I make them in my head. Ten minutes before the virtual meeting started, I began preparing in the way I always do now before these meetings. I found my computer charger and plugged it into the computer. I logged in to Teams, found my headphones, got a glass of water in the kitchen, and found a blanket for my chair. I questioned whether I should have the camera on or off during the meeting. Would the others have their cameras on? Was the internet connection stable enough for camera? Was it too dark in the room? Too noisy? Would it be easier to take notes if I left the camera off? I decided not to turn on the camera because the internet connection was too weak. I got settled in front of the computer, ready for the next short glimpse.

Field note excerpt, October 9, 2020.

This feeling of glimpses of access remained throughout my fieldwork. Most of the time, the field was not open to be observed. However, sometimes at meetings or events, the field would open up and provide a first-hand glimpse into the world of my informants. In between these glimpses of the field, I attempted to fill the gaps and stitch together a coherent image. I did this by collecting various documents (e.g., summaries from meetings I was not given access to), following my informants' activities on social media, conducting short follow-up interviews with key informants,

and more. This data collection made it possible to follow my field over time despite not being consistently present in one site.

4.3 Data Sample

4.3.1 Sampling Strategy

Before I started this Ph.D., I had identified the IRC as an organization that was particularly active in engaging with the private sector. In 2018, I conducted a handful of introductory interviews with IRC employees in New York and London to get an understanding of their interactions and collaborations with for-profit companies. I also participated in a summit organized by the business coalition Tent Partnership for Refugees in New York in 2019 to familiarize myself with the actors and organizations in this field, and I conducted follow-up interviews with Tent employees. The event and subsequent interviews confirmed the prominent role of the IRC in the field. These initial activities helped me define five sampling criteria, which I used to narrow my data collection at the IRC. I chose to focus on corporate partnerships at the IRC that were 1) refugee-focused, 2) including a tech company, 3) on-going, 4) focused not only on donations, but also the implementation of technology, and 5) focused not only on integration, but other parts of the migration process.

This focus led me to connect with Julie and Natalia and their respective teams at the IRC. By snowball sampling my way through their networks, I established contacts with interlocutors from tech companies and other NGOs. It was also through my IRC contacts that I was invited to attend the Google AI Impact Summit in February 2020 (analyzed in article one). By following the IRC and its partner organizations on Twitter (now called X), Facebook, and particularly LinkedIn, I learned about the organization Techfugees and its hackathons in Copenhagen. I decided to attend these events and use the opportunity to observe the development of digital refugee solutions in practice. While hackathons were not initially part of my data collection plan, they became part of my study because of the way Techfugees and the IRC were linked in this online and offline space of Tech for Good.

4.3.2 Interviews

Interviews include semi-structured interviews with written interview guides, shorter follow-up interviews, informal conversations with informants, and group interviews. In total, I conducted 62 interviews with 52 different participants. The interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 1.5 hours in duration and were conducted both online (49) and in person (13). The in-person interviews were conducted in informants' offices, coffee houses, and restaurants. The online interviews were conducted in Microsoft Teams, Skype, Google Hangout, or Zoom calls.

Both online and in-person interviews were usually restricted to a very finite time frame defined by the informant. In the beginning, I would ask for one-hour interviews, but I learned that one full hour was often too long for my informants' busy schedules. When informants suggested time frames themselves, they would usually suggest 30-45 minutes. The interviews were scheduled in between other meetings and therefore participants were often coming straight from other meetings and going into the next right after our talk. More often than not, participants were running late or rescheduled the interview a few hours before. The online platforms we used also helped delineate the timeframe for the interview, as the default meetings suggested on these platforms are half an hour or one hour. Thus, interviews rarely went on for longer than planned because participants most often had other meetings waiting (see also Seaver, 2017, for similar reflections on the use of interviews in corporate tech settings).

Many of the interviews were recorded on a digital recorder, always with explicit consent given from informants to be recorded. Sometimes I chose not to record, because asking for permission to record would change the dynamic or compromise the trust when this trust seemed vulnerable still. Some informants asked details about what the recording would be used for. I tried to explain in as much detail as possible what my research was about and offered to send them a written project description. I also encouraged them to contact me if they had questions or concerns about the interviews afterwards, but none of the participants did. In all interviews, I assured participants that they would remain anonymous if I quoted them anywhere. I chose not to record short follow-up conversations because I wanted to keep the conversations informal and light, and the process of obtaining consent to record often changed the dynamic of the conversation to make it more formal and participants more self-conscious.

The majority of interviewees can be roughly divided into two groups: 1) IRC employees and 2) employees of IRC partner organizations, including tech companies and other NGOs. These partner organizations include the two NGOs Mercy Corps and NetHope, and the tech companies Google,

Microsoft, Zendesk, Fraym, Box, and Accenture. A third and smaller group of interviewees includes participants and organizers of the two refugee hackathons I attended, a tech entrepreneur who had worked alongside IRC developing digital initiatives for refugees in Greece, and a former employee of the organization Tent, who introduced me to other people in the field. The table below shows the distribution of interview participants.

Table 2: Interviews

	Interview Participants		Total
IRC Employees	Headquarter staff	Field staff	32
	22	10	
Partner Org. Employees	Tech company	NGO	13
	11	2	
Others			7

As this table shows, my interviews focused on the headquarter level of the IRC. Headquarter staff includes project managers, fundraisers, legal teams, IT teams, technical advisors, HR teams, communication teams, monitoring and evaluation teams, policy teams, and more. Perhaps surprisingly, gaining access to headquarter levels was easier than for field offices. My IRC contacts at headquarter levels were more eager to introduce me to other headquarter staff members since arranging field office visits required another layer of logistical planning and research permissions, which became impossible during the pandemic. I also interpreted this difference in access as an indication of the interest in this research topic at headquarter levels and the lack of interest at field office levels. The field staff members I did speak to were not disinterested, but they were more skeptical and pragmatic about the partnerships with tech companies. This likely impacted their interest in engaging with me.

4.3.3 Participant Observation

I did participant observation at events and meetings both in person and online, as illustrated in table three below. The events include business summits, virtual presentations, and webinars (at Tent, Google.org and NetHope) and hackathons. The meetings include internal meetings in and

between the IRC teams and meetings between the IRC and their tech partners. Most meetings took place online, but a few happened in person, like the one in San Francisco I describe from fieldwork excerpts below:

There was silence in the car. Julie was responding to emails on her phone. I kept quiet, trying not to disturb her. But it felt awkward. We just came from a meeting with a tech company. Julie had canceled their originally planned meeting a few days before and had sent her assistant instead, so the meeting today was mostly "to be polite." We met William and Ted from the company at a small restaurant on a busy street corner, where we all sat down at the bar to eat salads and drink lemonade. The relationship between Julie, William, and Ted seemed very friendly even as the conversation turned from small talk to business. They were all meeting a few days later for a workshop with the partners in the Signpost project (Google, Microsoft, Meta, and more) and William and Ted asked Julie about the contributions of the other partners because they did not want to "step on any toes." Julie explained that Google was donating millions of dollars, Microsoft a little less. "Have any of these partners ever even been in the field?" William asked, with a disparaging attitude. Julie smiled knowingly. "Microsoft has," she said. After about 30 minutes, Ted had to leave for another meeting. William invited Julie and I to come see their new office across the street. The building was bright and newly renovated, all materials in light wood. There were large kitchens on all floors with shiny white tiles, a wide selection of coffees and teas and big jars full of cereals, nuts, and gummy bears. William showed us around and offered us coffee with almond milk. We stopped by a map over the building, displaying the layout with room names such as "the pizza slice", "the taco desk", and "the bowler hat". As Julie and I walked from the offices to our next Uber car, I asked her if the tech company was interested in becoming part of the Signpost project. She looked at me, pursed her lips tightly, and lifted her eyebrows, before replying, "Yeah, we're trying to find a way to get them involved, but they don't have a funding program, which makes it hard to take them on board." After sitting in silence in the car for a while, Julie looked at her wrist and proclaimed, "My watch is telling me to breathe. It can tell I'm stressed out. I always try to get the most out of my time here, but this might have been too much." Her meeting would start in two minutes, the traffic had slowed to a crawl, and suddenly Julie had had enough. "Just drop us off here, we'll walk the rest of the way," she told the driver, who pulled over. I was sitting on the passenger side of

the car, so I quickly opened the door to let us out. I struggled to collect my bag and balance my coffee, but Julie was already pushing us out of the door. I stepped out ungracefully, simultaneously trying to throw my backpack on my shoulder. My coffee spilled everywhere. When I looked up, Julie was once again 10 meters ahead of me, bag and coffee intact. I ran to catch up. The deftness with which Julie and I navigated this scene could not have been more different.

Field note excerpt, January 23, 2020.

Compared to the participant observations I conducted online, these field notes illustrate the physical experience of *being there* – the awkwardness of sitting in silence, the different facial expressions, and the rush to get out of the car. These aspects were much more difficult to record online. However, I did not consider the online observations as compensations for not being in the field. I was present in the field in the same way my interlocutors were present. In the months following the coronavirus pandemic, everyone was meeting online, and the Teams and Zoom meeting rooms became the only space where people in this field interacted. In this sense, by observing online I was present in a traditional ethnographic way because there was no in-person alternative to these virtual spaces.

Table 3: Participant Observation

Observations			Total
Events	In person	Online	6
	4	2	
Meetings	In person	Online	10
	3	7	

4.3.4 Emails and Online Communication

If not introduced by one of my informants, my main way to get in contact with new interlocutors was through LinkedIn. Most people in the field do not have their email addresses or contact information publicly visible on websites, so LinkedIn was a great place to not only locate who works where, but also to contact them. LinkedIn has a message function that allows you to send short messages. It is also possible to request to "connect" if you already know the person. Usually,

I would begin with a short introduction of myself and my research, and then request a short chat. A typical message from me on LinkedIn could look like this:

> Hi Alexandra, I am a Ph.D. student from Copenhagen. I am doing a research project on partnerships between humanitarian organizations and tech companies focusing on the refugee crisis, and I would really love to learn more about your work! Let me know if you would like to have a talk.

Before I started the Ph.D., I also reached out to potential informants on LinkedIn, which looked like this:
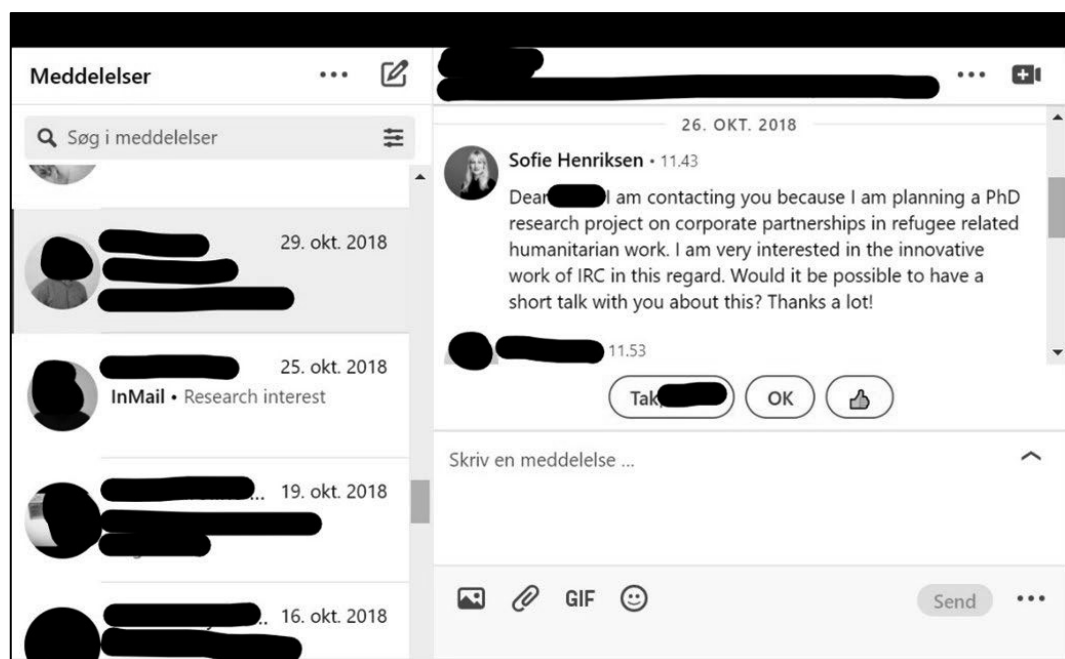
About half the people I contacted on LinkedIn responded, some after several messages. I also used LinkedIn to stay in touch with informants I had already met or as an alternative communication channel if they were not responding via email. Moreover, LinkedIn became a way for me to learn about informants' social interactions. When doing in-person fieldwork, the researcher would usually take notes to describe how people look, act, interact with other people, and how they present themselves in social situations. Due to the pandemic, digital forums and virtual spaces became the only sites for my informants to interact and therefore helpful sites to observe this interaction.

LinkedIn is a specific forum with a specific purpose. It is a business network platform, in which people strengthen their professional networks and careers by applying for jobs, posting about job-related achievements and news, and connecting with professional interests and colleagues. Thus, observing how my informants interact on LinkedIn – what they post, what posts they like, who they are connected with, how they describe their own work and skills, etc. – was an important part of understanding how people in my field understand and present themselves and what they do. It was also a helpful way to keep myself updated on their activities in between meetings and interviews in order to piece together a coherent picture of the field.

In order to capture the everyday communication and interactions that usually take place in physical fieldwork, I started systematically collecting email correspondences with my key informants. A large part of my communication with informants happened via emails and the messages convey a particular social dynamic and way of interaction. During fieldwork, I copied all email communications with informants into a table every week to document the on-going conversations. These emails were not meant as data for document or discourse analysis, but merely as ethnographic material to get a sense of the style of communication and convey the social dynamics, the atmosphere, and the way in which my informants made themselves accessible in the field.

I learned quickly that email communication in this field is characterized by its own language, phrases, and writing styles. Moreover, there were certain categories or types of emails I encountered repeatedly in the field, each one following some general style guidelines. For example, the "professional introduction" email. This type of email was used by my informants to connect me with people from their network. Below is an example:

Hi Sofie, I hope you are well!

In our last conversation, you might recall that I suggested it would be interesting for you to chat with my colleague – Susan (in copy) – who coordinates the Business Refugee Action Network (BRAN). Apologies for the delay, but I wanted to take this opportunity to connect you now.

Susan, as shared earlier, Sofie is exploring IRC's experiences partnering with the private sector, with a focus on tech partnerships. She is doing this through interviews with staff, but is also trying to find opportunities to observe some of these interactions in practice. So, in addition to your interview, if you think there might be any upcoming BRAN meetings Sofie could listen in on, I'm sure she would love to hear about those suggestions too.

Thanks both! (and happy holidays!)

Natalie

A more informal example of this email type looked like this:

Hey Sofie,
Wanted to introduce you to Sarah, one of our Technical Architects. She has been on the Signpost project since the beginning back in July of 2020 and will be able to give you the technical insight you were inquiring about.
I'll let the two of you schedule a time to chat that works!
Best,
William

Another example is the "follow-up email," a type of email I used to follow up with informants who I either wanted to speak with again or who had not responded to my previous emails. I quickly learned that the language in these emails should be direct and to the point. It worked best to have a specific request (e.g., can we talk more about a, b, or c), and to request very short meetings (emphasizing phrases such as "quick chat" and "short call").

> Hi Amanda,
>
> I just wanted to follow up on the email below and kindly ask if you have time for a short chat in the coming weeks? A suggestion from my side could be Tuesday next week?
>
> Thanks a lot for your time and I hope we get a chance to speak.
>
> Best,
> Sofie

After a few emails back and forth and three weeks without a response, I sent a shorter and more direct follow-up email:

> Hi Amanda,
>
> Just following up on our chat. Would you have time next week to meet?
>
> Best,
> Sofie

Other times, I would simply send a calendar invitation for a Teams meeting without asking in an email first. This approach worked with key informants whom I had spoken to several times. Again, I would only request short meetings (15-30 minutes).
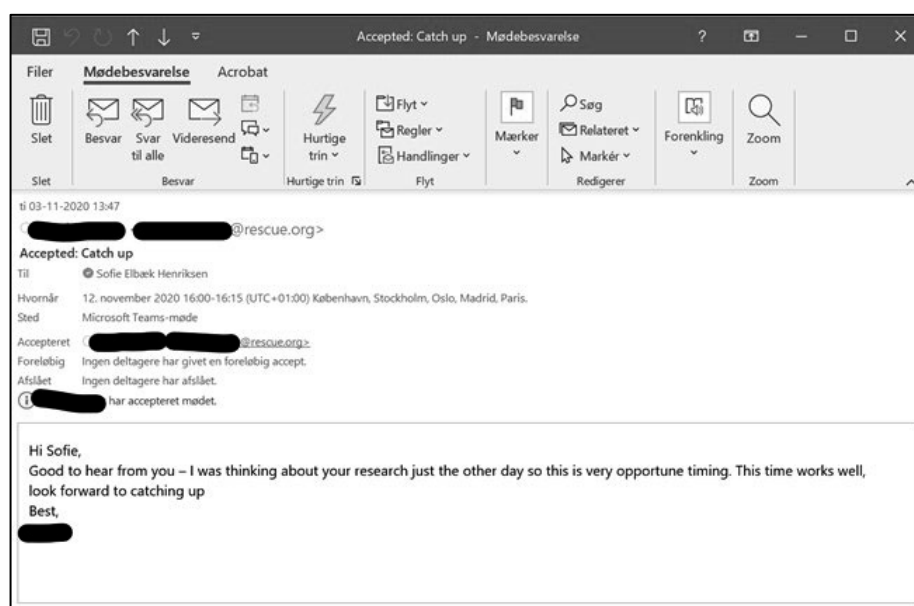
A final example is the "rescheduling email" in which an interview or meeting was delayed, postponed, or simply canceled. These emails were usually very short, not more than one line, and featured very similar language. Examples include: "Hey Sofie - can we do this a bit later today by any chance? Do you have other slots this afternoon?" or "Hello again! I'm sorry to ask again, but do you have time later today to connect?" or "Hello. We need to reschedule. Sorry. Between my new exec review and James' UK call we won't be able to have a coherent discussion. I'm adding my assistant to look for time over the next couple of days. Apologies." Oftentimes, these rescheduling emails would be sent on the day of the interview. I interpret all these emails as types of interaction that illustrate the field and the people in it.

4.3.5 Documents, Visual and Audio Material

I collected a variety of documents, podcasts, and visual materials in order to substantiate the findings from participant observations and interviews. Job ads, for example, became a way for me to understand how IRC employees actually worked with (or were expected to work with) private sector partnerships, because these ads included detailed descriptions of work responsibilities and tasks. For example, in an ad for the position of partnerships officer in the IPP department, the job description reads:

> The Officer (…) manages a portfolio of foundations and corporate clients supporting the IRC through financial and other resource commitments. The Officer creates tailored strategies for collaboration with foundations and businesses, with a focus on sustained revenue generation and humanitarian impact through innovative, outcomes-based partnerships.

One of the major responsibilities in this role, according to the ad, is to:

> develop and prioritize a series of high-impact, insightful *solutions-focused* opportunities that serve the IRC's beneficiaries across the world, whilst offering private sector clients innovative outlets to deploy philanthropic, marketing-based, core-business and other strategies in support of the IRC s humanitarian agenda. *(Emphasis added).*

These descriptions clearly illustrate an emphasis on solutions and finding "sweet spot" partnerships that serve beneficiaries while being a business opportunity (see article two).

Similarly, looking at presentation slides and webinars where IRC employees presented a particular partnership provided me with details about the partnerships that I could subsequently ask about in interviews. Additionally, these virtual presentations, as well as interviews in magazine articles and social media posts, showed me how the IRC wanted to portray the partnerships with tech companies to the public and how they highlighted the benefits of tech corporate engagement.

After attending an event in person, I found recordings of the speeches on YouTube. These YouTube videos became important pieces of data for article one. The books and podcasts became part of my data sample because interlocutors recommended them to me. For example, in an interview with an IRC employee in Oakland, she told me that I should read the critical book *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* by Anand Giridharadas to understand how she felt about partnering with tech companies. Similarly, the director of Signpost recommended a podcast about "the end of extractive journalism" to understand the kind of "information revolution" he was envisioning with Signpost. These materials thus highlighted how my interlocutors reflected on their own work.

Finally, I was given access to some internal documents such as market analysis reports, quarterly fundraising reports, impact reports from particular partnerships, a draft of an ethical framework for partnering with the tech sector, and more. While I was allowed to read the documents, my interlocutors asked me not to share or quote from them directly.

Table 4: Documents, audio, and video material

Documents, audio, and video material	
Press releases	10
Online articles and blog posts	54
Social media posts and websites	15
Promotional material and presentation slides	6
Job postings	22
Internal documents and reports	14
Public reports	16
Books	3

Podcasts	8
Webinars	14
YouTube videos	11

4.4 Analytical Process

The analytical processes are described in each of the three articles, but overall followed an abductive approach in which data collection and analysis is not separated. This means that data were analyzed throughout the fieldwork, which then shaped and informed subsequent data collection. According to Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012):

> Abductive reasoning begins with a puzzle, a surprise, or a tension (…) the researcher tacks continually, constantly, back and forth in an iterative–recursive fashion between what is puzzling and possible explanations for it, whether in other field situations (e.g., other observations, other documents or visual representations, other participations, other interviews) or in research-relevant literature. The back and forth takes place less as a series of discrete steps than it does in the same moment: in some sense, the researcher is simultaneously puzzling over empirical materials and theoretical literatures. (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 27)

Burawoy's *extended case method* (1998) is a well-known example of this abductive approach. In this method, data from empirical cases are collected ethnographically, examined interpretively with attention to their specific empirical contexts, and used to illuminate broader societal issues or processes. Importantly, the initial data collection is informed by theory. Thus, in contrast to inductive analytical approaches, an abductive approach does not claim to begin data analysis with no theoretical preconceptions (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 168). In fact, it is exactly in light of existing theories and in-depth familiarity with a broad range of theories that the researcher is able to recognize empirical data as surprising, novel, or insightful (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 169). Moreover, the tension that instigates the abductive analytical approach is often a result of the clash between the researcher's theoretically-founded expectations and the empirical reality they met in the field. Article two of this dissertation exemplifies this approach particularly well:

> My analytical interest in alignment was sparked by the observations made at the events I attended. These events focused on CSPs with businesses in the humanitarian field. Looking

through my field notes, I noticed that ideas of alignment were dominant in discussions on how to partner with the private sector. In my interviews, this pattern reappeared as discussions of the sweet spot partnerships. The repeated mention of sweet spots among practitioners and participants in the field was puzzling, as it resembled classic CSR narratives while being presented as a move beyond traditional CSR or philanthropy. I then reviewed critical theory on the narratives, discourses, and power relations of CSR to situate the sweet spot discourse in a theoretical framework that scrutinizes widely agreed-upon or taken-for-granted narratives. (Article two, page 163).

Thus, the tensions and puzzles I identified in the field emerged out of my existing expectations and theoretical knowledge. In turn, my theoretical knowledge evolved throughout the analytical process and was shaped by the findings from the field.

4.4.1 Coding

For article two, I coded interviews and field notes in NVivo because my analytical aim was to find a pattern in the ways in which "sweet spots" were articulated and understood in the field. I applied strategies of "structural coding" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 130) and "pattern coding" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 322) to create broad segments of data and identify patterns within each segment (see a more detailed description in article two). In articles one and three, I followed different analytical processes in which structured coding and the use of NVivo was not relevant. These processes are described in the articles.

4.4.2 Collaborative Writing

Article one was co-authored with Lisa Ann Richey, who is also my Ph.D. supervisor. The article is based on my fieldwork data from San Francisco but is the result of collaborative analysis and writing. I shared my field notes, interview notes, and pictures with Lisa and found links to YouTube videos from the Tech for Good event we were analyzing. During the writing phase, I was based in San Francisco and Lisa in Denmark, so we discussed the draft virtually and wrote in an online Google document. Data analysis and manuscript writing was shared equally between us, while I was the corresponding author responsible for submitting (and re-submitting) the manuscript and responding to reviewer comments.

This dissertation and the articles in it represent my individual work but they are also shaped by my collaborations with my two supervisors, as they have supported, critiqued, and helped me refine my analytical lens and writing throughout the Ph.D. However, the decision to co-author an article with my supervisor extended this collaboration in ways that brought benefits and challenges. The process of co-authoring with an experienced academic thinker and writer taught me important skills in crafting an argument grounded in the data available, structuring a manuscript, and moving through the publication process. Moreover, having a publication with a recognized and much-cited scholar in my field is a clear advantage for me as an early-career scholar.

On the other hand, having a co-authored article in my Ph.D. exposes me to doubts about how much the article reflects my work versus my supervisor's. At the same time, there are important power dynamics and ethics to consider, when co-authoring in a supervisor-student relation. For example, our supervisor-student relation could potentially influence our collaboration such that Lisa's opinions on the article's analysis or writing style would have more weight than mine. However, I experienced the collaboration as a fruitful and honest process in which we each contributed with our individual perspectives. The co-authorship reflects the ways in which the paper, while based on my ethnographic research, came out of our collaborative thinking on the themes in the paper.

5. ARTICLES

	Articles	Authors	Journal and status
1	Google's Tech Philanthropy: Capitalism and Humanitarianism in the Digital Age	Co-authored with Lisa Ann Richey	Published in *Public Anthropologist* (2022)
2	Finding the "Sweet Spot": The Politics of Alignment in Cross-Sector Partnerships for Refugees	Single authored	Published in special issue of *Business & Society* (2023)
3	Hacking the Refugee Crisis: Merging Refugee Aid and Digital Capitalism in Humanitarian Hacking	Single authored	Submitted to *Journal of Refugee Studies* (2023)

5.1 Article One

Google's Tech Philanthropy:

Capitalism and Humanitarianism in the Digital Age

Published, March 2022.
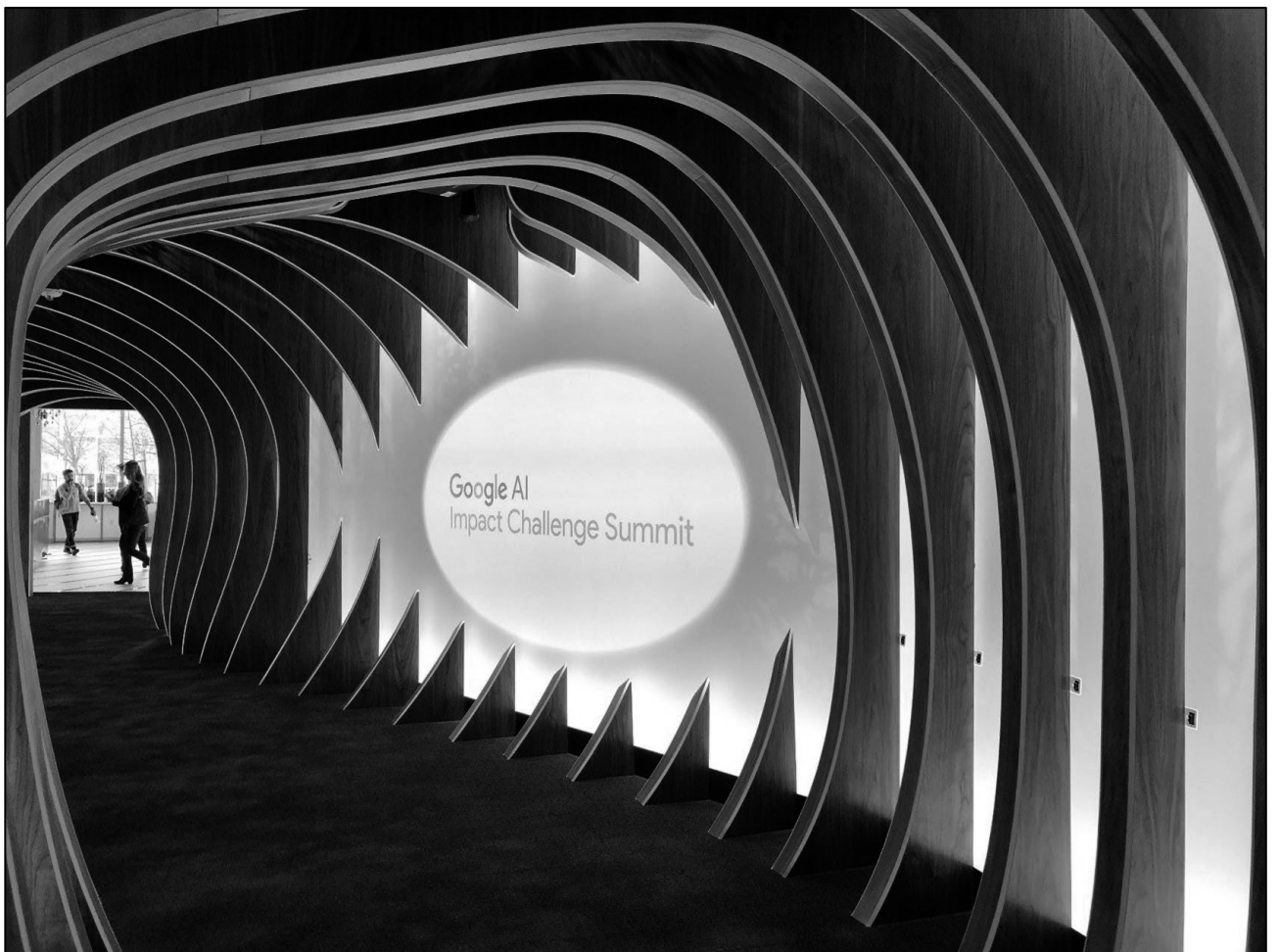
Picture 12: Entrance to the "Grove" where the Google AI Impact Challenge took place in Redwood City, California. Photo taken by author, February 2020.

Google's Tech Philanthropy:

Capitalism and Humanitarianism in the Digital Age

Sofie Elbæk Henriksen and Lisa Ann Richey

Abstract

Transnational tech companies have become important actors in global philanthropy. Led by tech giants such as Google, this tech philanthropy consists not just of donating funds to expert organizations and NGOs but also, importantly, in using the companies' own expertise and products to create social impact. This philanthropy is celebrated as innovative and criticized as exploitative for its novel ways of combining capitalism with global helping. But in what way is tech philanthropy novel and to what extent does it continue the well-worn historical trajectory of humanitarianism and capitalism? In this paper, we analyze the philanthropic practices of Google focusing on the company's current attempt to link philanthropy to the big business of artificial intelligence (AI). Based on ethnographic data collected at the "Google AI Impact Challenge Summit" in San Francisco and interviews with tech and humanitarian stakeholders, we highlight the entanglements of capitalism and humanitarianism in tech philanthropy.

Keywords

Introduction: Locating the Spectacle of Google's Tech Philanthropy

"All right, well, welcome everyone" Jacquelline Fuller, President of Google.org, declared as she stepped up on stage, smiling and clapping her hands together once.[1] "I am so excited to be here. In fact, yesterday, I was sitting with a friend having lunch and she said, 'OK, of all the stuff you are working on across Google and Google.org, what are you most excited about?' And I said, this room." She pointed her index fingers to the audience in a motion that followed the rhythm of her words. "What is happening in this room, the partnerships that are going on here, the progress that is being made here, is absolutely the best and most exciting thing I have seen in my 12 years at Google.org." The room indicated by Fuller's pointing was a big, green-lit auditorium in The Grove. This convention center, enigmatically called a "Google Experience Studio", is located in Redwood City in the Bay Area of Northern California and is designed with selected inspiration from the nearby redwood forests. The violent politicized history of the "Redwood Summer" thirty years before, when environmental activists like the celebrity Julia Butterfly Hill sat two years, perched in the giant trees to defend them from the Pacific Lumber Company, is completely obfuscated by the naturalization of tech (Sowards, 2020; Speece, 2019).

Arriving in the parking lot of The Grove, a large Google sign constructed from pieces of wood, rocks, and braided willow with the "e" hanging from a tree branch, displayed the theme. From the reception of The Grove, guests were directed to a lobby through a slightly curved tunnel of oblong shapes of wood, resembling the gills of a mushroom. Soft country music was pouring from the hidden speakers, perhaps an ironic gesture to the historical fistfights between activists and timber workers. The vast lobby had high ceilings and seating areas scattered around the room. On the left side of the room, which had large windows looking out into a courtyard, tall fake trees formed a circle around a digital campfire – a stack of tablets and smartphones all displaying images of burning wood and coals, arranged in the shape of a campfire. On the right side of the room, a coffee and tea buffet was set up. There were baskets full of dried fruits, candy bars, gummy bears, and cold beverages in big ice buckets. The website for The Grove describes the venue as:

> An authentic, flexible, and innovative space that showcases Google's position at the cutting edge of technology while also delivering engaging, user-focused design to immerse guests into the Google experience. From the Digital Campfire, a Google

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[1] This rendering is from the participant observation fieldnotes of the first author who attended the event. Fuller's recorded keynote can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3_0rY0-_Us&ab_channel=Google.org (Accessed 4 January 2022).

Assistant-powered gathering place created with the latest Google Pixel devices, to the Redwood Trail, an interactive tunnel that uses machine learning algorithms to improvise and play music live, there are countless moments of magic throughout The Grove where Google technology seamlessly enhances the guest experience.[2]

Storytelling and guest-centric designs throughout the center provide interactive and playful moments for customers, partners, and Google employees alike (Thinkwell, 2021). This venue, promoted as a space mixing nature, playfulness, innovation, storytelling, and the seamless infusion of Google technology, provided the scene, literally and symbolically, for the event analyzed in this paper: The Google AI Impact Challenge Summit.

Picture 13: The Digital Campfire displayed at the Grove. Photo taken by author, February 2020.

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[2] A video presentation of this can be seen here: http://www.andrewdorourke.com/google/ (Accessed 4 January 2022).

We examine this event in the context of our broader interest in commodified forms of global helping,[3] including corporations' engagement in humanitarianism. Such corporate humanitarian engagements, exemplified in this paper by Google's philanthropic endeavors, merge forms of humanitarianism and capitalism. Neither humanitarianism nor capitalism are naturally occurring or static universal objects, but rather historically and politically configured domains with evolving practices and ideologies. As Apthorpe and Borton have argued in this journal, "compassion across borders can cost as well as save lives, kill as well as be kind, or in effect make little difference either way" (Apthorpe & Borton, 2019). Technology companies are on the frontiers of global philanthropy, offering what they claim are innovative solutions to global crises and the shortcomings of the humanitarian sector in solving them (McGoey, 2016). This development, in which tech companies use their products and expertise "for social good", is both celebrated and denounced as the political and social influence of tech companies in society is increasingly scrutinized (Bughin et al., 2019; Schleifer, 2020). But in what ways is this tech philanthropy novel and to what extent does it continue the well-worn historical trajectory of humanitarianism and capitalism? To explore these questions, we turn to one of the world's top three tech companies, Google (Wood, 2020), and its current attempt to link philanthropy to the big business of artificial intelligence (AI).[4]

Our primary site of fieldwork is the Google AI Impact Challenge Summit, held in Redwood City, California, on February 13, 2020. This event was the culmination of the AI Impact Challenge issued by the company in the fall 2018 on "how to use AI to help address society's most pressing problems" (Google, 2019). Attendees of the event were mostly young people in their 20s and 30s from diverse cultural backgrounds working for tech companies, nonprofit organizations, and humanitarian agencies, with the majority coming from nonprofits. The atmosphere is illustrated in this vignette of spontaneous birthday greetings:

> During breakfast, which was served in the lobby before the event began, a man in his 30s with a loud voice and his company name "Gringo Trash Tech" on his shirt went around the crowds of people asking each person if he could record them saying happy birthday to his wife. "It's my wife's birthday and I am putting together a video for her of strangers

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[3] This is part of a research project entitled: Commodifying Compassion: Implications of Turning People and Humanitarian Causes into Marketable Things. www.comodifyingcompassion.com. See also Richey, 2019.
[4] AI is arguably the fastest growing business of our time; for example, Dauvergne describes the big business of AI and gives the example that AI business value is set to rise from $700 million in 2017 to $4 trillion in 2022 (Dauvergne, 2020, pp. 36–38).

telling her happy birthday, it'll be hilarious" he told me as I was putting black beans from the breakfast buffet onto my plate. I smiled, looked into his smartphone camera, and said "happy birthday" to a person I will never meet.[5]

As the excerpt suggests, the world's most pressing problems were set to be solved in an environment that was friendly, casual, and energetic.

Our methodology mixes participant observation and interviews with video and textual analysis. The first author participated in the Google AI Impact Challenge Summit event in California, and both authors analyzed the summit documents as well as the 11 videos publicly available online from the summit presentations. We also draw on Google's own reporting from the event (on their website and in reports) as well as material from interviews with tech and humanitarian stakeholders conducted in person and online by the first author between January 2020 and January 2021. These interviews were with representatives from tech companies (Google, Microsoft, Accenture, Zendesk, Box), and NGOs (International Rescue Committee, Nethope, Mercy Corps) working in the intersection between humanitarianism, philanthropy, and technology.

In recent years, a growing space has emerged in this intersection, in which tech companies,[6] humanitarian organizations and social enterprises collaborate to design, develop, fund, and implement digital technology "for good." This space goes by many names and is not a clearly defined group or practice empirically or in the literatures. Because we value the perspectives of the people and organizations we research in constructing, as well as responding to social forces like capitalism, in our analysis, we use the emic term *AI for Social Good* to describe this field. This term was used by the attendees of the Impact Challenge Summit and expresses their vision of what they do. We refer strictly to interviews and documents from the organization as a presentation of how they frame and create their humanitarian space. This is not to be read as an acritical acceptance of these claims, as we specify in our analysis.

A diverse body of literature has begun to examine emerging forms of "good-doing" by tech companies, through which their business models and data practices are intertwined with their philanthropy. These scholars have shown how humanitarian engagements from tech companies (like those of other business actors) are often driven by profit motives (Schwittay, 2012) and how

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[5] Fieldnotes by first author, February 13, 2020.
[6] By tech companies, we refer in this article to multinational companies in the technology sector that produce and sell digital electronics, software, and internet services. These companies are also referred to as Internet companies and technology platform businesses, see e.g. Flyverbom, Deibert and Matten, 2019 and Atal, 2020.

contemporary aid is imbued with capitalist logics and practices through such business engagements (Burns, 2019a; Fejerskov, 2017). As we illustrate in this paper, for-profit motives are not hidden features in AI for Social Good. Rather, profitability is highlighted as a key part of using AI for good. Scholars have thus critically noted how AI for Social Good (as a material and discursive phenomenon) frames controversial and profitable data practices as having public value and thereby obscures the power relations and politics of digital capitalism (Cinnamon, 2020). The growing intersection between humanitarianism, digital technology, and capitalism is characterized by Madianou as a reinvigoration of the colonial power structures that have shaped both capitalism and humanitarianism (Madianou, 2019, 2022). Through the notion of *technocolonialism,* Madianou explores "how digital and data practices rework and amplify colonial legacies" in humanitarianism (Madianou, 2019). In her analysis of "AI for good", she similarly finds that such practices, enabled by the "enchantment with technology", reproduce global inequality (Madianou, 2021).

In this paper, we contribute to this critical scholarship by exploring how AI for Social Good re-articulates links between humanitarianism and capitalism in corporate philanthropy. In doing so, our analysis draws on insights from a growing anthropological literature on the ongoing material and ideological transformations of humanitarianism. These transformations have been particularly visible as a renewed enthusiasm in the humanitarian sector for including new technologies, private sector actors and "innovative" practices (Müller & Sou, 2020). Anthropologists and others have carefully examined the development and politics of humanitarian goods (such as fuel-efficient stoves (Abdelnour & Saeed, 2014), refugee shelters (Scott-Smith, 2019; Pascucci, 2021b) and water filtering straws (Redfield, 2016)), humanitarian logistics (Pascucci, 2021a) and humanitarian markets (Cross, 2020). According to Scott-Smith (2016), these developments signify an ideological transformation towards what he terms *humanitarian neophilia*, through which classical humanitarian principles are challenged in favor of a view of aid as a series of "products and business models" (Scott-Smith, 2016, p. 2236). The technologizing of humanitarian space (Abdelnour & Saeed, 2014) in this sense refers both to an expanding interest in developing technical fixes for humanitarian problems and a discursive reframing of human suffering into technical design challenges and "manageable problems" that warrant such technical fixes (Duffield, 2019).

While these developments may be interpreted as examples of the ever-expanding processes of capitalist accumulation, the scholars mentioned above urge us to recognize how such market-

based approaches to humanitarian aid represent, rework and extend particular forms of care for distant others (Cross, 2020). Rather than an expression of the neoliberalization of aid, Redfield analyzes the development of "life technologies" such as nonprofit drugs, therapeutic foods and water straws as humanitarian goods that represent a minimalist form of bodily care in response to decreasing trust in the state's capacity to ensure the lives of its citizens (Redfield, 2012). Similarly, Cross describes the evolving humanitarian market for solar energy in refugees camps as an extension of a particular form of care that emphasizes the inclusion of refugees into a modern market economy (Cross, 2020). In sum, the literature demonstrates the shifting entanglements of morality and materiality in humanitarianism within a context of increased private sector engagement. Our analysis of Google's philanthropy, and the notions of AI for Social Good it promotes, contributes to this current discussion by examining the kind of care that is imagined in the application of AI for Social Good and how this particular care for distant others is construed through the promotion of technological products.

In the following sections, we situate the links between humanitarianism and capitalism in a brief historical context moving into capitalism's current dominant form labelled digital capitalism. We draw on recent critiques of digital capitalism as "capitalism in new clothes" to frame our analysis of how Google's philanthropy, packaged as innovation, extends a history of humanitarian engagement driven by capitalist motivations. We unfold this analysis in three subsequent parts focusing on the framework and model for Google's "for-profit philanthropy", Google's "impact challenges" and the discourse of AI for Social Good promoted by Google. Drawing on our fieldwork and critical literatures on humanitarianism and corporate philanthropy, in these sections we show how Google's philanthropic practices help the company evade corporate and nonprofit regulations, expand their markets, and enforce a "win-win" imaginary of AI's potential for social good through notions of risk and acceleration. Then, we discuss the implications of Google's philanthropy for the way "social good" and humanitarian problems are defined. In the final section, we return to the links between humanitarianism and capitalism and reflect on the ways in which these links are expressed in the case of Google's AI philanthropy.

Historical Links Between Humanitarianism and Capitalism

By now, the claim that humanitarianism and the aid sector is permeated by political and economic interests, will come as a surprise to few. However, humanitarianism has traditionally been

perceived as (ideally at least) separate from the spere of business (Hopgood, 2008) and scholars have frequently pointed to an apparent contradiction between companies' drive to profit-maximization and humanitarian principles (Binder & Witte, 2007). The underlying perception that humanitarianism, which relies on altruism, and capitalism, which relies on economic self-interest, are fundamentally contradictory is visible in contemporary rhetoric on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate philanthropy, which highlights how to overcome this contradiction. For example, scholars and practitioners have presented "the business case" for companies' humanitarian engagement (OCHA, 2017) and found new proof that you can "do well by doing good" (see review of *strategic CSR* in Valentin and Spence, 2017). Popular theories of *triple bottom lines*, *win-win-win solutions*, *bottom of the pyramid strategies* (Prahalad & Hart, 2002), and *philanthrocapitalism* (Bishop & Green, 2008) have emerged to make the case that by adopting new business perspectives, the disparate logics and practices of humanitarianism and capitalism can be combined and yield *shared value* (Porter & Cramer, 2011).

From a critical perspective, scholars have pointed to increasing commercial interests in humanitarian crises and disasters (Pascucci, 2021a). Notably, Naomi Klein argues in *The Shock Doctrine* that natural disasters, wars, and economic crises become opportunities for capitalists to advance their interests (Klein, 2007). Anthropologists have brought out the contradictions inherent in these market attempts at (self) empowerment (Dolan & Rajak, 2018).

However, scholars of humanitarianism argue that the merging of capitalism and humanitarianism is not new. In fact, the two have an intimate long-term relationship. Historians have analyzed and debated how capitalism – through the spread of capitalist markets (Haskell, 1985b, 1985a) and the turn to wage labor (Ashworth, 1987) – led to a Western humanitarian sensibility best illustrated by the movement to abolish slavery that emerged in the end of the eighteenth century. Others have theorized the origins of humanitarianism as part of colonialist and imperialist governance tied up with capitalist imperatives to seek out new markets and resources (Skinner & Lester, 2012) and linked commodity activism with imperialism (Budabin & Richey, 2021).

This research echoes critical research on development policies as modern forms of imperialism aiming to expand capitalist exploitation through the promotion of free market ideologies (Escobar, 1995). In a more recent example on the convergence between humanitarianism and capitalism, historian Tehila Sasson shows how the 1970 Nestlé boycott campaigns exemplify a movement in social activism from fighting to limit the power of corporations to advocating for "ethical markets"

in which corporations would regulate their own practices. Through this movement, "the market was transformed into a space for enforcing a global humanitarian ethic" (Sasson, 2016). This work aligns with critical analyses of the emergence of "just", "fair", and "caring" capitalisms (Barman, 2016; Goodman, 2004; Richey & Ponte, 2011), where capitalism is perceived not as the cause of social problems but as their solution.

Within the field of economic anthropology, scholars have long documented the shifting ethics and moralities that have always permeated and constituted rather than stood in opposition to markets and economic interactions. Ethnographies of ethical consumption (Carrier & Luetchford, 2012), fair trade (Berlan, 2008; Neve, 2008) and corporate social responsibility (Dolan & Rajak, 2016; Rajak, 2011) schemes have further illustrated the messy entanglements of humanitarian sentiments and capitalist practices. Thus, in contrast to the idea that humanitarianism and capitalism have only recently found common ground, scholars are calling for a rewriting of the history of humanitarianism, to emphasize "the primary importance of capitalism as a source of specific motivations and interests in humanitarian action, and as the focus of an alternative narrative to the prevalent one based on altruism" (Lago & Sullivan, 2017). However, while humanitarianism was never completely free of capitalist notions, the connections between the two domains have become more visible and explicitly celebrated in recent decades, illustrated for example by the growth of Brand Aid campaigns (Richey & Ponte, 2021) and other forms of NGO-business partnerships (Olwig, 2021). The case analyzed in this paper illustrates this turn to more explicitly commodified practices of humanitarian helping.

To situate Google's philanthropy within this historical context, we draw on recent scholarship on digital capitalism – a concept used to describe contemporary capitalism as a historical period in which 1) transnational production chains are enabled by digital technologies, 2) digital networks and infrastructures are privately owned and used to generate commercial profits, and 3) intra-firm management is organized through digital technologies (Pace, 2018, pp. 255–256).

A dynamic field of study has emerged to investigate this particular configuration of digital capitalism (Pace, 2018), data capitalism (West, 2019), platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017), transnational informational capitalism (Fuchs, 2009) and more. One of the most widely debated accounts is Zuboff's analysis of what she terms surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2015, 2019). Zuboff explains that surveillance capitalism consists of a new logic of accumulation, which "aims to predict and modify human behavior as a means to produce revenue" (Zuboff, 2015, p. 75). In

the business model of surveillance capitalism, profits are generated by extracting user data, which is used to produce and feed algorithms that direct advertisements. Although Zuboff acknowledges that surveillance capitalism is just one point in the history of capitalism, in which "each era has run toward a dominant logic of accumulation" (Zuboff, 2015, p. 77), she presents surveillance capitalism as a profoundly unique formation of capitalism. However, according to Morozov, Zuboff's view of surveillance capitalism as a new economic order obscures the ways in which surveillance capitalism is a continuation of "the same old capitalism" with expanded surveillance methods (Morozov, 2019a). These tech company surveillance strategies, Morozov argues, are merely local effects of a global and familiar capitalist cause to ensure long-term profitability in the face of competition. That is, surveillance capitalism is first and foremost capitalism - albeit in new clothes:

> Surveillance capitalism must be theorized as "capitalism" – a complex set of historical and social relationships between capital and labor, the state and the monetary system, the metropole, and the periphery – and not just as an aggregate of individual firms responding to imperatives of technological and social change. (Morozov, 2019a, p. 39)

What scholars fail to recognize, according to Morozov, is that the specific developments of contemporary capitalism (e.g., the growing investments in advanced technology) have been regular features of capitalist competition. Rather than structural shifts, these developments are "depictions of observed regularities in how capitalist firms expand their stocks of capital to include data" (Morozov, 2019b, pp. 41–42). Thus, when we condemn surveillance capitalism and its stakeholders like Google for seeking to modify our behavior and purchases (Zuboff, 2020), for profiting from the erosion of public budgets (Noble, 2020), and for exploiting workers through empowerment-labelled schemes of digital microwork in the Middle East (Hall, 2017), Morozov urges us to place this critique within a theoretical framework of capitalism.

Our paper draws on this scholarly debate to frame our inquiry into Google's tech philanthropy. If digital capitalism is not a fundamentally new form of capitalism, is the way in which this capitalism intersects with humanitarianism in AI for Social Good really a new or innovative form of corporate philanthropy? Is it driven by the same imperatives that have historically linked capitalism and humanitarianism and if so, what is the advantage of branding it as something new and different from older forms of corporate humanitarian engagement? In the following sections,

we explore this question through an analysis of Google's philanthropic model, Google's "Impact Challenges" and the notion of AI for Social Good underscoring these philanthropic activities.

Google's For-Profit Philanthropy: Donations, People and Products

The AI Impact Challenge we explore in this paper is just one part of Google's philanthropic activities, carried out by the charitable arm of the company called Google.org. In an article about Google.org and the kind of impact the organization aspires to have through their philanthropy, the Google.org president is introduced with this opening line: "Every morning, Jacquelline Fuller wakes up at sunrise, wondering how to save the world" (Fishwick, 2019). Before this current role, Fuller held a top position at the Gates Foundation and worked as a speech writer to the US Secretary of Health and Human Services. For more than a decade, she has sat on the board of influential NGOs and nonprofits such as World Vision, International Justice Mission and Ben Affleck's Eastern Congo Initiative (see also Budabin and Richey, 2021). In her speech at the Google AI Impact Challenge Summit, Fuller stated that the Impact Challenges were organized to harness the impact of Google:

> How do we bring the best of Google, all our assets, and bring these to bear alongside the teams, the innovators, who are doing this work on the front lines? That is why we launched the single biggest initiative in Google.org's history, which is the Google AI Impact Challenge.[7]

In this quote, Fuller equates philanthropy with doing what Google already does, but to a larger and more socially conscious extent. As such, a central part of Google's philanthropy is to find the social issues where Google products will have the largest impact (Google.org, 2021b). The former president of Google.org, Megan Smith, explained it this way: "We will look for things that could have global scale, are philanthropic in nature, and leverage what we are particularly good at. We have almost 10,000 engineers now. If we give grants that do not leverage any of their talents, they can't play" (Boss, 2010, p. 9). Thus, in contrast to more traditional corporate philanthropy where company founders use their personal wealth to support humanitarian and social causes, Google.org aims to "do good" by applying their business model, skills, and products to philanthropy. In doing so, Google.org seeks to replicate the disruptive impact they have had in the

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[7] Quote from the summit. Based on fieldnotes and the recording of Fuller's speech, which can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3_0rY0-_Us

business world by targeting the social issues that will allow them to have the same impact on humanitarianism (Boss, 2010, p. 3; Rana, 2008, p. 92).

In an interview conducted for this paper,[8] a Google.org employee, Martin,[9] explained Google.org's activities as falling into "three buckets": philanthropy, people, and products. Martin, who held a senior position at Google.org despite his young age, spoke with confidence and knowledge about his company's philanthropic programs as if he was used to communicating this to media and journalists. He mastered the balance between being friendly, casual, and deeply professional, characteristic of the people working in the field of AI for social good. He spoke fluently in a language that alternated between being direct and vague, weaving his own immigrant background and his mild personal skepticism of AI technology into a compelling narrative about the philanthropic ambitions of Google. The bucket of philanthropy, he explained, referred to money in the form of grants and cash donations. Besides the donations made through Impact Challenges, Google.org regularly donates money to nonprofits and aid organizations. For example, during the early COVID-19 pandemic, Google.org reports to have committed $100 million in grants (Google.org, 2020a). Sometimes donations from Google.org are offered as part of a partnership with a humanitarian organization, while other large donations are matching campaigns in which Google.org matches the donations made by individuals or employees. The company has a gift matching program through which employee donations for selected causes up to $10,000 will be matched 1:1 by Google.org.

The matching program also includes volunteer hours, which is the type of donations referred to as "people" by Martin, the second bucket of their engagement typology. Google employees can choose to volunteer for nonprofit organizations that Google.org partners with and according to Martin, employees are often the ones to initiate this volunteer work.[10] In some cases, Google.org will match the volunteer hours with a donation of $10 per volunteer hour to the nonprofit. But Google.org also uses volunteers and pro bono work more strategically in their philanthropic model, where fixed amounts of volunteer hours referred to as technical support or expertise is coupled with funding as part of donation "packages" (Google.org, 2021a).

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[8] Interview conducted February 10, 2020.
[9] This is a pseudonym. All other names in this paper are not anonymized because their speeches and statements are publicly available.
[10] Interview conducted February 10, 2020.

The third bucket of Google.org's engagement is about its products. Google.org donates products and advertisement space to nonprofits for a variety of causes. For example, in 2016 Google.org announced that it would donate 25,000 computers to refugees fleeing Syria (Walker, 2016). The number of laptops they did donate, however, is not publicly known. In addition to donating their own products, Google.org engages in partnerships with aid organizations and nonprofits to adapt and modify Google technologies to address social challenges (Google.org, 2021b). During an interview, Martin stated that what matters most in measuring the impact of their philanthropy was whether this impact could be connected directly to their products. Thus, an important task of Google.org as the philanthropic arm of Google was to find areas where Google products could be implemented "for good":

> So, where my team then comes in is, how can I amplify or spread, or whatever the verb you want to use, the benefits that are being created by this cutting-edge technology that our research team has built? And then, can this be leveraged by nonprofits to do a lot of work that they are already doing on the ground?

According to Martin, this meant assessing first if "there is an area where our products already are doing some interesting work that the benefits of which need to be amplified or could be amplified and have some differential impact on a vulnerable population."[11] This strategy of using Google products and technologies to "amplify" and create impact was described as a way to add more value in humanitarian crises:

> We have been discussing and assessing in what ways Google can support and be uniquely helpful and have added value instead of just adding to the noise of problems and situations in crises… And where do we have the skillsets or the assets that we might be able to uniquely leverage in a situation, above and beyond writing checks? I think the last thing my organization wants me to do is just write a big check to a big organization and pat ourselves on the back that we did what we had to do and then move on.

As seen here, Google's philanthropic vision is bound up with corporate ambitions of using Google products to have a unique impact on the world. Thus, these diversified philanthropic efforts are grounded in a belief that Google's most valuable contribution to society is their products and expertise, rather than their wealth. These ambitions align with the company's long held and

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[11] Quotes from interview conducted February 10, 2020.

publicly declared identity as a company aspiring to "make the world a better place" (Rana, 2008, p. 87) and the founders' proclaimed intention to never become "a conventional company" (Solomon, 2009, p. 107). The structural configurations of Google.org reflect these ambitions too. In contrast to traditional corporate foundations such as the Gates Foundation, which is a separate legal entity from Microsoft, Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin created Google.org in 2005 as a hybrid fund within the company as an experiment in "for-profit philanthropy"(Rana, 2008, pp. 91–92). The founders sought to use their hybrid model to do things "that other people aren't doing" (Rana, 2008, p. 88), and the current president of Google.org, Jacquelline Fuller, stated in 2010 that "we want people to look at what we are doing and say, 'Wow, only Google could have done something like that'" (Boss, 2010, p. 1). Thus, Google's philanthropic model links a desire to solidify the company's market position and to manifest its founders and employees' perception of the company as an innovative and original technology powerhouse.

The main innovation in the Google.org model is often believed to be its for-profit status and "its ability to incorporate business principles in the pursuit of philanthropic aims" (Rana, 2008, p. 90). This model has been creatively labeled "entrepreneurial philanthropy", "venture philanthropy", "innovative philanthropy", "for-profit charity", "compassionate capitalism", and "philanthropreneurship" (Rana, 2008, p. 90). But many for-profit businesses include a charitable aspect in their business practices, illustrated in Brand Aid examples such as Toms Shoes (Richey & Ponte, 2011), and new varieties of "doing good and doing well" are constantly emerging, increasingly collapsing the realms of nonprofit and for-profit (Olwig, 2021; Richey et al., 2021). The incorporation of entrepreneurship in philanthropy is also not new, and critics call the Google.org model merely "the most recent incarnation of a longstanding entrepreneurial streak in the realm of philanthropy" (Rana, 2008, p. 90).

Thus, despite Google's attempt to present their for-profit philanthropic model as innovative, the merging of for-profit interests with charitable activities is not particularly novel. What is unusual about the model, however, is the way it situates Google.org between regulatory frameworks allowing Google to evade constraints that regulate traditional foundations and nonprofits. For example, Google.org can invest in for-profit companies and channel the profits back into Google.org. As such, Google is not limited to supporting certain charitable causes as nonprofits usually are and the company can decide more freely which causes count as doing good (Solomon, 2009, p. 112). Google.org is allowed to lobby, develop products, hire consultants, and is not obliged to disclose spending publicly. Consequently, it is not possible to find exact records of the

spending of Google.org, which as pointed out by Boss (Boss, 2010, p. 11), is ironic for a company "whose mission is to organize the world's information." The hybrid model enables Google to avoid legal and structural regulations in place for nonprofits, but also market-based accountability structures in place for for-profit businesses (Rana, 2008, pp. 93–94). This regulatory straddling has been highlighted as a key corporate strategy for platform companies like Google to sustain their economic and political power in global markets (Atal, 2020).

As this section has demonstrated, Google's philanthropic model is constructed to highlight the public and humanitarian value of Google products and expertise over the value of the company's wealth. By focusing on the potential humanitarian value of Google's products, the disadvantages of concentrating wealth and power in very few companies is moved to the background of the narrative. Google markets this model as innovate because it combines philanthropy with for-profit activities, but philanthropy has always been intertwined with for-profit interests and business approaches (McGoey, 2016, pp. 15–17). Google.org, then, extends these ties while providing a corporate structure that evades regulation. Furthermore, by organizing their philanthropy into challenges through which organizations compete for funding, Google is able to shape these organizations' good-doing to fit the specific uses of AI that are most likely to use Google's products, which we examine in more detail below. Here we turn to Google's Impact Challenges through which the company enacts its philanthropic vision of using Google technology for good.

Google's Impact Challenges

Through regional and global Impact Challenges, Google.org provides grants to nonprofits and social enterprises with "the best and boldest ideas" (Google.org, 2021a) for how to solve a specified issue with digital technology. Every Impact Challenge is organized around a new issue and geographical scope determined by Google.org. The first Impact Challenge was held in the UK in 2013, under the name "a better world faster" (Google.org, 2013). Since then, 40 Impact Challenges have been launched, most recently the Google.org Impact Challenge for Women and Girls. Selected organizations are awarded "a strategic package of funding, mentorship, and technical support" (Google.org, 2021a) for up to three years. As such, the Impact Challenges embody our respondent, Martin's, characterization of Google's three bucket approach to philanthropy.

The AI Impact Challenge Summit that the first author attended in 2020 was organized to gather and present the 20 technology projects that had been awarded a grant in what totaled $25 million spent by the Impact Challenge to apply AI for social good.[12] In the call for applications, Jacquelline Fuller specified that the company was looking for organizations using AI to help address social, humanitarian and environmental problems (Fuller, 2019). The applications were assessed on five criteria: impact, feasibility, use of AI, scalability, and responsibility. For example, applications were judged on whether or not they demonstrated a "clear plan to deploy the AI model for real-world impact" (Google, 2018).

According to Google's own report, the particular AI capabilities and techniques that the applicant population planned to use, if granted Google funding, ranged from computer vision (41% referenced this), to machine learning, structured deep learning and natural language processing (Google, 2019, pp. 7–8). Most of the applications were addressing issues in the field of health (25% of all applications), followed by the environment, education, economic empowerment, equality and inclusion, crisis response and public and social sector management (Google, 2019). The report also clarifies the "insight" that "data accessibility challenges vary by sector" or, to connect these, that applications working on health and education were more likely to have access to the data necessary for using the AI, while other areas were not: "Applicants in the crisis response, economic empowerment, and equality and inclusion categories were likely to lack meaningful datasets" (Google, 2019, p. 16). How much benefit – or impact – can AI technologies offer in areas where the necessary data for using it are lacking?

Yet, in line with their strategy to focus on areas where Google's technology is already making an impact, the AI Impact Challenge was used to market existing technologies and the experts already trained to use them. For example, Google.org reports that "more than 70% of submissions, across all sectors and organization types, relied on existing AI frameworks (e.g. Caffe, cuDNN, TensorFlow, PyTorch)" (Google, 2019, p. 18). Also, less publicly promoted, but available in their insights report is the fact that four countries dominated the application process by submitting more

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[12] AI technology was applied in various ways in the 20 winning projects. For example, the Médecins Sans Frontières Foundation developed AI image recognition technology to analyze infections and prescribe the right antibiotics. The organization Crisis Text Line, Inc used AI technology to better allocate the organization's counselors to people in crisis, who requested help via text messages. Researchers from Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, won a grant from Google.org to apply AI to analyze and monitor air quality data in order to forecast spikes in air pollution. The panel of experts tasked with reviewing these applications included three Google employees, representatives from Inter-American Development Bank and World Bank Group, two tech company founders, two technology researchers and the actress Geena Davis. This expert panel reviewed 2602 applicants from 119 countries.

than 100 proposals each: Canada, India, UK and US (one third of all applications were from Americans). These are all English language, tech dominant countries, as the call for proposals was only issued in English and relied on network sharing for dissemination (Google, 2019, p. 7). Also interesting is the fact that half of the applicants overall (not those funded) reported as having no prior experience with AI. Through the application process, Google thus found a large market of nascent "unmet need" for their technological support and products, while presenting these products in the context in which they appear as having the most impact. In the executive summary of Google's report, they spell it out like this: "As more social sector organizations recognize AI's potential, we all gain more high-impact opportunities to strengthen the emerging ecosystem" (Google, 2019, p. 2). But who exactly is the "we all" who "gain" from these philanthropic endeavors? In the following section, we examine such "win-win" claims of AI through Google's use of the phrase AI for Social Good.

AI For Social Good: Risk-Taking and Acceleration

AI for Social Good is a term used in the tech field to describe the application of AI technologies (such as machine learning and algorithmic systems) to areas where they claim to have societal benefits (Madianou, 2021). What exactly constitutes "AI" or "social good" within this term, varies greatly and AI for Social Good has therefore become a popular expression for anything related to the speculated benefits of big data or data science for issues of social responsibility, social impacts, public good, development, humanitarianism and more (Moore, 2019). AI for Social Good as a movement has travelled from tech communities, to global conferences, university departments and corporate social responsibility programs, gaining popularity and shifting definitions along the way (Moore, 2019).

The term is connected to the broader movement and phenomenon of *Tech for Good* (Madianou, 2021), an equally elusive term. While it is sometimes used to describe a movement among IT programmers to use their coding skills to solve social problems (Roberson, 2018), the term is also used as a stand-in term for social enterprises in the tech sector (Bughin et al., 2019; Hull & Berry, 2016) and in global summits focusing on mitigating the risks and harms of digital technology (Dillet, 2018). In the field of corporate philanthropy analyzed in this paper, AI for Social Good and Tech for Good are generally used to describe philanthropic activities where technology corporations support social, environmental, and humanitarian causes not just by donating funds

but also, importantly, by applying their business expertise and products. As such, the AI Impact Challenge summit exemplifies the philanthropic practices of the AI for Social Good space. In this section, we highlight how the potential and "win-winism" of AI was promoted at the summit through notions of risk and speed.

In her keynote speech at the summit, Jacquelline Fuller emphasized with excitement the social aspirations attached to AI. "So why am I so excited? Why do I think this has so much potential?" Fuller asked rhetorically, from the stage in the auditorium. "Really, it is all about the power of AI. You know, Sundar, our CEO, has said Google is going to be an AI first company." The enormous screens behind her presented visual illustrations of AI technologies as she was talking. "He is going to bet the company on the power of AI. And we have seen it transform our business, it is helping make Gmail secure, it is helping you find that photo you want from Google Photos. It is doing amazing things. In fact, Sundar even said it could be as transformative as electricity." In this aspirational talk, we hear the risk-taking that is characteristic of tech philanthropy: the CEO is going to bet the company on AI, and the philanthropic work will be part of this gamble. In her speech, Fuller continued,

> So, at Google.org we ask ourselves: How do we ensure that the benefits of technology, especially advanced technology like AI, is being brought to bear on the problems that really matter the most for humanity? Issues like climate change and poverty and gender inequality and mental health. Because we believe that everyone, everywhere, should benefit from the advances of technology.

She slowed down her speech to emphasize each sentence and shook her head as she proclaimed: "Not just businesses. Not just the rich. Everyone."[13]

The rhetorical use of universalizing and inclusive language of "everyone", "everywhere", without any actual specificity of "anyone" existing "anywhere" in space or time, allows the audience to dream along with Google in the world of ideals, uncomplicated by the banalities of tax evasion, anti-trust laws or Co2 emission levels. Furthermore, the belief that "everyone, everywhere should benefit from the advances of technology" is a statement that works as the archetypical example from Animal Farm: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." Orwell's pigs distort the logic and use of language in which "equal" no longer means that all

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[13] Quotes from summit. Based on fieldnotes and the recording of Fuller's speech, which can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3_0rY0-_Us&ab_channel=Google.org (Accessed 4 January 2022).

animals are equal to other animals. Instead, it is used in a way that sounds linguistically correct, but completely changes the meaning of the term. When "equal" is used as a relative term instead of an absolute term, then some animals can become more equal than others.

In the discursive set-up of the AI Impact Challenge summit, we see similar linguistic moves that produce the feelings of consensual movement toward a common goal but have the effect of obfuscating power asymmetries. The "should benefit" is an aspirational statement linking a possibly positive future, a hypothetical notion, to the idea that technology will advance, an empirical fact. The entire stage for the AI for Social Good discourse that follows is that technology will advance as a fact outside of the politics and choices of agents necessary for making this happen. Thus, relevant discussions are limited to those around how to best implement an agreed upon normative value around benefits. It is not clear if these benefits are already existing and need to be noticed and celebrated; if they are somehow "stuck" in spaces or groups of people and thus need to be spread out to others; if they are nascent and need a combination of time and inputs to naturally grow and spread. The possibilities for these benefits are almost endless.

However, the place where they end is with any discussion of associated costs. The costs of tech philanthropy are not part of the "win-winism" of the AI Impact Challenge summit, except when they can be used to construct a context of "risk." Precisely notions of risk and speed, or acceleration as it was phrased at the summit, were repeatedly used to construct AI and Google's AI philanthropy as particularly potent for doing good, as we highlight below.

The Silicon Valley tech sector's willingness to take risks and to move quicker than usual in the nonprofit sector was a consistent underlying theme of the summit. In the introduction of the summit, the Head of Product Impact at Google.org, Brigitte Gosselink, was escorted onto the stage. The setup was incredibly organized. The screen was huge on stage; there were lighting and video crews and a stage manager with a headset on, standing at the foot of the stairs leading to the stage, who was responsible for sending people up on stage when it was their turn to speak. The whole setup was like attending the filming of a TED talk.[14] In her speech, Brigitte Gosselink offered an invitation for the audience. "Let us embrace the potential." She extended her arms out wide towards the audience and said:

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[14] Fieldnotes by first author, February 13, 2020.

You're hopefully all here because you likely believe in a potential of AI to benefit society. But you also may be sitting here with a healthy dose of skepticism. And I personally share that in many ways. I tend to be a skeptic myself, so I respect where you are coming from. But when we need to be clear-eyed about the potential risks of AI, and skeptical of grandiose statements that can solve all our problems, we also need to embrace the opportunity that presents and I think if we do not, we may be missing out on some real potential impact in the world that would not otherwise be possible.[15]

Here, Gosselink sets the ground rules about participation in "AI for social good": You are here with a belief in the potential of AI to benefit society. We will not talk about costs, trade-offs, or politics, but will use the concept of risk-taking to highlight the value of what corporations can bring to philanthropic helping. In this way, risks were also understood as part of making an impact. Taking risks and betting on potentially risky technology was presented as necessary to do good in meaningful ways.

Related to this emphasis on risk-taking is the common theme that Google products can accelerate social change faster, which is coupled with the urgency of the issues tackled by "AI for social good." Later in the summit program, four women went on stage for a panel discussion on responsible use of AI technology. One of the women acted as chair, and the other three represented each their nonprofit organization. They all sat on a row facing the audience and took turns sharing their perspectives on responsibility in using AI. Nancy, a representative of the nonprofit Crisis Text Line, sat at the end of the row. She wore big glasses with a red frame and a black and white patterned blazer. She spoke energetically and with enthusiasm about how her organization was using AI to communicate with vulnerable young people. "I am going to say something now not predictable and maybe a little bit surprising" she declared, turning her face to the audience:

I think people think that social change organizations should go slow and carefully and that the whole mantra out there of like "move faster and break things" should not be applied to our organizations because the work that we do is so precious. And so, what I am going to say to that is fuck that! We should actually move fastest.

Her fellow panelists smiled and applause from the audience followed. "These are the world's biggest problems; we deserve the best technology and the best people."[16] These repeated references to the urgent need for rapid and risky philanthropic action constructed the discursive links between AI and social good. The logic that these notions appeared to follow was: Yes, AI is controversial in ways of which we should skeptical, but we need to take risks. Yes, the tech sector can move too fast and "break things", but we need to accelerate. The urgency of addressing society's most pressing problems (Google, 2019), which governments and nonprofits were not fast or risk-inclined enough to tackle on their own, established the need for AI technology in doing good.

As these ethnographic data show, tech philanthropy relies upon an assumption of risk that is too high for public sector and government investment but provides an opportunity for companies like Google, known for a culture of risk-taking. In her keynote speech, Fuller shared a story:

> Last night I was talking to the Quills folks [one of the winning projects], and they were saying "thank you so much for funding us because nobody would fund this idea. It is so risky." And that is the concept of philanthropic capital, right? We should be risk capital. We should be investing in ideas that are not right for government, where there is a market failure.

Presenting tech philanthropy as an investment of risk capital underlines an important aspect of how capitalism and humanitarianism are intertwined in these initiatives. By propagating the "big-risk-big-reward" ethos, characteristic of the tech sector and start up culture (Heller, 2020), Google equates philanthropy to venture capitalism and approaches humanitarian crises as gaps in the market and opportunities for investments. Similar to venture capitalism, which was an essential force in Google's rise to the top of the corporate world, Google's philanthropy is about dreaming big and placing numerous unsuccessful bets in the search for that one big break. Thus, Google's philanthropy and their Impact Challenges center on finding the "right" problems to solve, or in other words, the problems that will bring about the biggest reward. We discuss this in the following section.

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[16] Quotes from summit. Based on fieldnotes and the "Google AI Impact Summit Highlights" video available online here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPhPYsdgOt0 (Accessed 4 January 2022).

Solutions Looking for Problems

The Google.org president and other employees highlighted repeatedly that AI is not always the solution. In her keynote speech at the summit, Fuller noted: "Even though AI is growing more accessible, machine learning is not always the right answer. It might be a little surprising to hear that from Google, but it was really one of the most important takeaways that we saw." In fact, the first "insight" reported from the Google.org application review was "Machine learning is not always the right answer" (Google, 2019, p. 13). Interestingly, the important missing piece of information is whether or not the applications that led Google to this insight and to gain a more grounded understanding of the limitations of its scope for doing good were actually given any funding. There is no reason to think that they might have been. Furthermore, the unmet need to "pressure test whether there is faster, simpler or cheaper alternative" to the proposed intervention with AI, is highlighted as part of a market for technical help (Google, 2019, p. 15).

Brigitte Gosselink echoed this notion when she, in her introduction to the summit, invited the audience to "dig into the details" of AI: "There is a lot of hype about AI these days and we really hope that we will be able to go beyond an abstract conversation to really understand, what do we mean by AI? What do we mean by social good?"[17] she asked from the stage in the auditorium. Drawing on recent work from scholars of humanitarian technology and innovation, important questions to ask of this case are: Will what we mean by "social good" be constituted within the limits of what AI can and cannot do? If this is the case for a corporate giant like Google, will it also impact other forms of philanthropy? These questions are important to address in a context of tech philanthropy, which has been critiqued for its technological optimism and "solutionism" – a tendency to produce solutions looking for problems (Morozov, 2020; Sandvik, 2017, p. 7). What problems, then, are these philanthropic tech solutions looking for? During the summit, this tendency was visible in conversations among participants, as illustrated in fieldnotes from the event:

In the lunch break, I brought my plate outside to the courtyard, where groups of people were settling around tables in the sun. I sat down at a table with two young women each working for a tech company. They started catching up, talking about their common work relations and the work they were each currently doing in their company's social impact departments. One of them asked

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[17] Quote from the summit. Based on fieldnotes and the recording of Gosselink's speech "Google AI Impact Challenge Summit Welcome Remarks", available online here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gf3YvXJvXv0&ab_channel=Google.org.

the other: "Did you guys do something with the corona virus?" "No, but we did do something for the Australian wildfires" the other responded.[18]

From a global pandemic to a natural disaster, Tech for Good can provide the philanthropic solution, as long as the intervention needed is technical, potentially profitable, and not political. The Google.org employee Martin expressed a similar view, as he explained how Google's three bucket approach of philanthropy, people, and products replaced an earlier approach of merely donating money. He said:

> A big natural disaster would hit, and we would write a check and move on. And I think we are trying to think a bit more strategically about how we can drive the most impact we can, dollar for dollar and hour for hour or of our volunteers' time…Thinking through the lens of natural disasters for a second, or knowing that protracted conflict can continue to exaggerate at a pace that we are not comfortable with, more work needs to be done on the preparedness and resilience building side… I can imagine there being a project in the future that we do to help support building hospital capacity for future pandemics. I am just spit balling right now, but knowing the trends of some of these crises and where we would probably drive the most value and have the largest impact, is probably investing ahead of time.

Here Martin describes both the synergistic imaginary of tech philanthropy in which "driving the most value" and "having the largest impact" is made possible by a context of predictable, linear, and most importantly, apolitical crisis spaces.

In another keynote talk from the summit, Yossi Matias, Vice President of Search & AI at Google, discusses examples of "AI for social good applications and his view on the direction of the field" (Google.org, 2020b). As described in the official video from his talk: "Matias runs Google's R&D center in Israel and is a founding executive sponsor for the AI for Social Good Program and for the Launchpad Accelerator Program of which this program is a part." In his speech, as he describes what he terms a personal lens on "how to use technology to help people during crisis", an image is projected of a city skyline with a huge fire in the distance. He tells the audience that this is a picture he took with his phone from his office in Haifa, Israel. The image has immediate resonance with many similar images that abound in the international news, reporting bombings and

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[18] Fieldnotes from summit, February 13, 2020.

explosions in the area. He describes it as a big fire in the Carmel mountains, and he was looking on the internet to find out, as he described it, "what's going on?" and "should I evacuate the office?" and "who's at risk?"

He goes on to show the history of Google searches at that time to demonstrate how many others were also seeing the same flames and looking for information, noting how one Google engineer was literally "coding under fire." But the expected story of violent political clashes in Israel and occupied Palestinian territories is never told. Instead, a completely different type of fire emerges, the kind we would term a "natural disaster." He shows the use of Google technology during the Chennai Floods, Superstorm Sandy, and the Paris Attacks.[19] He then goes on to point out the gaps they have found around the lack of information around floods. The keynote exemplified the types of AI that Google teams use to solve problems of "flood forecasting, preventing overfishing, diagnosing diabetic retinopathy, and predicting earthquake aftershocks", all illustrated by icons on screen.

This speech by a man viewing a fire from his office in Israel epitomizes how important it is to naturalize the idea of a humanitarian disaster. To engage the Tech for Good community, there must be a "real" need, unlike a politically made problem, which would be someone's fault and they should be held accountable to sort it out. Interestingly, the first public comment on YouTube when viewing the video is "coincidence that this video ranks first when searching for 'social good'?" bringing a striking lay critique, perhaps inspired by intellectuals like Zuboff and Morozov, to the fundamental questions of tech philanthropy. How is philanthropic work providing marketing content for big-tech companies that are able to use this both to shape the understandings of what Tech for Good should do, but also of what kinds of problems are worth solving?

Conclusions

In recent work on the merge of digital technology, humanitarianism and capitalism, scholars present the idea that the introduction of digital technologies in humanitarian work has opened the humanitarian domain to new capitalist logics (Burns, 2019b) and new corporate actors (Duffield, 2016). Thus, the use of digital technology is presented as a cause of, or at least occurring prior to, the increased corporate engagement in humanitarian work. However, following the argument of

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[19] Interestingly this is the only example of a political disaster, with the attacks attributed to the Islamic state, but it is not mentioned in the presentation, only shown as a comparative example.

Morozov and others on digital capitalism, one could argue that "the same old" structural links between capitalism and humanitarianism and their common imperatives have led to the expansion of humanitarian practice to include digital technology and technology companies. Rather than perceiving tech sector philanthropic engagement as a transformation of the ways in which capitalist and humanitarian logics intersect, should we instead approach it as simply the most recent manifestation of a long-standing convergence between capitalism and humanitarianism? And if so, what do the particular forms of care propagated by Google's philanthropy tell us about the contemporary relationship between humanitarianism and capitalism?

Through its tech philanthropy, Google creates a world where the most pressing global problems are solved by the successful applicants to its AI Impact Challenge – "partnerships between nonprofits with deep sector expertise and academic institutions or technology companies with the technical ability to shape and execute the AI portion of the project" (Google, 2019, p. 22). The role of governments is reduced to the obscuring delineation of policy makers as Google expands on its insights into "where to start" kinds of prescriptions. The explicit mention of governments is to act as a "role model for responsibly embracing AI" (Google, 2019, p. 50). Thus, governments are not to regulate or to push away the products and services offered by Google. Additionally, in a very small section of the appendix to the Google.org report, they even suggest that subsidies should be offered to support investment in the physical infrastructure supporting AI, discounts on electricity and more flexible rules around data localization. These are highly politicized arenas where Google is currently embedded in ongoing legal and regulatory struggles with governments.[20] Yet, Google's "hands-off AI" suggestions are presented as ways to "support AI for social good", a clear illustration of the entanglements of philanthropy and capitalism.

Returning to The Grove, the room of AI for Social Good enthusiasts that most excited Google.org's president where we began this paper sets the stage for our conclusions. Like the evolving humanitarian space around AI for Social Good, The Redwood Wars of the 1990s also had a complicated politics pitting humans against each other over their relationship to non-human objects of great significance. The results of the protests, tree-spiking, pipe-bombing, sit-ins, fistfights, marches, lawsuits, and legislation were mixed. In his book, *Defending Giants*, Speece

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[20] In the face-off between big tech and parts of the US government, the magnitude of the lobbying power of Google has come into stark display as they have given money to all of the organizations and political figures who are speaking out in their support. The co-sponsor of bills to limit Google and other big tech said the lobbying is "making our case that they have way too much power in terms of monopoly power and in terms of money and politics" (Kang et al., 2021).

(2019) argues that one of the longer-term impacts was an erosion of corporate power in managing the environment resulting from extremely effective litigation at all levels of the judiciary. Another impact, however, was a shift in the relations of power over environmental governance from the democratically elected Congress to the executive branch of government. The great diversity in the environmental movement was united against concentrated corporate power. To understand the diversity, possibilities, and limitations in the tech for good movement, public anthropology with an attention to the power dynamics of digital capitalism is needed. Our analysis here suggests limited opportunities for uniting against corporate power in humanitarian AI, as the corporation itself defines the goals and outcomes of the tech for good space. Our findings echo Dauvergne's political economy analysis of AI for environmental sustainability: "when all is said and done, eco-business is not endeavoring to advance social justice or to protect the earth but is aiming to expand markets, sales and corporate power" (Dauvergne, 2020, p. 15). In sum, our study of Google's AI Impact Challenge suggests that this relationship between tech for good and tech for profit, between philanthropy and capitalism, is becoming increasingly indistinguishable.

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5.2 Article Two

Finding the "Sweet Spot":

The Politics of Alignment in Cross-Sector Partnerships for Refugees

Picture 14: Poster in an office window at the IRC headquarters, showing company logos of some of the business partners of the IRC. Photo taken by author, January 2020.

Finding the "Sweet Spot":

The Politics of Alignment in Cross-Sector Partnerships for Refugees

Sofie Elbæk Henriksen

Abstract

Cross-sector partnerships (CSPs) between nonprofits and businesses are increasingly implemented in response to humanitarian crises. These partnerships are motivated by ideals of alignment as stakeholders strive to find the sweet spot between humanitarian and business interests. However, this article shows that the ideals of alignment differ from the actual practices of alignment in the CSPs, and sweet spots are not merely found but constructed in and through changing relations of power. Based on an ethnographic case study of partnerships between a global humanitarian organization and five technology companies, the article deploys a theoretical lens from critical humanitarian studies to analyze *how* alignment in CSPs comes about in practice. This analysis demonstrates that in the construction of alignment, the companies' interests become the priorities to which humanitarian organizations must align their and their beneficiaries' needs. Consequently, while the discourse of sweet spots perpetuates an ideal of alignment where all partners benefit equally from the partnership, it legitimates power imbalances and asymmetrical alignment in practice.

Introduction

Cross-sector partnerships (CSPs) between for-profit companies and nonprofit organizations have become widely recognized as instruments to address societal "grand challenges", such as the forced displacement of more than 80 million people globally (UNHCR, 2021). CSPs are voluntary collaborations between organizations in two or more sectors that address a problem considered too complex for one sector to handle in isolation (Selsky & Parker, 2005). As such, CSPs rely on a win-win philosophy of merging skills and resources from different sectors to tackle "wicked problems" and bring about systemic change (Clarke & Crane, 2018; Kolk & Lenfant, 2015, p. 423) in areas such as sustainability (DiVito et al., 2021; Gray & Stites, 2013; Lubberink, 2021; Pedersen et al., 2020) and development (Ber & Branzei, 2010a; Kolk et al., 2008; Vestergaard et al., 2019).

In humanitarian and development sectors, institutional frameworks like the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals and the UN Global Compacts have strongly promoted CSPs as part of a broader push for innovation in aid (Müller & Sou, 2020; Sandvik, 2017; Utting & Zammit, 2009). These frameworks encourage CSPs that leverage companies' core business practices to serve both humanitarian and business interests (UN Global Compact, 2015). As such, discourses of win-win solutions and shared value (Porter & Cramer, 2011), well-known among practitioners of corporate social responsibility (CSR), are permeating the humanitarian sector. Companies and humanitarian organizations are encouraged to find what practitioners working in this field today colloquially refer to as the "sweet spot" where profit and purpose align. However, as businesses become humanitarian partners, there is a need to critically assess the assumptions of shared objectives and values in corporate humanitarian collaborations. CSPs are increasingly implemented to address humanitarian problems, in which the intended beneficiaries such as refugees have little influence on the problem definitions and outcomes of CSPs. Therefore, more research is needed on the actual practices of CSPs to understand how and for whom they actually create value.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork with one of the world's largest refugee aid organizations and their corporate partners from the technology sector, this article examines how alignment between humanitarian and business interests is pursued and constructed in refugee-focused CSPs. By analyzing interest alignment as a set of distinct practices, the article finds that sweet spots are not discovered but rather constructed. In these alignment practices, business interests become the priorities to which humanitarian organizations must align their and their beneficiaries' needs to

receive funding. The article concludes that the discourse of finding sweet spots in refugee-focused CSPs perpetuates this power asymmetry.

The process of interest alignment in refugee-focused CSPs takes place within broader and ongoing discussions over how to solve humanitarian problems in ways that create shared value. Yet this value is shared unequally between humanitarian organizations and their corporate partners. The process of finding alignment in CSPs is thus distinctly political because it involves "the continuous negotiation and struggle over definitions of reality" (Garsten & Sörbom, 2017a, p. 5; see also Seitanidi, 2010a, p. 4). As such, refugee-focused CSPs are an important site for studying the implications of businesses' changing societal roles and responsibilities in humanitarian aid.

In highlighting the politics of alignment, the article contributes to two emerging debates within the business and society literature. First, the article engages with a critical stream of literature that seeks to uncover the actual operation, practices, and political implications of CSPs, for example by questioning how and for whom CSPs create value (Ber & Branzei, 2010b; Vogel et al., 2021, p. 17). The findings in this article provide novel empirical evidence of the practices and politics through which partnership alignment comes about. Second, the article contributes to emergent scholarship on corporate engagement in humanitarianism (Hotho & Girschik, 2019) by demonstrating the centrality of power dynamics in CSPs. While the literature on CSPs emphasizes the importance of considering the political dimensions of CSPs (Selsky & Parker, 2005, p. 867) and recognizes their often asymmetric power relations (Dewulf & Elbers, 2018), the extant literature tends to reproduce normative assumptions about the win-win-win benefits of CSPs by discussing them in "functional, normative, and managerial terms" (Selsky & Parker, 2005, p. 866; see also Laasonen et al., 2012). Moreover, existing literature has focused on producing frameworks to optimize CSPs and identify business cases (Crane et al., 2014; Feix & Philippe, 2020; Girschik et al., 2020). By integrating theory from critical humanitarian studies in the analysis of interest alignment, this article identifies three key power dynamics that influence CSPs and should be considered in research on business-humanitarian engagements.

CSPs in Humanitarian Aid

Various frameworks have been offered to characterize CSPs between business and humanitarian nonprofits, centered for example on the constellation of actors involved, the nature of their collaboration, or their geographical level and aims. Vestergaard et al. (2019) define CSPs in

development contexts in terms of their issue, scope, and function. CSPs can focus on issues such as health, education, or poverty alleviation and address these issues with varying scopes. Micro-level partnerships often focus on a specific project, country, or activity. Meso-level partnerships usually focus on a particular sector or supply chain, and macro-level partnerships target broader issues with global activities (Kolk et al., 2008; Vestergaard et al., 2019, p. 5). CSPs' function, or "targeted solution" (Stadtler & Karakulak, 2021), can include the provision of services and goods, fundraising, advocacy, and awareness raising or influencing policies and governance processes.

Based on Austin's (2000) influential "collaboration continuum" of philanthropic, transactional, and integrative CSPs, Thomas and Fritz (2006) distinguish between philanthropic partnerships, i.e. low-level engagement primarily focused on the provision of cash or goods, and integrative partnerships, i.e. high-level engagement focused on utilizing core competencies of partnering organizations. Humanitarian logistics partnerships are an example of the latter (Nurmala et al., 2017; Pascucci, 2021; Rueede & Kreutzer, 2015). These two CSP categories are similar to what Haigh and Sutton (2012) term philanthropic collaborations, which "advance social welfare by facilitating the delivery of humanitarian organizations' services" and strategic collaborations that "realize exclusive benefits for the firm, while advancing social welfare through the activities of the humanitarian organization" (Haigh & Sutton, 2012, p. 274).

Despite these helpful distinctions, the line between non- and for-profit interests is blurry in both philanthropic and strategic CSPs, and "benefits for the firm" are not always linked directly to profits. Hotho and Girschik (2019) highlight that even philanthropic and nonprofit engagements in humanitarian aid can be driven by instrumental rationales. From a business perspective, these include i) access to new markets, ii) reputational benefits both externally (improving moral legitimacy with consumers and other stakeholders) and internally (motivating and retaining employees), iii) the reduction of risks and interruptions of supply chains, and finally iv) the opportunity to build relationships and gain influence with governments, local communities, and international organizations. Moreover, CSPs with nonprofits can be a way for businesses to respond to stakeholder and consumer pressure (Pedersen & Pedersen, 2013; Thomas & Fritz, 2006; see also Stadtler, 2011, p. 88-89) and implement their increasingly expected CSR activities (Nurmala et al., 2017, p. 90; Seitanidi, 2010; Seitanidi & Crane, 2009; Skagerlind et al., 2015).

Nonprofits and aid agencies, on the other hand, operate in a context of increased competition for funding. As a result, more nonprofits adopt an entrepreneurial orientation and proactively seek

out partnerships with the private sector (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2021) to acquire funding, goods, and operational expertise that will improve efficiency in aid delivery (Nurmala et al., 2017, p. 90; Thomas & Fritz, 2006, p. 117). CSPs also help nonprofits achieve visibility and brand recognition, which is critical for their survival and growth (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2021, p. 1029). In this sense, nonprofits and humanitarian organizations operate increasingly like firms (Joachim & Schneiker, 2018) and "speak to us just as any brand would do" (Sharma, 2017, p. 1). However, it is not clear from extant research how this instrumentality and resource dependency shape what CSPs are and do.

Interest Alignment in CSPs

The concept of alignment is widely applied in CSP literature to analyze the merging of partners' interests (Stadtler, 2011), organizational cultures (Gray & Stites, 2013), institutional logics (Vogel et al., 2021), values and objectives (Ber & Branzei, 2010a), shared value creation processes (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a, 2012b; Ber & Branzei, 2010b; Murphy et al., 2015), purpose definitions (Cloutier & Langley, 2017; Eden & Huxham, 2001), goals and solutions (Stadtler & Karakulak, 2021), and power asymmetries (Berger et al., 2004; Dewulf & Elbers, 2018).

Although scholars argue that no type of cross-sector collaboration is better than others, it is a common notion in the literature that CSPs closer to the integrative end of the collaboration continuum will have more impact and yield higher levels of shared value (Austin, 2000, p. 79; Thomas & Fritz, 2006, p. 122). The potential for creating this collaborative value is claimed to be contingent on finding the "organizational fit" (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a, p. 729; Berger et al., 2004) and a shared "articulation of the social problem" at hand (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012b, p. 931). Thus, while it is widely assumed that businesses and nonprofits will have differing or even conflicting objectives and interests (Laasonen et al., 2012, p. 533; Selsky & Parker, 2005, p. 856; van Tulder & Keen, 2018, p. 318), alignment is still presented as the ideal to strive for in CSPs (Brand et al., 2020) and an indicator of the transformational potential of a CSP (Murphy et al., 2015; Seitanidi et al., 2010; Seitanidi & Crane, 2009; Stadtler, 2011). In this sense, the literature mirrors the practitioner discourse on finding sweet spots for CSPs.

Consequently, the dominant focus of the extant literature is to provide theories and frameworks for overcoming differences, mitigating the tensions that arise from them, and strengthening CSP alignment. Recent examples include developing a "framing plurality" approach (Klitsie et al.,

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2018), analyzing partners' underlying ideologies and moral worlds (Cloutier & Langley, 2017), or using broker organizations to navigate tensions (Stadtler & Karakulak, 2020). These studies express a normative interest in achieving alignment (Laasonen et al., 2012, pp. 537–538), but lack a discussion of the politics or power dimensions of alignment.

Alignment, in this article, refers to the alignment of interests in CSPs between business and humanitarian actors. Broadly, interest alignment refers to the accommodation of differing priorities into a partnership that benefits all parties. In CSP research, interest alignment has commonly been understood in relation to the "fundamental CSR challenge" of striking a balance between economic and social interests (Stadtler, 2011, p. 86). The notion of interests tends to be narrowly defined as economic self-interest for example, but as urged by Cloutier and Langley (2017), partner interests must be considered in close connection with their "deeply help, ideological or moral beliefs" (Cloutier and Langley, 2017, p. 122). As such, what individual partners view as being in their interest is shaped by and shapes the partnership's purpose, goals, and objectives.

Moreover, the notion of alignment tends to be understood as a two-sided effort of "meeting in the middle". Stadtler's (2011) influential framework for theorizing interest alignment in CSPs emphasizes the compatibility of a business' economic interests and the social goals of a partnership. The framework indicates that sustained interest alignment is more likely in a partnership where economic and social interests are linked "through a reciprocal relationship" (Stadtler, 2011, p. 91), through which economic success is dependent on the success of the partnership's social goal. In an asymmetric relationship, on the other hand, economic interests will hamper the realization of social goals and interest alignment will not be possible. Thus, interest alignment is connected to notions of reciprocity, symmetry, and mutual benefits.

However, since CSPs are rarely perfectly symmetrical, there is a need to examine more carefully whether partners actually do meet in the middle and to which extent each partner must "move" or align to meet the other's preferences. To do this, I apply a theoretical framework from critical humanitarian studies, as outlined below.

Alignment Through a Critical Lens
Contrary to existing literature that views alignment as a fixed and ontological fact, I argue that alignment is more usefully understood as the product of alignment practices that unfold in and

through power relations. To analyze these power relations, I integrate an interdisciplinary body of literature on new actors and alliances in humanitarianism (Barnett, 2022; Olwig, 2021; Richey & Ponte, 2014)

This literature theorizes how businesses access new forms of power by entering the sphere of humanitarianism, a sphere that was previously limited to NGOs, nonprofits, and governments. The literature recognizes humanitarianism as a distinctly political field with various longstanding power imbalances between governments, donor agencies, NGOs, and recipients (Barnett & Weiss, 2008). Importantly, NGOs and nonprofits are not considered as neutral or powerless actors in this field, but rather as organizations with their own interests and political relations (Krause, 2014).

Scholars have documented the workings of power in business-humanitarian engagements by studying the structural and discursive power of businesses to shape norms and ideals, set humanitarian agendas, and increase political influence through CSR initiatives and NGO-business partnerships (Blowfield & Dolan, 2014; Dolan & Rajak, 2016; Garsten & Sörbom, 2017b). For example, studies have highlighted how CSR initiatives enable businesses to reframe humanitarian problems and solutions in ways that depoliticize their own business activities and cast them as virtuous (Cinnamon, 2020; Rajak, 2011, p. 18). As part of this literature, scholars have recently called for a re-politicization of CSPs to "move from the slippery 'global' toward the scale of the everyday, the intricacies of how partnerships work and how they fundamentally shift, and have the potential to shift, power-relations" (Richey et al., 2021, p. 3).

Conceptualizing alignment through this lens enables an analysis of the politics of CSPs that centers the actual practices of these partnerships and connects them to the discursive power of ideas. That is, how certain ideas, such as CSPs between nonprofit and for-profit actors, become idealized and mobilized as preferred solutions to societal challenges (Olwig, 2021; Utting & Zammit, 2009). In the conceptual framework of this article, practices are understood as the application of actual activities of and in partnerships as opposed to the ideal and theories of partnerships. Politics refers to the processes and relations of power that shape the partnerships, their outcomes, and their definitions of alignment and value. This use of the term draws on the notion of "politics of humanitarianism", which examines how political interests, ideologies, and power relations impact the delivery of humanitarian assistance, the prioritization of needs, and the allocation of resources (De Lauri, 2016). To show how these relations of power play out in

practice, I use the term power dynamic, which describes how this power is distributed, wielded, and expressed in the interactions between nonprofits and tech companies in CSPs.

Research Design

To support the theoretical framework of this article, I adopted a critical and interpretive methodology (Tracy, 2012, p. 40). Accordingly, I coupled qualitative ethnographic methods with an explorative and abductive analytical approach (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 26) described below.

Empirical Setting

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) is one of the largest global aid organizations in the world working with refugees, and partnerships with the tech sector are critical to their work.[1] The president of the IRC since 2013, David Miliband, formerly worked as advisor to the United Kingdom's Prime Minister Tony Blair before joining Parliament and serving as foreign secretary under Prime Minister Gordon Brown for the Labour Party. From these positions, Miliband brings to the IRC a political philosophy that enthusiastically embraces the role of the private sector in helping solve social, environmental, and humanitarian challenges. In an interview with Fast Company, Miliband explains that he has pushed his staff to pull in more private funds because government grants are too restricted: "The private money has greater leverage. It is our venture fund" (Shaer, 2016).

Thus, while the IRC has a long history of engaging with private sector companies, mainly through philanthropic donations and fundraising campaigns, the organization is starting to incorporate private sector partners more strategically into its financial and operational strategies. This development is not specific to the IRC, but rather typical for contemporary humanitarian

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[1] In the US, the IRC primarily works with refugee resettlement as one of nine official resettlement agencies appointed by the US government (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2012). Outside of the US, the IRC focuses on emergency relief for refugees and operates in more than 40 countries, managing aid programs on health, gender-based violence programs, emergency response, education, refugee advocacy, livelihood strategies and economic recovery. The IRC also participates in EU coordinated resettlement programs and is currently the second biggest implementation partner of The European Commission's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO), and therefore a key actor in European migration management. Most of IRC's funding comes from EU and United Nations agencies as well as US government agencies. About 30 percent of their funding comes from private foundations and donors (International Rescue Committee, 2020).

organizations (Barnett, 2022), which positions the IRC as an exemplary case for studying the alignment between business and humanitarian interests in CSPs. Thus, although this article's analysis is context-specific, the cases reflect a development beyond the five partnerships studied here.

In recent years, the IRC has developed a broad portfolio of partnerships in the tech sector with diverse companies such as Google, Microsoft, Facebook, Airbnb, Mastercard, Salesforce, Twilio, Intel, and more. Having historically branded themselves as operating within a version of capitalism committed to social improvement through innovation and disruption (Atal, 2020), companies from the tech sector have been positioned as particularly crucial partners in the shift towards more efficient and innovative aid for refugees (Culbertson et al., 2019; PwC Global Crisis Centre, 2017; UNHCR, 2016). Technology companies, in this article, refer to for-profit corporations in the tech sector that design and sell digital technology, software, and internet services. These businesses are also referred to as Internet companies (Flyverbom et al., 2019) and technology platform businesses (Atal, 2020). This article uses data collected from the IRC's partnerships with Google, Microsoft, Zendesk, Accenture, and Box (see Table 1 for an overview).

These partnerships were selected based on the following criteria: i) They include a technology company as the corporate partner; ii) They focus on refugees as their main issue (but diverge in their specific focus and function); iii) They are all integrative/strategic partnerships rather than purely philanthropic.; iv) My access as a researcher was agreed consensually between the businesses and the IRC. As such, the partnerships were all considered successful by both partners and were not selected to exemplify particularly asymmetrical partnerships; and v) At the time of research, all partnerships were ongoing and at stages where aligning processes, such as project implementation and bilateral meetings, could be observed. While these five partnerships constituted the main sites of data collection for this article, their specific focus and characteristics are not the subject of analysis. Rather, the partnerships provide empirical insights into the practices of alignment and how these practices contrast the ideal of alignment.

Table 1: Technology partners included in this study

Company	Type	Issue(s)	Scope	Function	Activities	Interview respondents

Company	Type	Focus	Level	Activity	Contribution		#
Google (Internet services and products; computer software and hardware company)	Integrative/ strategic	Digital skills and livelihoods Refugees' information needs	Micro; Macro	Provision of services and goods Fundraising Product development	Donation of grants, volunteer hours, and products Technical expertise and product strategy		3
Microsoft (Internet services and products; computer software and hardware company)	Integrative/ strategic	IT solutions to improve the work of nonprofits. Digital skills and livelihoods	Meso; Macro	Provision of services and goods Product development	Donation of grants, products, and expertise Discounts and development of software for the organization		2
Accenture (IT services and consulting company)	Integrative/ strategic	Mobilizing support for refugees in the private sector	Micro	Provision of services Mobilizing resources	Financial and volunteer donations Support in facilitating networks and corporate partnership strategies		2
Zendesk (Customer service platform and software development company)	Integrative/ strategic	IT solutions to improve the work of nonprofits. Refugees' information needs	Micro; Meso; Macro	Provision of services and goods Product development	Donation of grants, volunteer hours, and products Technical expertise		3
Box	Integrative/ strategic	Emergency relief for refugees	Micro; Macro	Provision of services and goods	Donation of grants,		1

| (Cloud content management company) | | IT solutions to improve the work of nonprofits | | Fundraising Awareness raising Policy | volunteer hours, and products. Discounts and development of software for the organization | |

Data Collection

Data collection followed the "extended case method" (Burawoy, 1998; Wadham & Warren, 2014). In this method, data from empirical cases are collected ethnographically, examined interpretively with attention to their specific empirical contexts, and used to illuminate broader societal issues or processes. While I applied ethnographic methods, data collection did not look like traditional ethnographic fieldwork as prolonged immersion in a single, bounded, and distant (geographically and/or culturally) field site with participant observation as the main method. Rather, data collection was fragmented and polymorphous and the boundaries between being "in" and "out" of the field were blurred.

Between September 2019 and January 2022, data were collected through "polymorphous" engagement with informants across dispersed sites (Gusterson, 1997). Literature on "studying up" influenced my strategy for gaining access (Nader, 1972; Ortner, 2010) as I sought out what Souleles calls interstitial spaces: "events and sites at which a population that is hard to access presents itself to the public" (Souleles, 2018, p. 53). Through meticulous research on the social media platform LinkedIn, I established contacts that developed into gatekeepers and secured research access to the IRC. Interviews and fieldwork trips were organized through these gatekeepers. This access influenced my data sample, which contains more data from IRC employees than their corporate partners. Moreover, my previous experience working with international NGOs shaped data collection through an insider perspective on the practices, structures, and language of such organizations (Henriksen, 2018). Thus, my position can be characterized as both an insider and outsider, a position familiar to anthropologists doing fieldwork in organizations in general (Garsten & Nyqvist, 2013) and humanitarian agencies specifically (Fassin, 2011). This position has implications for how I collected data (e.g., by

determining where and when I was allowed to collect data) and for my interpretation of these data (e.g., shaping what I included and excluded in my analysis), as I outline below.

Data were collected through two rounds of fieldwork in New York and San Francisco, in which I observed IRC's work on corporate partnerships with the tech sector. I followed three teams, in which employees are engaged in CSPs with tech companies. In total, I spent 11 months "in the field", including one week at the IRC headquarters in New York City in January 2020 just before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. I put the field in quotes to indicate that the field was both a physical and virtual space that I was never completely disengaged from. For example, I continued to collect data online after my trips to New York and San Francisco. Likewise, while I was in San Francisco some data were collected online. Due to the pandemic, the IRC teams shifted to online work, which enabled me to follow their work, interact with informants virtually and generate "thick" data in between field trips.

My two main methods for data collection, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews, were thus conducted both in person and online. However, the pandemic did limit the opportunities for participant observation. Thus, my data sample contains more interviews than field notes, which in turn shaped my analytical process to rely more on interview quotes than observations. I conducted participant observation and recorded field notes at i) five events and summits about private sector engagement in humanitarian and refugee aid, ii) seven internal meetings in the IRC teams, and iii) three meetings between IRC teams and their corporate technology partners. At these meetings, I was introduced as an independent researcher. In addition to these activities, I recorded field notes after every interview to describe the interview setting, the body language of the interviewee (when possible), and details of the interaction (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 18). I wrote a journal with personal and analytical reflections throughout my time in the field (Sanjek, 1990, p. 108), in which I documented my own feelings and biases as I immersed myself in the professional lives and perspectives of my interlocutors. These field notes total more than 100 pages.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 52 key informants from the IRC, the technology companies partnering with the IRC, and other relevant stakeholder organizations. Of these 52 participants, 35 came from nonprofits or aid agencies (IRC, Mercy Corps, and Nethope), 10 came from the technology companies included in this study (Google, Microsoft, Zendesk, Box, and Accenture) and seven informants had different affiliations (e.g., the business consortia Tent

Partnerships for Refugees and the nonprofit Techfugees). The interviews were between 20 and 80 minutes each in duration. I conducted in-person interviews with 13 of the 52 informants and the remaining through Zoom, Teams, or telephone. I identified participants through "snowball sampling" (Guest, 2014), utilizing my informants' networks to gain access, which explains the majority of informants from the nonprofit sector. I interviewed IRC employees involved in corporate partnerships from different positions (in different departments and of different ranks) to include multiple partnership activities.

To follow partnerships over time, I conducted 20 follow-up interviews with selected informants, prioritizing IRC employees and corporate managers that were directly involved in partnerships. The aim of the research was not to conduct an ethnography of the NGO or the companies specifically, but of the middle space in which they meet to observe processes of alignment. Therefore, I included interviews from both sides to try to balance corporate and NGO views on the partnerships. However, my data collection emphasizes the perspectives of the IRC to pay particular attention to the NGO perspective of alignment practices in CSPs. Following an ethnographic commitment to the emic perspectives of my interlocutors, i.e., their experiences with and ideas about CSPs in refugee contexts, the interviews followed a loosely structured interview guide, which allowed the conversation to go in directions decided by the informants (Weller, 2014, p. 346). I phrased interview questions to encourage open-ended and descriptive responses to generate rich and detailed data on the narratives, developments, and practices of CSPs.

Data from company and nonprofit reports, blog posts, and other internal and publicly available documents were used to triangulate findings from interviews and observations. For example, several of the technology companies publish blog posts about their partnerships with the IRC. I used the information from these blog posts to substantiate the descriptions of partnership activities and discourses I collected through interviews and observations.

Data Analysis

Throughout data collection, I coded my data through an open and explorative coding strategy (Saldaña, 2021, p. 148). Consequently, data collection and analysis were not separated stages but involved iterative movements between empirical data and theory, which then shaped subsequent data collection (Locke et al., 2020). While methodological literature often refers to this movement between data and theory as either inductive or deductive logics of inquiry, the term abduction has

been proposed to describe an analytical approach that begins with an empirically observed puzzle, surprise, or tension (Kennedy & Thornberg, 2017; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The analytical process of this article reflects an abductive approach, which is less step-wise and linear and more circular than induction and deduction: "The back and forth takes place less as a series of discrete steps than it does in the same moment: in some sense, the researcher is simultaneously puzzling over empirical materials and theoretical literatures" (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, pp. 27–28).

My analytical interest in alignment was sparked by the observations made at the events I attended. These events focused on CSPs with businesses in the humanitarian field. Looking through my field notes, I noticed that ideas of alignment were dominant in discussions on how to partner with the private sector. In my interviews, this pattern reappeared as discussions of the sweet spot partnerships. The repeated mention of sweet spots among practitioners and participants in the field was puzzling, as it resembled classic CSR narratives while being presented as a move beyond traditional CSR or philanthropy. I then reviewed critical theory on the narratives, discourses, and power relations of CSR to situate the sweet spot discourse in a theoretical framework that scrutinizes widely agreed-upon or taken-for-granted narratives. This theoretical orientation guided my next round of interviews and fieldnote readings.

I narrowed the data set to focus on interviews with participants from the IRC and tech companies directly involved in CSPs to analyze how the sweet spot discourse and ideals of alignment are expressed in partnership practices. As such, information from both the IRC and the company side of the partnerships informs the analysis, although the majority of the data were collected with the IRC. While the five partnerships differ in their issue focus, scope, and activities, the collected data enabled an analytical strategy for identifying patterns and similarities. I interviewed at least one corporate manager involved in partnerships with the IRC from each tech company (see a distribution of these interviews in Table 1), while the interviews with IRC employees did not focus on one partnership in particular.

Selected interviews and field notes were subjected to several rounds of coding in NVivo. First, I conducted a round of structural coding (Saldaña, 2021, p. 130) to generate broad analytical nodes about how the concept of alignment appeared in the data. This coding helped separate the quotes and observations into useful segments such as "the ideals of alignment" and "practices of alignment" I then applied a strategy of pattern coding to each data segment (Saldaña, 2021, p. 322) to interpret the data according to my evolving theoretical framework on interest alignment

and power. I categorized data within each segment by developing statements that captured the major themes and patterns of actions described by participants. For example, the quotes and observations within the "ideals of alignment" segment were grouped into pattern codes such as "impact" and "beyond CSR", corresponding to the words used by participants to describe the ideal of alignment.

Through this coding, I found that the alignment of humanitarian and business interests was pursued in the field through a set of distinct practices, which focused on i) strategies, ii) needs, and iii) projects. Rather than analyzing the varying degrees of alignment in partnerships (and thereby reinforcing the idea that alignment should appear), these categories enable a critical analysis of *how* alignment comes about in practice.

Findings: Practices of Alignment in CSPs for Refugees

In the following sections, I analyze alignment as ideal and practice in the CSPs between the IRC and their technology company partners. The analysis unfolds across three types of observed alignment practices, which I categorize as strategy alignment, needs alignment, and project alignment. These practices are distinguished in terms of their particular activities, organizational level, and level of collaboration between partner organizations (see Figure 1). The analysis demonstrates each practice's underlying power dynamics and implications for the partnership. The findings are not temporally ordered according to partnership timelines or stages of development because the practices did not follow an organized and linear process. Rather, the practices often overlapped and were closely interwoven. For clarity, informants from technology companies will be referred to as corporate managers, while informants from the IRC will be referred to as IRC employees from this point forward. All informants are anonymized, names are pseudonyms, and quotes from corporate managers are not linked to their specific company. I begin by analyzing the ideal of alignment as it emerged in the field.

The Sweet Spot Discourse: Alignment as Ideal

The ideal of finding a sweet spot in refugee-focused CSPs is situated in a historical context of increased private sector engagement in humanitarian action. In this context, nonprofits compete for funding from donors, who often favor nonprofits that engage in private sector partnerships

(Sandvik, 2017, p. 6). At the same time, some technology companies seek to legitimize their technologies and public image by associating with charitable and humanitarian work. Thus, the current humanitarian landscape facilitates an interdependence between businesses and nonprofits.

Informants from both the IRC and the technology companies recurrently brought up an ideal of alignment that mirrored instrumental CSR logics (Garriga & Melé, 2013) of win-win solutions and business cases for doing good. For example, one corporate manager described how partnerships need to make "business sense" *and* be good for the world. During an interview about his company's partnerships with humanitarian organizations, he enthusiastically described the perfect partnership as "that big chocolate cake that does not make you gain weight". This notion was echoed by corporate managers from other companies but also from employees at the IRC, expressing that a partnership hits a sweet spot when it extends the for-profit mission of the company as well as the social mission of the nonprofit. As such, the ideal of alignment was similar across the IRC and its corporate partners.

However, there were diverging views on the role of financial donations in these ideals of alignment. Finding the sweet spot was often described by informants from both the IRC and tech companies as a move away from traditional CSR solutions. A corporate manager explained that while companies are often asked for money, "true value is actually when you can engage a company's capabilities or can really embed that social impact within the value chain of a business". Financial donations were described as merely the tip of the iceberg of CSPs, whereas their true potential was to be unleashed by aligning the core business and the humanitarian mission.

Some in the IRC organization (mainly mid-level employees working as "partnerships officers") subscribed to this logic and argued that it was important for the IRC to "capitalize" on the willingness of tech companies to contribute in other ways than cash donations. Top-level management at the IRC, however, was still assessing partnerships in terms of fundraising and therefore highlighted the importance of including financial donations from corporate partners. Despite these differences, both the IRC and their corporate partners pursued partnerships with the aspiration of aligning their interests. In this endeavor, alignment as an ideal for CSPs was articulated as an extended form of corporate responsibility that required companies to do more, be more helpful, and have more impact.

According to IRC employees, the organization often needed to spend vast amounts of time implementing donated technologies into humanitarian programs that were too complicated or did not solve an actual need. Aware of this issue, a corporate manager explained that the goal of his team, which he referred to as the "social impact team" within his company, was to be as "helpful as possible". His team pursued this goal by looking for partnerships where their technology could be donated to allow nonprofits "to do what they do more efficiently and help more people than they may be helping today".

This approach to finding alignment between the technological product and the humanitarian mission was presented as a way to help companies capitalize on their social impact initiatives. One corporate manager explained that prioritizing the partnerships, where his company's technology would be "uniquely helpful" and have the most impact, benefited the company by generating more positive media attention and better branding opportunities. Informants thus used the language of sweet spot partnerships to describe both a movement away from traditional philanthropy and an extension of the humanitarian responsibility of companies, in which their contributions were perceived as more helpful and impactful while also generating more value for the company.

These articulations of the sweet spot are fueled by what scholars have referred to as a *partnership ideology* (Utting & Zammit, 2009), that promotes private sector collaborations as panaceas for development and social change (Olwig, 2021). In this partnership ideology, the emphasis on engaging a company's core business skills rather than merely their financial support is discursively linked to an urgent need for private sector skills, particularly from the tech industry, to innovate and fix the international refugee regime. Businesses have been recognized as important partners in humanitarian aid for refugees (Müller & Sou, 2020), based on a perceived failure of the state-led refugee regime. Similarly, since the 1990s, partnerships between business and development sectors have been propagated as pragmatic solutions to governance issues and "state failures" (Utting & Zammit, 2009, pp. 41–42).

The mass displacement of more than 100 million people is frequently referred to by humanitarian agencies and NGOs as the global refugee crisis. This crisis covers a range of geographically dispersed emergencies, including civil wars in Syria and South Sudan, economic collapse in Venezuela, and the violent persecution of Rohingya in Myanmar, all of which resulted in mass displacements (UNHCR, 2023). The term global refugee crisis refers also to a current crisis of

institutionalized refugee governance, in which displacement globally is met with a concurrent decline in states' willingness to provide asylum and humanitarian assistance to refugees (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Tan, 2017, p. 29). This governance crisis is not new, however, and Western policymakers and scholars have long called for a paradigm shift in the international refugee regime to manage migration flows more efficiently (Crisp, 2005) and "innovate" the global refugee regime (Betts et al., 2012; Betts & Collier, 2017).

The current predominantly state-led refugee regime is criticized for being inefficient, unsustainable, and creating a dependence on aid. To mitigate these limitations, scholars argue that global businesses can offer "creative and sustainable alternatives to state-led humanitarian dependency" (Betts et al., 2012, p. 3). Similar calls have been launched from humanitarian organizations (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2018; UN Global Compact, 2015), political institutions (e.g. The White House, 2016), and private sector consortia such as the Tent Partnership for Refugees and the Refugee Investment Network (Dyssegaard Kallick & Roldan, 2018; ICC, 2019). Taken together, these actors advance a strong mandate for businesses to assume responsibility in the global refugee crisis.

The need for innovative technology is based on claims about the more advanced technology needs of refugees relative to other humanitarian beneficiary groups and the increasingly vital role of digital technology and internet access for refugees on their journeys (Fisher, 2018; Gillespie et al., 2018). Digital technology, in this sense, is presented as a tool of empowerment, enabling refugees to "better help themselves" (Culbertson et al., 2019, p. 7). At the same time, reports highlight a growing need for digital technology for governments to manage migration and refugee flows (PwC Global Crisis Centre, 2017). Governments and humanitarian agencies increasingly sub-contract the development of these digital technologies to technology companies (Lemberg-Pedersen & Haioty, 2020). As such, technology companies are positioned as key actors in the refugee crisis, serving the innovation and technology needs of NGOs, border agencies, and refugees themselves.

This particular configuration of the partnership ideology shaped the ways in which informants imagined and defined the sweet spot in refugee-focused CSPs. That is, partnerships where the humanitarian needs of refugees align perfectly with what technology companies do best. For example, Microsoft describes their commitment to "helping nonprofits access deeper levels of innovation to address social challenges – using our technology and expertise to help humanitarian

organizations scale the impact of the workers on front lines, manage and allocate aid, and help populations who need it most". The company does so through a shift from "a traditional approach of corporate social responsibility, to an approach of 'total social impact,'" in which they "use the power of technology to route information, skills, and knowledge in better ways to displaced people" (all quotes from Spelhaug, 2019).

These quotes demonstrate the underlying relationships and context for CSPs between technology companies and humanitarian agencies, in which CSR discourses on shared value have traveled to the domain of refugee aid. In this context, private sector innovation and expertise is perceived as critical to tackling the refugee crisis. The sweet spot in refugee-focused CSPs, then, is articulated as partnerships that mobilize the unique expertise of tech companies and align them with the needs of humanitarian organizations and their refugee beneficiaries. However, as the next three sections show, this ideal is contrasted by the practices of alignment in which refugee needs are rather aligned to corporate priorities.

Practices of strategy alignment

In the practices of strategy alignment, top-level staff such as directors and senior management, draft broad strategies for corporate partnerships (on the nonprofit side) and social impact (on the business side). These strategies are produced independently within the companies and the nonprofit and do not pertain to only one specific partnership. As such, both the IRC and their corporate partners develop internal partnership strategies, in which they define their current and future partnership needs and goals. These strategies are expressions of each organization's interests. But in the alignment of these strategies, shifting corporate priorities become the benchmarks to which IRC's strategies must be aligned. Moreover, to attract funding from tech partners, the IRC is increasingly required to incorporate their technology solutions, which in turn shapes IRC partnership strategies.

In line with other large aid organizations that prioritize private sector partnerships (Thomas & Fritz, 2006, p. 118), the IRC has formalized its work with corporate partners, for example by assigning specialized staff to corporate partnership teams. In the words of one senior advisor at IRC, the teams have gradually shifted from what she called an "opportunistic approach" (i.e., exploiting opportunities as they arise) to an approach that involves setting priorities in advance for corporate engagement. New staff members were hired to streamline partnership processes in

the hopes of abandoning the more ad hoc practices of the past. The IRC partnership teams now conduct regular assessments of their operational needs to pursue new partnerships.

An IRC employee from one of these teams explained that because the organization has a limited capacity for managing partnerships, they compile a "top ten" list of potential partners by carefully assessing IRC's technology needs:

> We know that most tech partners, if you want financial resources from them, you also have to want other things from them, like their technology, and so we are trying to be really conscientious about what kind of technology needs the organization has.

As demonstrated in this quote, the IRC reviews its technological needs partly because to attract funding from corporate technology partners, the IRC must also "want" their technology (see also Culbertson et al., 2019, p. 14). Therefore, the IRC must find a technological need that aligns with the products offered by technology companies. The social impact teams of the technology companies, on the other hand, look for suitable humanitarian issues to fit their company's products and mission. Selected issues become part of a corporate social impact strategy that outlines how a company plans to generate social impact through its business activities. Several corporate managers explained that the work of selecting these issues consisted of finding humanitarian problems where the benefits of the company's existing technological solutions could be amplified for more impact.

However, while both the IRC and their corporate partners produce partnership strategies, the work of aligning these strategies fell disproportionately on the IRC. In fact, an important task for the IRC partnership teams was to remain part of the corporate social impact strategies to ensure long-term commitment. A senior IRC employee explained that the partnership teams evaluated and revised their strategies for each partnership every year. When I asked whether this work followed annual meetings with each partner, she responded with a sigh: "It does not usually work as lockstep as that. Our strategy planning is never the same time as theirs, so more likely we will set a strategy and then probably adjust our strategy if they have a new strategy".

This indication was confirmed in a following interview with two corporate managers. One of them explained: "I think you go where technology companies are going. Technology companies do not randomly do something in humanitarian (aid), they do things that align with what they are doing as a company". The other manager concurred that partnerships would follow "the strategic focus" of the companies and added: "We shift pretty rapidly (…) technology companies are very similar

in that they tend to pivot over time as their strategies shift over time". Shifts in corporate priorities were described by informants as, for example, shifts to a main focus on cloud technology or artificial intelligence, which in turn defined their engagement in humanitarian action.

These quotes portray alignment not as a merge of two sets of strategic interests, but as a one-way movement steered by the corporate priorities of technology companies. As these priorities shift, the focus to which nonprofits must align, shift too. As a result, the senior employee at IRC emphasized the need to build corporate partnerships that align on multiple levels: "That is the whole point of developing a strong multi-faceted relationship - so they cannot leave you so easily" she laughed. "If you were not, it is a lot easier to just go with the whims and the waves and what the popular topic *du jour* is". Addressing the specific challenges of partnering with technology companies, she continued: "Because they (technology companies) are growing and changing so much, their strategies are changing pretty quickly, so the point for us is to make sure that we are always part of those strategies".

CSP literature suggests that partners must continually seek out new activities that generate shared value to sustain the success of CSPs (Austin, 2000, p. 81). However, as the above findings indicate, sustaining those points of shared value falls predominantly on the nonprofit, as their needs for funding and resources do not change with the same speed as corporate priorities. More importantly, while corporate strategies change, the refugee needs they aim to address do not.

In the alignment of organizational strategies, the corporate "social impact" strategies become the benchmarks to which nonprofits must align their strategies. To remain part of these rapidly shifting strategies, the partnership teams at the IRC relied on what they defined as "creative thinking", which is the focus of the following section.

Practices of needs alignment

The alignment of needs is carried out by IRC partnership officers, who are employed at the nonprofit headquarter, but are positioned below directors and senior management. Needs, in this case, are different from strategies because they are more specific (i.e., a strategy can focus on engaging with a particular section of the tech sector, while new computers and phones are a specific need linked to that strategy), but they are still more general than actual humanitarian projects or programs that detail and plan how to deploy the donations needed. Needs can refer to

the nonprofit's needs or the needs of refugees, and these will not necessarily be the same. Just like businesses, humanitarian organizations have funding or brand visibility needs that are separate from the needs of refugees such as shelter, medical help, and legal recognition.

In contrast to the ideals of integrative and transformational CSPs (Austin, 2000; Pedersen & Pedersen, 2013), the IRC partnerships with tech companies had clear transactional underpinnings. Thus, the aspirational idea of *shared* value (implying a common objective) was contrasted by the practices of alignment within the partnerships, which sought rather to accommodate the *separate* values of nonprofits and companies through transactions. In these transactions, the needs of both the IRC and their refugee beneficiaries were aligned through "creative thinking" to fit the donations tech partners wished to contribute. One IRC employee, who was managing a partnership with a tech company that aimed at developing software solutions for the IRC, described:

> They (tech companies) are not just nice. I mean they are nice, but they are not just nice. The *quid pro quo* is we get them to build us a tool, they get our understanding of how data is logically arranged in our world such that they can use that intellectual property to build other tools that they might one day sell.

The employee therefore recommended to not view corporate partners as ATM machines: "It is essential to understand that there is a transaction happening here (…) understanding what they are trying to achieve is central to how to leverage resources from them".

At the IRC, corporate partnership officers performed this work of understanding the details of the transactions. One partnership officer described the job as "figuring out what the companies want from a partnership, go to the IRC field staff to discuss how this aligns with their needs on the ground, and then draft a strategy for how to partner in a way that works for both". Drafting a strategy, another partnership officer explained, involved a large amount of "creative thinking" in figuring out how to align the needs of each partner: "We are the bridges between the IRC and the companies, but also the interpreters", he said, pointing to their role as translators of corporate and NGO worlds.[2] The vignette below, from a meeting between a partnership officer, Jessica, and IRC field staff in Oakland, illustrates these practices:

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[2] Fieldnotes, January 23, 2020.

January 28th, 2020, Oakland, California

Jessica arrived as the last person for the meeting. She was carrying her white suitcase and explained that she was flying back to New York right after this meeting. She worked at the headquarters in Manhattan. She said hello to me and to the Regional Director of IRC Northern California, Alice, as well as two other IRC employees who had joined us on a Teams call – Marie from the Sacramento office and Dana from the office in San Jose. We were sitting in a small meeting room in the IRC Oakland office, which is a local resettlement office for refugees in Northern California. The office ran language classes and offered help with green card applications. After a short round of introductions, the four started discussing volunteer opportunities for technology employees because Jessica had received many requests from technology companies in this regard. Alice thought it was a great idea to have technology employees volunteer, but she said the enthusiasm from technology companies to volunteer was almost too much for IRC's capacity. It was difficult and time-consuming to find volunteer tasks and organize the volunteer work. They agreed however that it was strategically an efficient way to engage the companies and hopefully get them to donate money. Alice, Marie, and Dana started discussing different volunteer opportunities already in place: citizen workshops, empowerment workshops, and mentor programs. Jessica asked if the mentor programs could run virtually, which would attract more technology people, but Marie replied that the program required at least one face-to-face meeting every other month. "Is it feasible to travel from San Francisco to Sacramento for volunteer work?" Jessica asked. Alice shook her head. "That is easily a three-hour drive each way", she said, and Dana added that even going from San Francisco to San Jose was probably too much of a hassle. The four discussed which types of volunteer work might be interesting for the technology employees. "You won't get 15 Googlers doing yard work", said Jessica. They want to donate their expertise, not just their time, she added. Marie said that her office ran smartphone literacy workshops for refugee women in Sacramento and asked if Google would be interested in volunteering for that. Jessica was sure they would be but added: "Google is usually not willing to travel, but they love to host!" Jessica said it would be great to compose a menu of volunteer opportunities that the IRC could send to companies. They decided to produce a "corporate engagement deck" (a brief presentation with simple slides comparable to a deck of cards) for each local IRC office in California. After this discussion, the three local office managers started listing their in-kind donation needs to Jessica. Alice mentioned phones and computers. She and Jessica exchanged

telling smiles and Alice added that she knew how hard it is to get technology companies to donate products. Marie said that they also needed computers, bus and train tickets, bikes, and helmets. "And I just want to throw this out there: Gift cards. Giving the gift of choice" she said. I could tell by Alice and Jessica's faces that gift cards were almost impossible to get. Marie explained that it would really ease her workload because her "clients" would be able to just buy what they need. Jessica concluded that it might be helpful if Alice, Marie, and Dana each compiled a list of in-kind needs to send her. Then she could have a look and see which needs "speak to tech people" and which ones are "appropriate to ask for".[3]

This meeting demonstrated several important aspects of the "creative" construction of alignment. First, the unequal amount of work in finding alignment was clear. As I had spent time with and conducted individual interviews with several of the present employees, I was aware of their differing views on corporate tech partnerships going into the meeting. While Jessica, the partnership officer, was positive towards partnering in ways that suited the corporate partners, the local staff was generally less enthusiastic and more skeptical about the usefulness of such partnerships. Consequently, local employees focused more on the transactional component of partnerships and saw them largely as a way to establish a funding relationship (consistent with the findings of Binder & Witte, 2007).

The regional office of IRC Northern California operates on a 12 million budget annually, of which 20% comes from private donations including from corporations, individuals, and foundations. According to employees, the balance between public and private funding at the IRC was changing due to a decline in public funding. Prioritizing partnerships with the tech sector was part of an overall IRC strategy to bring in more private funds to compensate for this decline in public funding. However, while this strategy followed the ideal of aligning corporate and humanitarian interests, IRC employees experienced that they had to do most of the aligning. One IRC employee explained:

> Their [tech companies] perspective is tying product and money. Obviously, money is essentially what helps our programs run. But most of the corporate partnerships has some combination (…) We have companies that will give us donations of their product whether through credits or actual stuff. And then most want to be involved in some way in engaging their employees. A lot of my work revolves around employee engagement and

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[3] Fieldnotes, January 28, 2020.

ensuring that companies that we partner with feel part of the IRC, the work that we do, and sort of understand and feel the benefit of how we are helping people. We have employment workshops where we will do job readiness classes for refugees and newcomers. And a group of [tech] employees might come and do mock interviews. We provide all the curricula; we facilitate the day. They [tech employees] really just come, and we train them and then we spend about two-three hours in a workshop with them and IRC clients.

Secondly, the meeting clearly illustrated the power dynamics that shape alignment practices, as the corporate partners ultimately determined the terms of any encounter, including the content, scope, and location of their engagement. The IRC employee quoted above also commented on this power dynamic, as she explained:

It's a difficult balance, you know, building a partnership and having the autonomy to run the programs. And to use the expertise that we have and not sacrifice that at the expense of funding. The more corporations want to get involved, the more they control within our systems.

Moreover, she described, with the movement to donate products and time rather than money, corporations also increasingly sought to influence humanitarian programs by bringing in experts and donating "expertise". This power dynamic is linked to the discourse of sweet spots and its emphasis on utilizing the core capacities of a business. Even though phones and computers were the most pressing need, technology partners preferred to donate their expertise. This desire to be "uniquely helpful" shaped what they wanted to donate their time to – digital literacy workshops, not yard work. Consequently, the alignment of needs and contributions became a task for the IRC employees of highlighting some needs over others in ways that align with corporate priorities. The final section of the analysis below illustrates how IRC employees bring this transactional understanding to their corporate partners to create alignment for specific projects.

Practices of project alignment

The alignment of projects cuts across organizational levels and involves top-level staff, partnership officers, and field staff in local country offices, who implement the projects designed in CSPs. The level of collaboration between nonprofit and corporate partners is highest in the

alignment of projects, as employees from both sides collaborate on the day-to-day design and operation of projects. The alignment of projects happens throughout a partnership as one partnership can include multiple projects. The previous sections have illustrated how the strategies and needs of the IRC and their beneficiaries are aligned to the priorities of corporate tech partners. But this one-sided alignment also happened in relation to specific humanitarian projects, which to receive support from partners, needed to fit the commercial interests of tech partners and the individual motivations of corporate volunteers.

In a follow-up Zoom interview with an IRC partnership officer, who had just secured a large grant from a technology company to support a project for refugees in Italy, I asked him how he had approached this task. It is about "representing the needs on the ground" in a compelling way, he replied. "So how do you do that?" I probed. He chuckled and said:

> Lots of experience. This becomes the 'salesy' part of the job (…) They [technology companies] advertise that they are nimble, they advertise that their technology is customizable, and allows people to build solutions that are tailored to their specific needs. So, you have to speak that language.

To speak the language, the partnership officers regularly attended events and summits to stay updated on developments in the "tech for social impact" space and held bi-weekly meetings with their teams to discuss potential new partners. Furthermore, the teams consulted with market analysts about which social impact causes the tech sector was currently prioritizing. This knowledge was presented internally in the IRC in quarterly reports on "market trends" and "giving trends" of the tech sector.[4] This knowledge, one IRC employee explained, enabled them to better communicate "alignment of programmatic areas" with their technology partners. As such, finding alignment involved framing the needs of refugees in a way that matched what the companies were trying to sell.

However, these alignment practices were not only performed by IRC employees. Although the IRC is increasingly required to integrate technology solutions as part of a partnership transaction, a financial donation from the company is usually still required. The partnership teams I followed during my fieldwork were all situated within the fundraising department of the IRC. According to informants, this fundraising department worked primarily to secure financial funds rather than

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[4] I have read examples of these internal reports but have been asked to keep contents confidential.

products and expertise. As such, the success of partnership teams was still measured on their ability to raise money through corporate partnerships. And while technology companies are eager to donate their expertise or software solutions, nonprofit organizations need money to operate (Schleifer, 2020).

Thus, some of the smaller companies in my sample (relative to the dominant tech companies like Google and Microsoft) needed to more creatively "sell" their contribution to the IRC to secure a partnership. One corporate manager explained that his job included "sales-y discovery calls with newer humanitarian organizations" to understand if his company could help them. Over the course of several months, the company had been pursuing a partnership with the IRC, which had been difficult to formalize because the social impact team could not offer sufficient financial donations. During a lunch meeting between two of the company's social impact managers and an IRC employee in San Francisco in January 2020,[5] the corporate managers probed about IRC's specific humanitarian projects to find potential overlaps with their company's expertise. Thus, a partnership sweet spot, rather than already existing and ready "to find", is constructed through negotiations on both sides of a CSP.

In this negotiation, both IRC employees and corporate managers emphasized the importance of personal relationships. Long-term trust building between partner organizations is known as a crucial factor for the success of CSPs (Berger et al., 2004, p. 69), and according to my informants, this trust was usually created and sustained between individual employees on both sides of the partnership. However, this reliance on personal connections between the partnership teams, which were situated in the headquarters of the organization, created challenges for the IRC employees working at the field level to implement the partnership projects. One IRC employee who worked on a project involving multiple corporate partners described how the nature of the partnership relationships, characterized by personal connections and ideals of alignment, halted the execution of the project:

> Even though we technically have access to what you would consider the best designers and developers in the world, it is actually kind of hard to engage in that way (…) It is easier when you are paying them, and there is a contract versus the strategic alignment that is required with a technology company.

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[5] I was present at this lunch meeting on January 23, 2020.

The challenge was two-fold. First, the employee explained, it required a lot of work to provide corporate partners, who might be motivated by an exciting new project or a desire to do good, with the necessary knowledge to work in a specific humanitarian context. Second, the execution of projects depended on the personal motivations and interests of corporate volunteers:

> It is actually hard to find a designer to work on this particular project, and then also make a case for why this is a project they should work on (…) I think it is the nature of that relationship that makes it very hard to execute. I mean, it is kind of the opposite of agile and quick turnaround, right?

Thus, in contrast to portrayals of the tech sector as agile and fast-paced, the nature of the partnerships with technology companies made their work less efficient in some cases.

The Contrasts of Alignment as Ideal and Practices

Taken together, the above findings demonstrate how alignment is expressed as an ideal and as concrete partnership practices. The empirical model below (Figure 1) illustrates these practices, how they differ and interlink, what power dynamics they reveal, and the implications of these dynamics for the partnerships. Overall, the findings in this article demonstrate that interest alignment in CSPs between business and humanitarian actors is deeply influenced by power dynamics and does not reflect the ideal – both among CSR practitioners and in the CSR literature – of a balanced, two-sided "meeting in the middle". Consequently, research on CSPs and business-humanitarian engagement must consider the politics of alignment to understand how CSPs operate and with whose interests at their core. Below I suggest three key power dynamics central to the alignment of humanitarian and business interests derived from my analysis.

Figure 1: Alignment as Ideal and Practice

Ideal of Alignment

Partnerships where the unique expertise of tech companies align with the needs of humanitarian organizations and their refugee beneficiaries

Alignment as two-sided

Ideal shapes practices

Practices shape ideal

Alignment in Practice

	Practices	Collaboration and organizational level	Power dynamics and implications
Strategy alignment	• The IRC: Drafting strategies for corporate partnerships. • Company: Drafting strategies for CSR / social impact partnerships.	No collaboration. Each partner draft strategies independently in management teams.	• Tech companies base their humanitarian engagement on own business priorities, which forces nonprofits to align their strategy to corporate interests. • Alignment becomes a moving target as corporate strategies shift.
Needs alignment	• Understanding the partnership transaction. • Finding overlap between the needs of the IRC and beneficiaries with the donations and engagement from the corporate partner.	Moderate collaboration. Partnership officers move between the IRC and corporate partners to "translate" needs.	• Nonprofit and refugee needs are adjusted to fit the donations corporate partners wish to make. • Only the needs that align with corporate interests are met.
Project alignment	• "Selling" specific partnership projects. • Matching technology products or individual volunteers with specific humanitarian projects.	Highest degree of collaboration. IRC field staff work with tech company employees to design, implement, and manage projects.	• Focus on alignment creates a dependence on personal relationships and individual motivation of tech company volunteers. • Projects are slow and unsustainable.

Discussion: The Power Dynamics of Alignment

While the ideal of alignment is not realized in practice, this ideal was still articulated by both IRC and corporate employees (although challenged internally in the IRC by local employees). The ideal of sweet spots was an ideal not only from the business perspective, even as it draws on familiar CSR discourses. The difference between the ideal and practices of alignment, then, is not only the result of direct power dynamics between the businesses and the IRC. Rather, as this article has shown, the ideal is constructed at a broader scale and influences both business and nonprofit actors in the humanitarian sector. I argue that this institutional ideal of sweet spots and the partnership ideology in fact legitimizes the asymmetrical power dynamics in CSPs. This process of legitimization is expressed through three dynamics, as outlined below.

1. *One-Way Translation of Business Strategy into Social Value*

The emphasis on creating CSPs that leverage a company's core business is key to the sweet spot discourse. This notion translated in practice into a one-sided alignment where humanitarian strategies were aligned to shifting corporate strategies. Alignment thus becomes a moving target for nonprofit partners, who have to continuously align to and incorporate corporate partners' new technological priorities into humanitarian strategies. In this way, the particular ideal of finding a sweet spot between technology companies' core business and the needs of refugees legitimizes a one-way translation of business strategies into social value, through which the production of social value is defined and limited by business interests.

2. *Adjustment of Needs to Match Solutions*

The emphasis in the sweet spot discourse on the need for business expertise and innovation supported a focus in practice on product donations and volunteer hours rather than cash donations. This finding is consistent with larger philanthropic trends in the tech industry, as technology companies are eager to shift from product donations to "digital transformation" initiatives (Cheney, 2018). Such initiatives focus on training humanitarian organizations and their beneficiaries in using the companies' technology tools (Henriksen & Richey, 2022), and in return, companies expand their user group and gain knowledge about their product needs. As a result, corporate partners offer technological solutions, and nonprofit partners are tasked with the

"creative thinking" necessary to find the needs and problems that fit these solutions. The alignment between humanitarian needs and corporate solutions thus appears in practice as transactions, through which nonprofit and refugee needs are adjusted to fit the products and donations corporate partners prefer to contribute.

3. *Project Selling for Employee Engagement*

Finally, the emphasis on how corporate partners can be uniquely helpful became visible in practice as a need to align humanitarian projects to the commercial interests of corporate partners in ways that helped tech companies promote their "unique" products and distinguish themselves from competing companies. Moreover, nonprofit employees are required to capture the interest of corporate volunteers. Thus, the alignment of projects to corporate partners' social impact programs, including grants and volunteer hours, emerges as a negotiation and "selling" of humanitarian projects.

In sum, these three dynamics show how the sweet spot discourse, which emphasizes the need for technological innovation and business engagement in the humanitarian sector supports an ideal of alignment between the interests of business and aid organizations. This ideal, in turn, legitimizes asymmetrical alignment in practice. Consequently, the emphasis on finding CSP sweet spots displaces and shifts the humanitarian motives of CSPs in favor of corporate interests. This analysis also shows how the ideal of alignment shapes partnership practices across organizational levels and how these practices are interlinked. For example, the practices of alignment at the needs and project level might not have good chances to succeed unless the partners achieve two-sided alignment at the strategic level.[6] However, given the power imbalance, this alignment is not likely to happen.

The empirical settings of this study indicate important avenues for future research. First, the partnerships included in this study were accessed through the nonprofit, and the data therefore highlight the NGO perspective on behalf of the businesses' perspectives. Additionally, this article's analysis was aimed at identifying patterns in the practices of alignment across the five partnerships, because I wanted to understand the ideal of sweet spot partnerships as a common sense emerging in the field of humanitarianism. To add nuance to these findings, future research

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[6] Thank you to the anonymous reviewer for this point.

could focus on differences in CSPs or include different types of organizations. Most importantly, however, the perspectives of refugees themselves are missing from this work. As my findings show, nonprofits and businesses increasingly speak the same language of sweet spots and alignment and operate increasingly from the same instrumental and market-based logics. But even if these actors manage to find sweet spots of aligned interests and mutual benefit, this does not necessarily translate to a sweet spot for refugees. Further research is needed to document how the pursuit of partnership sweet spots, and the power relations in which sweet spots are constructed, affect the lives and experiences of humanitarian beneficiaries (see also Pallister-Wilkins et al., 2023).

While the management literature recognizes to some extent that CSPs are shaped by power relations, negotiations, and conflicting values (Cloutier & Langley, 2017; Dewulf & Elbers, 2018; Eden & Huxham, 2001), the normative ideal of finding alignment is persistent. Underlying this ideal is the assumption that CSP stakeholders share common goals and have even levels of power. But asymmetric power levels are in fact often the reason why CSPs frequently fail to effectively address the challenges they aim to resolve (Gray et al., 2022). Moreover, as recent research has shown, CSPs emerge within historical and structural inequalities and power imbalances which they risk further exacerbating (Olwig, 2021).

Following the lead of scholars who increasingly call for a re-politicization of the role of corporations in creating social change (Feix & Philippe, 2020; Girschik et al., 2020) as well as the taken-for-granted narratives and ideals of CSR (Brand et al., 2020; Laasonen et al., 2012), this article has provided empirical and theoretical ground for similarly re-politicizing the ideal of alignment in CSPs. In the cases analyzed in this article, the IRC must increasingly align its needs to corporate strategies, in effect orienting refugee aid towards profit motives. As the discourse of sweet spots conceals this essentially profit-driven nature of CSPs, it legitimizes the infusion of business interests into humanitarian aid. Thus, while CSPs are based on ideals of shared value, the practices outlined in this article show that the generation of value for refugees is increasingly contingent on the simultaneous creation of value for companies.

Conclusion: Re-Politicizing Alignment in CSPs

CSPs between nonprofits and technology companies are becoming increasingly popular in the humanitarian field and in response to refugee crises. Such partnerships are often celebrated as

innovative and transformational collaborations that move beyond traditional CSR approaches and find sweet spots that yield benefits for businesses, nonprofits, and aid recipients. However, this article has demonstrated that while CSPs are presented as integrative, they still rely on transactional relations and negotiations, in which business interests are often favored. Thus, despite the "win-win-win" hype surrounding CSPs in the humanitarian sector, there is reason to question who actually wins. Focusing on interest alignment as a political process, this article provides empirically grounded insights into how alignment comes about and the power relations that shape this process.

Based on these findings, I argue that the power relations of CSPs are linked to and legitimized by the discourse of sweet spots and the ideal of alignment. This ideal is persistent among CSR practitioners, but also in CSP literature. While the ideal of alignment perpetuates notions of shared value, reciprocity, mutual benefits, and "meeting in the middle", this ideal, in fact, legitimizes power imbalances and asymmetrical alignment, in which nonprofit partners are expected to do more of the aligning. As such, the findings of this article challenge the dominant understandings of alignment as i) a neutral and balanced two-sided effort to accommodate interests evenly; and ii) an ideal to strive for in CSPs. The empirical model developed in this article offers a foundation for asking new important questions about interest alignment in CSPs. What kind of partnership practices does the ideal of alignment encourage in CSPs? How does strategy-, needs- or project alignment look in other CSP cases? What power relations are revealed in these practices and how do they shape partnerships? By providing this empirically grounded framework for analyzing the politics of alignment, the article encourages further critical examination of interest alignment in CSPs.

Theoretically, the article contributes to scholarship on interest alignment in CSPs by drawing attention to the power relations that shape alignment and by providing a novel theoretical framework through which to understand them. By analyzing the empirical material through the lens of critical humanitarian studies, this article suggests three key power dynamics that shape CSPs in the humanitarian field: the one-way translation of business strategy into social value, the adjustment of needs to match solutions, and the project selling for employee engagement. Future research on CSPs and business-humanitarian engagements needs to consider these and other power dynamics to understand how CSPs operate, whose interests they prioritize, and whom they create value for.

Practically, the findings indicate that concerns about the efficiency and sustainability of state- and NGO-led refugee aid can similarly be raised for refugee-focused CSPs. Increasingly, nonprofits must find ways to implement the technological products and expertise that technology companies want to contribute rather than being guided by the actual needs of refugees. This dependence on the social impact strategies of technology companies challenges the sustainability and efficiency of partnership projects, as these strategies shift rapidly, and alignment becomes a moving target. While integrative sweet spot partnerships are promoted as mechanisms to innovate, optimize, and fix the refugee system, this article shows that maintaining such partnerships requires significant resources from nonprofits. As such, integrative CSPs are likely to be more beneficial for businesses, allowing them to donate their expertise rather than money, while nonprofits will benefit more from long-term philanthropic partnerships. The pervasive discourse of sweet spot partnerships is thus skewed towards the interests of business.

Ultimately, the findings of this article suggest that incorporating business value as a measure of success in humanitarian work risks shifting the terms of accountability such that refugee-focused CSPs will be measured primarily on their ability to create value for businesses rather than protection, freedom, and safety for refugees.

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5.3 Article Three

Hacking the Refugee Crisis:

Merging Refugee Aid and Digital Capitalism in Humanitarian Hacking

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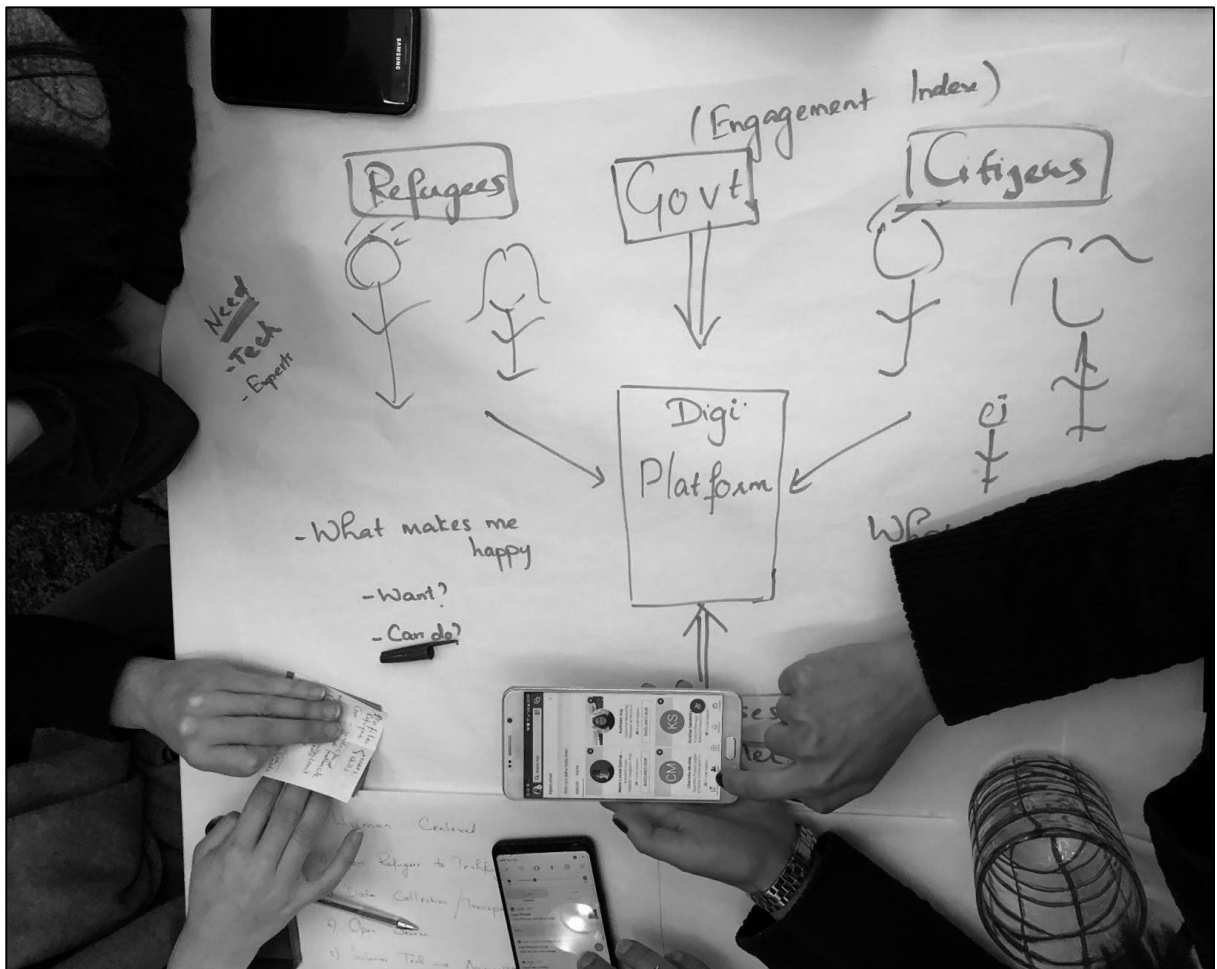
Picture 15: Hackathon participants drawing ideas for digital platforms for refugees and connecting on LinkedIn at Techfugees hackathon. Photo taken by author, March 2020.

Hacking the Refugee Crisis:

Merging Refugee Aid and Digital Capitalism in Humanitarian Hacking

Sofie Elbæk Henriksen

Abstract

Hackathons have become popular formats for helping refugees, among NGOs, volunteers, and corporations but their material impact has been limited. This article explores two volunteer hackathons in Copenhagen organized by the nonprofit organization Techfugees with support from Google. The article conceptualizes humanitarian hacking as a space where refugee aid meets digital capitalism by examining the collective practices of "hacking the refugee crisis" within the analytical framework of critical refugee and humanitarian innovation literature. Rather than providing novel technical solutions, volunteer hackathons reproduce existing imaginaries that cast digital technologies as effective, quick fix solutions; tech companies as innovation experts and compassionate humanitarian actors; and refugees as depoliticized, entrepreneurial subjects. The article concludes that humanitarian hacking places tech companies and digital technology at the forefront of humanitarian aid for refugees in a way that reaffirms humanitarian innovation policy narratives and Silicon Valley visions of corporate humanitarianism.

Introduction

On October 23, 2019, Techfugees Denmark's first-ever "Hack for Refugees" event took place. A small group of people gathered in an auditorium at Copenhagen University with the aim of spending the next two days finding technological solutions for – or "hacking" – the problems faced by refugees arriving in Denmark. The hope, the organizer proclaimed with a sarcastic smile, was to find "the next billion-dollar company to solve all future refugee crises."[1] After a short introduction to the work of Techfugees, the guest speaker Mahdi,[2] who had fled Syria and arrived in Denmark in 2015, was invited onto the stage. The hackathon organizers asked him to describe the challenges he had faced as a refugee and Mahdi replied that apart from the crossing from Turkey to Greece, he had not experienced many. The questions from the organizers continued: "What was hard for you?" "What could have made it easier for you?" "What would be your best piece of advice for other refugees coming to Denmark?" The participants in the room joined in with more questions. "What was difficult about arriving in Denmark?" Mahdi described in very few words the difficulty of finding information about the progress of his asylum application, but otherwise "everything went kind of smooth," he said. One participant suggested developing a tech solution for language barriers, but Mahdi argued that the biggest barrier for integration in Denmark was actually the Danish people and "the way they treat us. I will never feel like this is my country" he declared and contrasted Denmark to Sweden where several of his friends lived. In Sweden, he explained, people greet them as citizens of Sweden, but in Denmark he was always presented as, or asked about being, a refugee. The participants began suggesting apps and websites that could bridge cultural and social differences and facilitate mutual understanding and empathy, to which Mahdi responded: "But you cannot create friendships."

The complexity of Mahdi's challenges did not discourage the participants and organizers at the Techfugees hackathon from spending the next two days "hacking the global refugee crisis." In fact, five months later Techfugees Denmark organized a second hackathon in Copenhagen, this time in collaboration with Google, which attracted five times as many participants. Neither of the hackathons resulted in workable digital solutions for refugees in Denmark. What participants did produce, however, were particular imaginaries about refugees and the role of technology and business in helping them.

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[1] Author's fieldnotes, Oct. 23, 2019.
[2] All names have been changed.

Hackathons have become popular events for helping and "doing good." From being perceived as a "hacker culture" phenomenon (Coleman, 2010, 2013), hackathons have spread to policy, public and corporate sectors (Cruz & Thornham, 2016), used to address issues ranging from homelessness (Linnell et al., 2014) and public education (Briscoe & Mulligan, 2014) to humanitarian crisis response (Haywood, 2012). The humanitarian response to "the long summer of migration" in 2015 (Kasparek & Speer, 2015) sparked a proliferation of hackathons (Leurs, 2018; Pascucci, 2019) among other digital humanitarian initiatives (Meier, 2015) including smartphone apps (Horn, 2015) and coding camps. Refugees quickly became "a favorite subject of well-intentioned 'hackers' and 'disruptors'," (Varagur, 2016) and more than 1,500 digital initiatives were organized by NGOs, activists, corporations, and major humanitarian agencies (Leurs, 2018, p. 266) aimed at improving refugee integration, livelihoods and employability (Hatayama, 2018). The hundreds of hackathons organized in response to "the European refugee crisis" in 2015–16 (Madianou, 2019) included, for example, the 2018 VHacks: a 36-hour hackathon co-sponsored by Google and Microsoft that took place in a 15th century palazzo in the Vatican with the declared aim of "creating technological solutions for encouraging social inclusion, promoting interfaith dialogue, and providing resources to migrants and refugees" (Valdez, 2018).

However, this wave of refugee-themed hackathons and digital initiatives has been criticized for being inefficient and a waste of time (Geber, 2016; Horn, 2015; Varagur, 2016). Indeed, while the popularity of hackathons has grown beyond hacker subcultures, it has become an open secret, even among hackers themselves, that "nothing useful is ever created at a hackathon" (Broussard, 2015). The digital initiatives for refugees such as smartphone apps are rarely used by refugees themselves (Leurs, 2018, p. 266) and the emergence of a so-called "app creep" in the refugee crisis has produced an abundance of poor-quality apps with outdated information and broken links, referred to as "digital litter" (Benton, 2019).

More broadly within the humanitarian sector aid workers report being fed up with unrealistic tech-optimism and "solutions looking for problems" at hackathons (Warnes, 2018). Scholars point to the link between refugee hackathons and a broader upsurge in digital humanitarian movements (such as ICT4D) that materialize an urge to apply engineering and technology solutions to complex social problems (Madianou, 2019; Taylor & Meissner, 2020). These movements indicate a growing logic of technological solutionism – a logic that Horn mocks in *The Atlantic*: "Displaced by civil war? There's an app for that!" ((2015).

In this paper, I use ethnographic data collected at the two Techfugees hackathons to understand how practices of "hacking" humanitarian problems – what I conceptualize as *humanitarian hacking* – merge policy narratives of humanitarian innovation with the corporate humanitarianism of Silicon Valley tech companies. I argue that humanitarian hacking does this by reproducing imaginaries about what digital solutions for refugees are, who can provide them, and who is helped by them. Ultimately, these imaginaries reframe the refugee crisis as a technical challenge, which legitimizes the growing role of private sector tech companies and digital technology in humanitarian aid.

The paper contributes to scholarly debates about the digitalization of refugee governance and aid, and the marketization of humanitarianism more broadly, to which this journal has significantly contributed. Across a wide range of disciplines, scholars have documented the growing role of digital technology and private sector actors in the humanitarian field, focusing for example on the development of digital tools to address refugee mental health (Goodman et al., 2021), refugees' use of smartphones (M. Gillespie et al., 2018; Maitland, 2018) including their practices around data privacy (Witteborn, 2021), and the digitalization of asylum systems (Josipovic, 2023; McNamara & Tikka, 2023; Micinski & Jones, 2022). Within this broad literature, much attention has been paid to the development and use of blockchain and biometric technologies for identification and tracking purposes (Ajana, 2013; Cheesman, 2017; Jacobsen, 2017; Lemberg-Pedersen & Haioty, 2020; Martin et al., 2023). These technologies magnify the tension between refugee empowerment and control (Nedelcu & Soysüren, 2020) and between surveillance and inclusion (Weitzberg et al., 2021) inherent in the digitalization of refugee aid, where digital technologies and data practices are increasingly deployed as instruments of both governing and of helping. For instance, Harney (2013), in this journal, shows that while digital technologies are used by states to surveil and exclude migrants, they are also vital for migrants' sense of security and wellbeing. This article contributes to these debates by showing how the digitalization of refugee aid occurs outside the formal humanitarian system and includes a range of non-state actors.

The digitalization of refugee aid also ties into the politics of imaginaries and representation in humanitarian governance of refugees. In European asylum processes, representations of Syrian refugees as ideal "refugee entrepreneurs" and the deployment of entrepreneurship programs in an increasingly neoliberal refugee regime attempt "to re-imagine refugees as an 'opportunity' or a 'resource', rather than a 'burden' or a 'threat'" (Embiricos, 2020; Turner, 2019, p. 2). These

attempts correlate with a broader tendency to construct refugee deservingness through ideals of market citizenship (Haw, 2021).

Moreover, the reframing of humanitarian crises as technical or design challenges (Duffield, 2019) has been conceptualized as the "technologization of humanitarian space" (Abdelnour & Saeed, 2014), whereby complex humanitarian crises are construed as manageable problems warranting technical fixes such as fuel-efficient stoves and other "humanitarian goods" (Redfield, 2012) and "development devices" (Collier et al., 2017). Recent studies focus on the implementation of digital solutions in refugee governance (Tazzioli, 2019) and the ways in which new technology reconfigures humanitarianism and introduces new, techno-political, meanings (Sandvik, 2017). This article explores how such techno-political understandings of humanitarian action and crises are mediated in the context of humanitarian hacking where digital technologies are not actually present, but merely imagined.

The article offers a novel, ethnographic lens on hackathons as sites for the grounded study of digital transformations. As field sites, hackathons have been theorized as "microcosms" (Jones et al., 2015, p. 341), "microworlds" (Irani, 2015, p. 814), and "privileged observational sites" (Cruz & Thornham, 2016, p. 5) for the study of broader social and political processes. Building on these insights, I consider hackathons as sites for observing the merger of digital capitalism and refugee aid in practice.

The paper proceeds in five sections. The first describes and contextualizes humanitarian hacking as the focus of the article. The second section situates humanitarian hacking in a theoretical framework of critical refugee studies and humanitarian innovation literature to lay the foundation for an analysis of how humanitarian hacking merges humanitarian policy narratives and Silicon Valley tech imaginaries. The third section presents the Techfugees hackathons as field sites and describes the methodology adopted. The fourth section presents three analytical categories: the digital quick fix, the compassionate tech company, and the digital refugee entrepreneur. Each represents one dominant imaginary produced at the hackathon and together they illustrate the convergence between the Silicon Valley tech imaginary and humanitarian innovation policy narratives. The article concludes by reflecting on the ways in which humanitarian hacking legitimizes and positions digital technology and tech companies at the forefront of humanitarian aid for refugees, thereby further entangling refugee aid with digital capitalism.

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Humanitarian Hacking: From Silicon Valley to the Borders of Europe

Hackathons are multi-day events usually taking place at night, on weekends, or during conferences, where volunteers compete in teams to design software prototypes that solve problems defined by the event organizers. These organizers, who can be companies, public institutions, or NGOs, offer a space, Internet access, often food and energy drinks, and a specific issue they wish participants to address. Participants bring "their computers, production skills and undivided attention" (Irani, 2015, p. 803). Hackathons are historically and ideologically related to the open-source software culture of the 1980s. When they emerged under the name "hackathon" in the late 1990s, the events were mainly attended by computer programmers and focused strictly on producing or improving software (Briscoe & Mulligan, 2014, p. 2; Jones et al., 2015, p. 323). However, hacking has also always been infused with a certain ethic. While "hacker ethics" (Coleman, 2013) does not refer to one homogeneous code, studies of hackathons and hacking cultures concur that notions of sharing, decentralization, world improvement, free speech and mistrust of state authorities are common tenets of hacking communities (Coleman, 2013; Haywood, 2016; Levy, 2010).

By the end of the 1990s hackathons and the free software movement they represented had moved from the margins into the mainstream, becoming part of the Silicon Valley tech boom (Coleman 2013: 77) and what cultural scholar Melissa Gregg calls the fairytale of the "killer app" (Gregg, 2015): the pursuit of that one great digital invention with the power to transform a tech startup into a billion dollar company. Hackathons have earned a reputation for producing such killer apps. Prominent examples include the Facebook "like" button and timeline function, both first conceptualized at Facebook hackathons (Chang 2012; Briscoe and Mulligan 2014: 6). In addition to developing software, hackathons have proved valuable tools for tech companies to recruit new employees, to sustain a playful and passionate startup culture internally, and to project that image externally. Concurrently, participants have found hackathons useful to practice and demonstrate technical skills to potential employers and to broaden professional and social networks. Critical scholars of hackathons have noted how the professionalization and profit orientation of hackathons in corporate sectors is straining the original social orientation of hacking (Richterich, 2019).

In recent years, hackathons have become widely used beyond tech environments and the format is now deployed by the for-profit, non-profit, and public sectors to promote the development of

technical solutions to social, political, environmental, and humanitarian issues. The events increasingly attract participants with non-technical expertise, such as marketers, business developers, students, and designers (Briscoe & Mulligan, 2014, p. 4). Consequently, as journalist Gideon Lewis-Kraus states, "the term these days is used anywhere people congregate with the expectation of getting something vaguely machine-oriented done in one big room" (Lewis-Kraus 2015, cited in Jones *et al.* 2015).

The use of hackathons to address humanitarian crises is one of a range of "hacking for social good" activities, which include practices of political "hacktivism" and "civic hacking" (Haywood, 2016). In an ethnographic analysis of what he terms a "humanitarian hacking community," Haywood (2012) describes the practice of humanitarian hacking as events where "participants engage in open-source software development and hardware modification with the aim of solving various social, environmental and humanitarian 'problems'." However, he does not relate the practices of hacking to literature on humanitarianism. Pascucci (2019), on the other hand, investigates hackathons and other coding events as part of a policy trend in humanitarianism that relies on paradigms of self-reliance, creativity, technological innovation, and entrepreneurship. I conceptualize the practices of hacking analyzed in this article as a form of "humanitarian hacking" because, while refugee hackathons are not necessarily organized by actors within the formal humanitarian sector, they address migration as a humanitarian problem and relate to broader policy developments in humanitarianism.

In taking this perspective, I draw on a stream of literature examining hackathons as spaces that provide insights into broader political, social, and cultural developments. For instance, Jones, Semel and Le (2015) understand hackathons as expressions of Silicon Valley culture and of values and ideologies perpetuated in the digital economy: "Hackathons are a microcosm of technoliberal volatility, amplifying free-market innovation cycles in an arena of fun, game-like competition" (Jones et al., 2015, p. 314). Other studies highlight that not only do hackathons encapsulate political processes, they also enforce and reproduce them. Based on her study of entrepreneurial citizenship in Indian design hackathons, Irani argues that "hackathons sometimes produce technologies, and they always, however, produce subjects" (Irani, 2015, p. 800). As such, hackathons can be explored as sites of social practice "where techniques from the Web make their way into 'the real world'" (Irani, 2015, p. 800). In their study of corporate-sponsored hackathons, Zukin and Papadantonakis examine hackathons in the context of economic restructuring following the 2007–2008 financial crisis. They argue that hackathons enable the co-option of hacker

subculture values into new, exploitive, work norms, which allow corporations and the state to benefit from talented workers without offering them full-time jobs (Zukin & Papadantonakis, 2017, p. 159) and, consequently, that hackathons have become "hallmarks of the new economy" (Zukin & Papadantonakis, 2017, p. 178).

Drawing on these non-technologically specific understandings of humanitarian hacking (Haywood, 2016), I adopt Pascucci's description of hackathons as "the space where the new technological frontier of global humanitarianism materializes into an event" (Pascucci, 2019, p. 580). However, in the refugee hackathons explored here, the "technological frontier" does not materialize as actual technological products but rather as imaginaries of technology. Therefore, I deploy a theoretical framework to understand how refugee aid and digital capitalism merge within humanitarian hacking through the production of imaginaries that reaffirm humanitarian innovation narratives and corporate humanitarian visions.

The Convergence Between Refugee Aid and Digital Capitalism

The theoretical framework of this article combines critical refugee studies with literature on humanitarian innovation. Both fields have addressed the growing role of the private sector and digital technology in migration management and refugee aid.

Hackathons epitomize key elements of a Silicon Valley "spirit" (Burrell & Fourcade, 2021), that has evolved from what Barbrook and Cameron (1996) term the "Californian ideology." This ideology "emerged from a bizarre fusion of the cultural bohemianism of San Francisco with the hi-tech industries of Silicon Valley" and "promiscuously combines the free-wheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies" (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996). Ferrari (2020) identifies three tenets of this Silicon Valley spirit: 1) digital technologies create freedom, democracy and personal autonomy; 2) social problems are better solved by technological fixes than by policy changes; and 3) the free market, not government, is the vehicle for improving people's lives (Ferrari, 2020, pp. 121–122).

The proliferation of these ideas has also been studied within the framework of corporate humanitarianism. This term captures various practices and processes of marketization, professionalization, and privatization of humanitarian and development aid (Barnett, 2022; Joachim & Schneiker, 2018; Krause, 2014; Richey, 2018), including the commodification of

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humanitarian sentiments of compassion and solidarity (Chouliaraki, 2013; Olwig, 2021; Richey et al., 2021). Corporate humanitarianism describes the active involvement of the private sector in providing aid in humanitarian crises, and thus also their role in shaping definitions of "doing good" where the market, rather than the state, is the most efficient driver of social change (Richey & Ponte, 2011). In digital capitalism specifically, these corporate humanitarian visions cast commercial technologies such as Google's AI as tools "for good" (Henriksen & Richey, 2022; Madianou, 2021).

The corporate humanitarian tenets of digital capitalism have travelled beyond California and taken root in humanitarian governance in a movement and policy of humanitarian innovation (Müller & Sou, 2020; Sandvik, 2017; Scott-Smith, 2016). This innovation turn combines increasing use of digital technology and data practices with an expansion of private sector actors, practices, and logic into humanitarian action. These developments are founded on promises of increased efficiency, accuracy, and accountability in aid delivery. Behind these promises lies the idea that digital technology has the potential to "free people from suffering while also emancipating the aid industry from top-down bureaucracy" by channeling "market innovation toward the more efficient delivery of basic needs" (Scott-Smith, 2023, p. 238).

Within the refugee regime (Morris, 2021), this development has been studied as the emergence of a new, neoliberal, asylum paradigm that shifts focus away from the protection of refugees towards deterrence policies aimed at minimizing the number of admitted refugees and asylum seekers (Crisp, 2003; Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2014; Hyndman, 2020). The emergence of this asylum paradigm is also visible in the proliferation of humanitarian refugee policies focusing on economic inclusion (Pascucci, 2019; Ramsay, 2020) and entrepreneurship (Rosamond & Gregoratti, 2020; Turner, 2019) as pathways to increased "self-reliance" and "resilience." (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018; U. Krause & Schmidt, 2020; Skran & Easton-Calabria, 2020).

In the following analysis I outline three points of convergence between Silicon Valley corporate humanitarian visions and humanitarian innovation policy narratives as they play out in humanitarian hacking. I show how these convergences are expressed through three distinct imaginaries produced at the Techfugees hackathons: the digital quick fix, the compassionate tech company, and the digital refugee entrepreneur. While the term "imaginaries" has been critiqued as vague and over-used in social theory (Sneath et al., 2009; Stankiewicz, 2016; Strauss, 2006), I nevertheless find it useful here to indicate the production of shared – though not singular, or

necessarily coherent – ideas about technology, business, and refugees. Importantly, although these ideas are not realized or fully materialized, they nevertheless mobilize action and resources through imaginaries of tech companies and digital technology as humanitarian solutions to refugee crises. First, I introduce the field sites and the methods adopted.

The Hackathons

Data for this paper was collected at two 48-hour hackathons organized by Techfugees Denmark in October 2019 and March 2020. Techfugees is a global organization that aims to provide a physical community and online platform for "techies, social entrepreneurs, humanitarians, students, researchers, innovators, corporates, impact investors, journalists…" with the mission of "empowering refugees & displaced people with technology" (Techfugees, 2021). Prompted by the tragic image of young Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi, it was created by volunteers in September 2015 who then rapidly coordinated a conference and a hackathon. By early 2020 fourteen national Techfugees chapters had been established.[3]

According to the Techfugees website, "hackathons are the very first and essential step of Techfugees' innovation cycle." Since 2015 Techfugees have hosted more than 35 hackathons focusing on themes such as inclusion for refugee women and children, sport and refugees, #Hack-the-Camp, and innovative NGO fundraising. Techfugees started as a volunteer project and still relies on volunteers for most of their work, but they also have paid, full-time workers and an advisory board. The organizations' first CEO, Joséphine Goube, sat on the board of the Norwegian Refugee Council and acted as an informal expert for the European Commission on migration reforms. "Techfugees is not a political movement" stood in bold letters on early iterations of the Techfugees website. The organization seeks to convey what they call a pragmatic message: "We no longer have the time to be FOR or AGAINST migration. It is time to adapt and prepare. Only by building scalable, ethical & sustainable tools will we be able to tackle one of the biggest challenges of our century."[4]

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[3] These chapters are located in Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Kenya, Lebanon, New Zealand, Nigeria, Serbia, Thailand, Turkey, and the UK. Only eight of these chapters were still active in February 2023 according to Techfugees' website.

[4] https://techfugees.com/about/, accessed April 14, 2020.

The first Techfugees Denmark hackathon was organized in collaboration with a research program on refugees and migrants' use of digital technology, and was hosted by the University of Copenhagen. The second was co-organized with and hosted by Google Denmark. While the two hackathons shared a basic structure and time frame, they diverged in several ways. The first hackathon took place in a university auditorium. On a table near the entrance door, large numbers of water bottles and cans of soda stood in rows, signaling an expectation that many participants would show up that contrasted sharply with the almost empty room. In total, seven participants, all in their twenties, attended: three women and four men from Denmark, Germany, France, and Italy. All were students at universities in Copenhagen except for one who had taken a bus from France to attend.

More than forty participants attended the second hackathon, co-organized and hosted by Google's office in Copenhagen. For this hackathon, the organizers chose to focus on refugee social inclusion as a theme. Compared to the first hackathon, it was somehow more corporate but less formal, and just altogether more… *Google*. The rows of soda cans at the first hackathon were replaced by chilled specialty beers, "spa water" infused with melon slices and mint leaves, and gin and tonic on tap. At the Google hackathon, Mahdi was again invited as a guest speaker to share his experiences as a refugee, but his presentation was now referred to as a "fireside chat" (a term for an informal conversation between a moderator and guest speakers commonly used at corporate conferences) and included a session chair. Participants at this second hackathon wore name tags and were screened by security guards before entering the offices. While participants were in their twenties, similar to the first hackathon, the majority had non-Danish backgrounds, including Turkish, Dutch, Vietnamese, Russian, Chinese, and Canadian.

Several participants had signed up via their enrolment in a Copenhagen-based non-profit tech school that offers free IT courses on coding to women from ethnic minority backgrounds. Others joined because they were pursuing careers in the tech industry and saw the event as a great way to broaden their network. Several were graduates of masters or MBAs now looking for jobs, and they eagerly connected with each other on LinkedIn. Lena, a young immigrant from Turkey who was living in Denmark and searching for a job, told me that she attended the hackathon because she was interested in tech, social inclusion, and Google. She was hoping that her attendance would improve her CV and bring her closer to a job in Copenhagen, but the hackathon was also a way for her to do something fun, use her skills, and widen her social circle.

I did participant observation at both hackathons. I attended the first one without signing up as a participant to prioritize observation. At the second hackathon, to prioritize participation I signed up and was part of a team in the competition, which offered a different set of insights into the hackathon process and practices. Similar to Richterich (2019), who applied digital ethnographic methods in her study of hackathons, I found that being a participant provided me with a more immersive experience, while being an observer made it possible to engage with a wider group of people. Throughout the events I took fieldnotes and engaged in informal conversations with the participants during breaks and meals. I informed everyone I talked to about my research and data collection. Additionally, I collected data from social media platforms and online blogs where participants and organizers posted pictures and descriptions of the hackathons and winning projects. I conducted follow-up interviews with Mahdi and seven participants from the second hackathon about their experiences.

Picture 16: The beverage selection at the Techfugees hackathon co-sponsored by Google. Photo taken by author, March 2020.

The Imaginaries of Humanitarian Hacking

The Techfugees hackathons followed a basic structure common to most (Haywood, 2012; Richterich, 2019). First, the two young men organizing the events introduced the Techfugees organization. Quoting UNICEF, the first organizer declared that we were "in the middle of the largest refugee crisis since World War II." Then, smiling, he extended his arms to the audience and added "…so there is no better time to be a Techfugees hacker!" Next followed a presentation of the problem we were here to solve, exemplified by Mahdi's presentation at the first hackathon. At the second Techfugees hackathon, Mahdi was joined by another guest speaker named Sara, a woman who had fled Iran almost three years earlier, and they were both asked to describe the challenges they had faced upon arrival in Denmark. These presentations set the stage for the subsequent hacking practices, which I analyze below, focusing on the three central imaginaries produced.

Digital Quick Fixes

At the hackathons, digital solutions for refugees were conceived and then judged according to notions of speed and of the reduction of complexity into simple and easily implementable products. As the following section illustrates, these ideals were baked into the format of the hackathons and realized in the design process and final judging.

The presentation of refugee experiences was followed by a group exercise to inspire creative thought. This involved dividing the participants into smaller groups to answer the question: "If aliens came to the Earth, what would be the one thing you would introduce them to on our planet?" After coming up with an answer (answers included "a wedding," "music," "a tour of spectacular natural sites") the groups were asked to design this idea as a technological product offered by the fictive "Alien Tours" company. According to the organizers, the exercise helped participants get into the mindset and framework of tech innovation and hacking. The exercise encouraged participants to think about innovation as the reduction of complex and abstract ideas into tangible tech products. After a round of speed pitching, where participants were asked to stand up and give

a thirty-second pitch of their idea for a digital solution,[5] it was time to apply this innovation strategy to our own hacking projects.

I joined a team of six participants. The project idea around which the team had formed was still unclear to me as we sat down and began brainstorming in a corner of the large conference room. All around us, other groups were settling into corners of their own and the room was buzzing with excitement. It was already getting late, and we had been told to leave the Google offices by 9pm, so the pressure was on to quickly develop a strong project idea. Two of the team members – Sanjay and Lena – took charge and started drawing on a large flipchart. They were both determined to create something focusing on refugees' emotions and the fact that "refugees are not happy" in the current asylum system. The project, they agreed, should provide refugees with an opportunity to engage in social relations and feel valued.

Their idea was a digital platform where refugees and Danish citizens could create personal profiles and add their interests, needs and skills. Sanjay offered examples. "I could add to my profile that I like fixing bikes. Another person might add that they need their bike fixed. Then our profiles will match." Another team member suggested that if two people put on their profiles that they go running their profiles would match and they could run together. Sanjay drew an equation on the poster: "We ask 'what makes refugees happy' on one side and 'What makes citizens happy' on the other and then we match them, so everyone has their needs met. This creates social value because everyone is happy." In this equation, refugees were categorized as distinct from citizens and creating mutual happiness relied on a technology to find an overlap between the needs and skills of the two separate groups of people. Thus, the team's well-meaning attempt to reduce a complex issue like emotional wellbeing to a technical need reproduced exactly the differentiation between refugees and citizens deplored by Mahdi in his opening presentation. In the process of breaking down a complex issue into a concrete tech product, a division between citizens and refugees became a fundamental part of the product design.

These practices illustrate an imaginary of digital solutions as quick fixes. This highlights one point of convergence between corporate humanitarianism and humanitarian innovation as both embrace

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[5] Suggestions included social media networks, a banking app, a "buddy app" for refugees throughout their journey, skill-sharing apps, language apps, AI technology to help refugees through asylum processes, tailored maps, an app to decode and translate body language and facial expressions, a "humor school" app to facilitate mutual learning about humor, and an online platform for refugees to tell their stories to Danish people with the aim of debunking Danish prejudices.

the promise of the emancipatory forces of digital technology. The Silicon Valley tech industry has long been a symbol of hope for financial success, and fuels aspirations to become one of "the coding elite" – the new owners of capital and power in digital capitalism (Burrell & Fourcade, 2021). In the "digital utopia" of Silicon Valley, with free and unlimited flows of information, "everybody will be hip and rich" (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996). In the humanitarian sector, however, innovation is widely perceived as a matter of survival (Scott-Smith 2016: 2232). Scholars have critically noted how a widespread strategy of "picking low-hanging fruits" in humanitarian innovation and digital humanitarianism has led to an emphasis on quick fixes, which in turn reconfigure humanitarian problems to fit already-existing technological solutions (Abdelnour & Saeed, 2014; Sandvik, 2017). Furthermore, this strategy leads to innovation developments that "seem to be driven by what is possible rather than what is needed" (Read et al., 2016, p. 1315). Thus, while innovation is often presented as "game-changing," innovations rarely change the rules of the game (Currion, 2019, p. 43).

This critique resonated with what happened at the Techfugees hackathons. At the rounds of final judging, most of the ideas and prototypes built by participants were deemed too complicated, too difficult to implement, or in violation of data protection and privacy laws. Several projects proposing online platforms were criticized for not utilizing pre-existing platforms with the argument that competing with popular platforms like Facebook would be too difficult. The winning projects were praised for being easy to implement and for focusing on solving just one problem. After the hackathon my team member Sanjay complained to me that the projects had been judged excessively from an investor's perspective, assessing how quickly they could be implemented, rather than the quality and potential of the idea behind the project. In his opinion, projects were rewarded for being closest to done rather than for being the best idea or having the most long-term impact. In this sense, the hackathon format encouraged projects that focused on digital quick fixes.

Compassionate Tech Companies

At the first Techfugees hackathon, the organizer proclaimed that the hope for the hackathon was to "find the next billion-dollar company to solve all future refugee crises." Although he stated this with a sarcastic smile, the emphasis on business approaches became notably more evident in the second hackathon co-organized by Google. Using fieldnotes from the Google hackathon, this

section will illustrate how the hackathon reproduced an imaginary of compassionate capitalism in which tech companies appear as legitimate humanitarian actors based on their business and innovation expertise.

Early in the hackathon, a young Google employee introduced herself to the participants. "This is not about Google," she said. "It is about the mission we are all here to solve." Nonetheless, participants were constantly reminded throughout the hackathon that they were hosted by Google: by the large Google signs with O's made of bike wheels in the lobby, the massive screens showing real-time Google search trends and by the insistence of the organizers that participants only present their ideas using Google software. Moreover, most of my fellow participants had signed up for the hackathon precisely because it was hosted by Google. Like myself, they were curious to see the Google offices and meet the employees. Amanda, a young woman on my team, explained that Google was intriguing because we all use their services every day and it was exciting to be allowed "inside."

While the hackathon teams worked on their projects, Google employees moved from group to group to offer marketing or product development advice. A Google marketing employee advised my group to simplify our idea and work on our pitch. "Find your single unifying story" she urged and suggested, "something like 'Tinder for Refugees'" inspired by the element of matchmaking in our project. When the next Googler came to our table, my team member Sanjay, who had told us earlier that he was pursuing a career in business strategy and management, declared that we needed to decide on a business model. "Are we creating a zebra or a unicorn?" he asked, showcasing his knowledge of the language of Silicon Valley startup culture. Unicorns refer to private companies with a valuation over $1 billion, whereas a zebra, with its dual color pattern, signifies a company that targets both profit and social impact. The rest of the team had no idea what animal we aspired to be, but these brief mentoring sessions from Googlers influenced our brainstorming process. Rather than discussing the potential impact for refugees, we now focused on how to design and market our technology solution according to the norms of the tech startup culture that Google has been influential in creating.

In the practice of humanitarian hacking, business and marketing approaches were not seen in opposition to helping refugees; in fact, these practices were perceived as essential to it. The notion of a compassionate version of capitalism was pervasive at the Techfugees hackathons, among both participants and organizers. During a coffee break in the Google lobby I spoke to a participant

from another hacking team who had pitched several project ideas the previous day. The young Danish man told me about the very successful tech startup he had founded himself, which developed software solutions for insurance companies. "So, I work for the bad guys" he grinned. "But on the other hand," he rationalized, "doing that gives me the opportunity to be here and use my skills for good." He fumbled with his smartphone, pulled out his banking app and showed me the month's earnings from his business. "When you make this much, it's easier to do good."

His mention of insurance companies as "the bad guys" suggested a moral distinction between good and bad businesses. Where the notion of insurance companies conjures up images of evil, greedy capitalists, Silicon Valley tech companies have, until recently, been associated with a more humane, compassionate, and egalitarian capitalism (Atal, 2020, p. 4), perceived as compatible with humanitarian objectives and values. The participant above supports this perception when he contrasts his participation in the Google hackathon with working for "the bad guys." By distinguishing between his work with insurance companies as driven by profit motives and the work he was doing at the Google hackathon as "using his skills for good," he exemplifies an imaginary of tech companies as apolitical "platforms" for doing good (Atal 2020: 3; Gillespie 2010).

This imaginary highlights a second convergence between corporate humanitarianism and humanitarian innovation. In the aid sector, establishing partnerships between NGOs and private sector actors is often presented as inherently innovative (Olwig, 2021), but humanitarian innovation also incorporates private sector language (for example, aid recipients are increasingly referred to as "clients") and a logic whereby the market is assumed to be the main driver of innovation and social good (Müller & Sou, 2020, p. 1; Scott-Smith, 2016, p. 2231). This logic draws on Silicon Valley ideas of capitalism as a force for social good. By blending for-profit and non-profit logics in humanitarian innovation, "the humanitarian sentiments of care, compassion and responsibility are realized as utterly and inseparably synonymous with the capitalistic and corporate sentiments of profit" (Richey et al., 2021, p. 2). Thus, in humanitarian innovation as well as in Silicon Valley, corporate humanitarianism, doing good and doing business, become one and the same thing.

Through Google's dual role as a physical platform and digital space for the hackathon, and a source of expertise on developing quick and marketable digital products, the hackathon reproduced an imaginary of private sector actors as essential to solving humanitarian crises. This

imaginary links with our third imaginary of refugees as entrepreneurial subjects, benefitting more from help from the market than from the state.

The Digital Refugee

The two hackathons produced particular imaginaries about refugees as the beneficiaries of digital quick fix solutions. These imaginaries present refugees as digitally skilled, entrepreneurial, and depoliticized subjects in need not of aid, but of platforms and market access to realize their potential. As this section shows, such imaginaries connect to racial and political representations of refugees in the humanitarian sector.

In the introductory presentations at both hackathons, the organizer offered advice on how to build a strong team, which he believed meant combining technical and business skills with a "special sauce" to stand out from the crowd. The special sauce could be anything, in his opinion. For example "knowledge about refugees." Describing knowledge about refugees as a special sauce indicated that in their substance these hackathons were less about refugees and more about technology and business. Aside from the short presentations by Mahdi and Sara, participants were not offered any information about refugees in Denmark, although refugees were central to the hackathons as the imagined recipients of the tech solutions. While knowledge and information about refugees was not explicitly presented, the figure of the refugee was, however, tacitly known and imagined.

While never specified, it was strongly implied at the hackathons that refugees were imagined to be from countries in the Middle East. For example, a portrait of an unidentified Middle Eastern woman was displayed on the front of the podium facing the audience. She was smiling and looking into the camera. During the hackathon there was no mention of who she was and her relation to Techfugees, but her portrait served as a familiar reference for the commonly-held image of a refugee in Denmark.

From 2012–2017, the highest number of asylum applications in Denmark came from Syrian citizens (Statistics Denmark, 2021). In the summer of 2015 the extensive media coverage of refugees walking along Danish highways from Germany helped establish a dominant image of the refugee as Middle Eastern. European media coverage of Syrian refugees has often highlighted stories of well-educated and affluent people and emphasized smartphones and digital technology

as essential tools during their journeys (Gillespie *et al*. 2016: 23). Thus, imagining the refugee as Syrian evokes ideas about digital capacities that do not represent the diversity of refugee experiences. Studies show, for example, that refugees and migrants from African countries rarely own smartphones (Gillespie *et al*. 2016: 27). The representation of Syrian refugees as entrepreneurs based on their assumed resilience, agency, and trade skills has construed them in the humanitarian field as non-African. That is, they are "understood to be both distinct from and superior to 'African' refugees" (Turner, 2019, p. 2). These implicit assumptions were visible at the hackathons as they reproduced the imaginary of the digitally skilled Syrian refugee.

Refugees were also imagined as being particularly entrepreneurial. This was reflected in the participants' hackathon projects, many of which focused on the skills and achievements of refugees. For example, the winning project at the Google hackathon, which sought to transfer education credits from refugees' own education systems to the Danish system, assumed certain education levels. The project ideas illustrated an imaginary of refugees not as passive receivers of aid, but as resourceful subjects. This imaginary of refugee entrepreneurship clearly illustrates a third point of convergence between humanitarian innovation and corporate humanitarianism. Personified by successful startup founders like Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg, the Silicon Valley entrepreneur is portrayed as a casually-dressed and socially awkward geek who heroically ditches formal and secure career paths for work driven by their passion for innovation and technology (Burrell & Fourcade, 2021, p. 214).

The emphasis on the individual achievements of tech entrepreneurs is linked to a belief that "big government should stay off the backs of resourceful entrepreneurs who are the only people cool and courageous enough to take risks" (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996). Thus, despite a proclaimed commitment to ideals of community and reciprocal exchange, the celebration of the tech entrepreneur also promotes a "fervent belief in individualism" which erases "the history of federal government involvement and propels the myth that the business successes of the sector's pioneers were entirely their own" (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996; Burrell & Fourcade, 2021, p. 214).

This mirrors a growing tendency in tech and business-oriented refugee initiatives to highlight refugee skills as exceptional, admirable, and linked to their "refugeeness" (Gürsel, 2017; Lenner & Turner, 2019). Recent examples have seen refugees portrayed in social campaigns as "stress resistant" or "team players" (Social-Bee, 2018), effectively reframing harrowing refugee experiences as incidents that build and prove the kind of resilience, risk-taking and creativity

idolized in both the Silicon Valley tech industry and humanitarian innovation discourse. However, this emphasis on entrepreneurship also creates "digital order" that demands a particular "performed refugeeness" in which refugees, through participation in hackathons and coding schools, must prove their skills and willingness to support themselves financially (Embiricos, 2020; Georgiou, 2019).

The practices of humanitarian hacking described here stimulate an imaginary of the refugee as a depoliticized subject, free from the rigid bureaucratic structures and state regulation that normally govern refugees' opportunities to engage in work and education. In fact, the state was barely mentioned at the hackathons. During a brainstorming session in my team, Sanjay suggested that funding for our platform would come from government and business. His idea was for businesses to buy access to data from our platform and use it to target advertisements at users, and for the Danish Government to buy data to "follow the progress of integration." Linda, another team member, objected, arguing that it would be ethically and legally problematic to sell data about refugees to the government, which could then be used to inform asylum claim assessments. This discussion was the only mention of the state I observed at the hackathon, and it was only spoken of here as a threat to the freedom, autonomy, and privacy rights of refugees. By contrast, there was no objection to the idea of businesses buying the data. This notion echoes anti-establishment and anti-regulation narratives of Silicon Valley (Atal, 2020, pp. 4, 11), but is remarkable in the Danish context with a robust welfare state that employs almost a third of the working age population (OECD, 2019, p. 85). In humanitarian hacking refugees are, thus, positioned outside the realm of the state rather than as subjects to be protected or regulated by it.

Conclusion

About six months after the last hackathon, I met Mahdi in a suburb of Copenhagen for a cup of coffee. We sat down at an outdoor table on the sidewalk of a busy street lined with tall, lush trees. Over the course of our talk, a couple of friends and acquaintances of Mahdi stopped to say hello or waved as they walked by. He explained that participating in the hackathon had taught him something about how people think, and it had inspired him to look for possibilities rather than limitations. After our talk, we walked together towards the train station and Mahdi told me he was going to dinner with a group of friends. These friendships were not the result of an app produced

at the hackathons, not least because none of the winning projects of the two hackathons have become operational tech platforms.

Techfugees report on their website that 33% of winning hackathon projects are running after one year (Techfugees, 2020) and 25% are "still operational" after three years (Techfugees, 2019). The winner of the Google-hosted hackathon was not at all surprised that his idea did not grow into an actual product. "Hackathons are usually aimed at demonstrating concepts or showing off skills, so in that sense I was not expecting much in the long term," he said.[6] He added that "actual execution is always harder than the ideas and the proof of concept, sadly. But it was a fun experience." His statement suggests that participants were not actually expecting to create new technology. In a Zoom call a few months after the hackathon, I asked my team members about their experience at the event. Lena stated that she thought of the hackathon as a great experience that made her feel useful by solving a real problem even though her efforts did not result in any concrete solution. It was about the process, not the result, she said, only underlining that she had not actually created anything. Thus, not only were participants not necessarily expecting to create actual technologies, but they also seemed unperturbed in their experience of having fun, being useful and solving real problems by the fact that nothing concrete came from the events.

At the hackathons the refugee crisis was transformed from a complex humanitarian issue into a technical challenge, and this transformation drew on particular imaginaries about refugees and the role of technology and business in helping them. Interestingly, these narratives persist even when the attempt to solve refugees' problems with digital technology "fails." This observation highlights the role of technology in the realm of migration and humanitarianism as a powerful source of imaginaries, promises and hope (Bruun & Krause-Jensen, 2022; Greene, 2021; Hockenhull & Cohn, 2021). The digital solutions prototyped at the hackathons were not technologically advanced nor particularly innovative, yet they were shaped by, and extended, imaginaries about the capacity of digital technology and innovation to empower refugees and solve humanitarian crises.

Therefore I have argued in this article that humanitarian hacking as a non-technologically specific practice, rather than producing novel technologies works to reaffirm policy narratives of humanitarian innovation and Silicon Valley visions of corporate humanitarianism. In these

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[6] Written communication, November 30, 2020

visions, tech companies and digital technologies are positioned as important and legitimate humanitarian actors and solutions, at the forefront of humanitarian aid for refugees. Thus, humanitarian hacking enables and illustrates the contemporary merging of digital capitalism and refugee aid.

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6. CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation has explored the rise of tech companies as humanitarian actors in the global refugee crisis. Collectively, the three articles have aimed to understand how and why tech companies engage in refugee aid and how their corporate humanitarian practices have positioned tech companies as legitimate humanitarian actors.

6.1 Article Conclusions

Article one, *Google's Tech Philanthropy: Capitalism and Humanitarianism in the Digital Age,* examines the 2020 Tech for Good event called Google AI Impact Challenge. Based on this analysis, the article suggests that the lines between philanthropy and capitalism, or between Tech for Good and Tech for Profit, have become increasingly indistinguishable. Through their philanthropic activities, Google and other Big Tech companies, effectively link their business interests and strategies to humanitarian and environmental causes. However, rather than simply perceiving this philanthropic engagement as a novel attempt to "do good" and "do well," we suggest that Google's AI philanthropy can be more usefully understood as the most recent manifestation of a long-standing entanglement between capitalism and humanitarianism.

With this analytical lens, we focus on the particular form of capitalism that humanitarianism is currently being linked to: digital capitalism. The article highlights how this current relationship between digital capitalism and humanitarianism promotes a vision of doing good defined by tech companies themselves to foreground the use of technical "solutions," notions of speed and risk, and the active erasure of government involvement. We argue that as this Tech for Good movement is predominantly corporate, i.e., funded by corporations, shaped, and defined by corporate interests, and focused on finding corporate solutions, the opportunities for challenging the power relations of digital capitalism and using technology for good are limited.

This co-authored article was accepted for publication at a relatively early stage of my Ph.D., which has given me time to reflect on what could have been done differently, had we written the article now. The article highlights the importance of historizing the practices and discourses of tech philanthropy in order to challenge claims of "newness" and disruption, but a deeper analysis of this history would have been useful to tease out how current AI philanthropy continues or disrupts

corporate philanthropy. In addition, following up with the winning projects of Google's AI challenge could have highlighted to what extent Google's "AI for Social Good" practices shaped the outcomes of projects.

Article two, *Finding the "Sweet Spot": The Politics of Alignment in Cross-Sector Partnerships for Refugees,* focuses on the power dynamics of refugee-focused CSPs between nonprofits and tech companies. Such partnerships have become increasingly popular in the humanitarian response to refugee crises. The article demonstrates that while CSPs for refugees are based on ideals of sweet spots between humanitarian and business interests, they often rely on transactional relations and negotiations, in which business interests are favored. This power asymmetry is linked to, and legitimized by, win-win discourses and an ideal of alignment perpetuated by global institutional frameworks, CSR practitioners, and CSP literature. While the ideal of alignment promotes notions of shared value, reciprocity, mutual benefits, and "meeting in the middle," this ideal legitimizes power imbalances and asymmetrical alignment, in which nonprofit partners are expected to do more of the aligning.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork with the IRC and their corporate tech partners, and by applying a theoretical framework that combines CSP literature with critical humanitarian studies, this article suggests three key power dynamics that shape CSPs in the humanitarian field: the one-way translation of business strategy into social value, the adjustment of needs to match solutions, and the project selling for employee engagement. The findings stress the need to consider these and other power dynamics to understand how CSPs operate, whose interests they prioritize, and for whom them create value, to avoid business value becoming the primary measure of success in CSPs rather than the provision of protection, freedom, and safety for refugees.

Writing this article and shaping my ethnographic data and style of analysis to fit a business and management journal was a challenging process, which taught me a lot about my own ways of writing and thinking. The editor and reviewers' helpful comments forced me to sharpen my claims about why critical and anthropological analyses of CSPs are valuable, but the final article includes fewer ethnographic data than I originally wished to include. Specifically, this piece would have benefitted significantly from the perspective of the intended refugee beneficiaries of CSPs. As the article seeks to highlight the asymmetry of power in CSPs, the power relations between refugees, aid agencies, and corporations are crucial pieces to this puzzle.

Article three, *Hacking the Refugee Crisis: Merging Refugee Aid and Digital Capitalism in Humanitarian Hacking,* explores two refugee-focused volunteer hackathons organized by the nonprofit organization Techfugees in Copenhagen with support from Google. The hackathons aimed to develop digital solutions for refugees in Denmark and were organized in response to the global refugee crisis. While hackathons became a popular format among NGOs, volunteers, and corporations for helping refugees during the European refugee crisis, the impact of this humanitarian hacking has been limited. By examining the collective practices of "hacking the refugee crisis" within an analytical framework of critical refugee studies and humanitarian innovation literature, the article shows how rather than providing novel technical solutions, the hackathons reproduce already existing imaginaries about technology, business, and refugees. In these imaginaries, digital technologies are cast as effective quick-fix solutions, tech companies as innovation experts and compassionate humanitarian actors, and refugees as depoliticized entrepreneurial subjects.

Based on these findings, the article suggests that the imaginaries produced at the hackathons place tech companies and digital technologies at the forefront of humanitarian action for refugees in a way that reaffirms humanitarian innovation policy narratives and Silicon Valley visions of corporate humanitarianism. The article argues that the hackathons serve to crystalize and legitimize the growing role of tech companies as humanitarian actors in refugee crises in spaces beyond the formal humanitarian sector. Moreover, the article highlights how hackathons offer a unique site for producing grounded and ethnographic analyses of digital processes.

In writing this article, I have struggled to balance a critical reading of humanitarian hacking with respect and sympathy for the people engaging in these practices. I am not sure if I have found this balance yet. The article highlights the participants' eagerness to do good and to help, but also the performativity of these practices of helping. In this sense, the practices of hacking mirror many other public and corporate performances of solidarity and compassion, and I would have liked to learn more about how the practices of hacking and coding specifically tied into hackathon participants' experiences of feeling helpful. Moreover, the article would have benefitted from engaging more with the participants' ambiguity toward capitalism, technology, and migration politics, expressed at the hackathons.

6.2 Main Conclusions

The dissertation has illustrated the different ways in which tech companies engage in refugee crises and humanitarian aid more broadly: As philanthropic actors shaping corporate humanitarian definitions of "doing good;" as influential partners of aid agencies looking for sweet spots that yield benefits for business and refugees alike; and as funders and facilitators of volunteer hackathons focused on applying digital technologies as tools for humanitarian helping. In all of these roles, the business interests of tech companies – whether of promoting AI technologies as Tech for Good or improving their public image – are linked to the humanitarian response to protracted displacement through the narrative frame of refugee crises. This discourse on migration as crisis legitimizes an urgent need for innovation, corporate disruption, and technical expertise to fix the "broken refugee system."

I have focused on the concept of corporate humanitarian solutionism to capture and frame the three articles of this dissertation and the actors and practices they depict. This concept is both descriptive and analytical. It describes a particular version of corporate humanitarianism, by which I mean forms of humanitarian practice and discourse influenced by the involvement of for-profit corporations. This version of corporate humanitarianism emphasizes the design of digital solutions through problem-solving approaches and ideologies rooted in the Silicon Valley tech sector. By combining three disparate literatures, the concept offers a novel theoretical framework for understanding the convergence of Big Tech and humanitarian aid in refugee crises.

The dissertation has examined how corporate humanitarian solutionism is practiced among various groups of people from tech company employees in social impact teams, to NGO workers and volunteer hackers. In doing so, it has brought empirical nuance to the concept of solutionism by showing that while corporate humanitarian solutionism can easily appear as merely a strategic ploy for companies to package their profit-seeking business as altruistic, solutionism also appeals to nonprofit actors aiming to help refugees. Corporate humanitarian solutionism brings together a diverse group of tech helpers with different motivations and aspirations for acting on refugee crises with technology. For tech companies, engaging in partnerships with humanitarian agencies is not only a way to pursue corporate interests or position the company as a "good corporate citizen" externally (as highlighted in article one), but also a way to retain employees by offering them the opportunity to work on humanitarian projects that feel meaningful to them. However, in article two I showed how letting employees select their own meaningful projects required nonprofits to "sell" humanitarian projects in line with the individual interests of tech company

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employees. As such, corporate humanitarian solutionism brings out and exacerbates asymmetrical power relations in these partnerships.

For refugee aid agencies, corporate humanitarian solutionism and the emphasis on digital humanitarian initiatives for refugees becomes a way to navigate a context of ever-growing humanitarian needs and an increasingly competitive and politicized funding landscape (European Commission, 2021a). In this context, private funding from tech companies often comes with fewer explicit strings attached (as described by my interlocutors in article two), but increasingly involves adopting the technologies and expertise offered by the companies. At the same time, humanitarian organizations operate within a sector that is undergoing rapid processes of digitization and datafication and where the capacity to use big data and AI technologies to respond to on-going crises and predict future crises is increasingly needed and requested by donors (Greenwood, 2020). Thus, as article two illustrates, aid agencies seek to "capitalize" on the willingness of tech companies to contribute to humanitarian aid in new ways. However, while tech companies frame their willingness to donate technical expertise and products as a new and more efficient approach to "doing good," these new ways of corporate helping in fact extend and legitimize a profit orientation of humanitarian aid.

Lastly, for volunteer hackers at the Techfugees hackathons, corporate humanitarian solutionism provided them with a feeling of doing something meaningful and helping others while pursuing their interests in technology development, making professional or social connections, or improving their CVs for the job market. As such, in enacting the narrative of the refugee crisis as a depoliticized crisis in need of technical fixes, corporate humanitarian solutionism offered a valuable and meaningful way for hackathon participants to engage with each other and with current humanitarian problems. However, as I demonstrated in article three, this humanitarian engagement reproduced dominant narratives and imaginaries about technology, business, and refugees that ultimately legitimize the growing role of tech companies in humanitarianism.

This broad appeal of corporate humanitarian solutionism is found within a growing public and political disenchantment with Silicon Valley tech companies and increasing tensions between the use of digital technologies as tools of both care and control in the current refugee regime. I have sought to understand this development by focusing on the social imaginaries of the digital and the ways in which corporate humanitarian solutionism is expressed through the imaginaries and ideals of the people who aspire to develop digital solutions in refugee crises. This analytical focus

became especially relevant for me as I studied sites where technological solutions for refugees were not actually used or implemented, but rather imagined, negotiated, or envisioned.

In taking this focus, the dissertation engages with scholarly debates about how to ethnographically study fragmented, ephemeral, and inaccessible social worlds. Utilizing perspectives on assemblage ethnography (Wahlberg, 2022), studying up (Archer & Souleles, 2021; Nader, 1972), and digital ethnography (Pink, 2016), I began considering the hot air of corporate humanitarian solutionism as an object of study rather than a smokescreen for what I expected to be the "real" practices in the field. This analytical move involved careful ethnographic attention to the various practices and interactions of my interlocutors, but it also required me to accept the great deal of *not knowing* that characterized my field.

These feelings of hot air and not knowing reflect not just my experience as an ethnographer in this field, but also an important part of the mobilizing power and pervasiveness of the social imaginaries around technology, business, and humanitarianism. As argued by Sneath et al., "the place of the imagination, then, is the space of indeterminacy in social and cultural life, and it can be empirically identified and ethnographically explored with reference to the processes and technologies that open it up" (Sneath et al., 2009, p. 24). In his ethnography of the access doctrine, Greene similarly argues that it is this indeterminacy or inability to know exactly how or whether Internet-focused poverty alleviation actually works that keeps various institutions and individuals *hoping* for the positive impact of technology (Greene, 2021, pp. 176–177). Only because there are so many things we do not and cannot know, whether due to a lack of technical skills, a lack of useful data, or due to corporate secrecy, the imaginaries and promises of what technology *might* do for refugees or how technology companies *might* profit from humanitarian engagement become powerful and generative. Thus, the hot air of corporate humanitarian solutionism is a key part of the influential role tech companies have come to hold in humanitarian aid for refugees.

In summary, this dissertation has shed light on the ways in which tech companies engage in humanitarianism and refugee aid, but also how this involvement raises questions about power dynamics, the alignment of interests, and the sustainability of tech solutions to humanitarian crises. Ultimately, the dissertation shows that the corporate humanitarianism of Big Tech is asymmetrical, profit-oriented, and skewed toward business interests. Importantly, critiques of corporate humanitarianism should not simply define profits in terms of hard cash or monetary gains, because the fact that tech companies do not receive money from these engagements does

not mean they do not profit from them. This dissertation demonstrates the need to look beyond the terminology of "good intentions," "non-profit," and "doing good" in corporate humanitarianism. Rather, scholars must continue to critically question the unequal power relations and capitalist underpinnings of businesses' attempts to "help."

6.3 Avenues for Future Research

I began the dissertation with a description of the Signpost project as an example of Big Tech's engagement in refugee crises. In January 2020, when I started fieldwork with the IRC, the organization coordinating Signpost, the project was at a standstill. A lack of funding and a clear, coherent vision for the project's future had forced the Signpost teams to terminate one of the platforms, the information platform serving refugees arriving in Greece. In San Francisco, the IRC invited the corporate tech partners to a full-day workshop with the purpose of "re-committing" to the project. Although I was not allowed to participate in the workshop, I gathered from subsequent conversations with interlocutors that getting tech companies to commit to the project was difficult, especially since the issue of refugees had "become so politicized," in the words of an IRC employee. It was election year in the US after all.

A few months later in May, as the shock waves of the coronavirus pandemic started to settle, I contacted one of my interlocutors at the IRC, Jessica, for a follow-up interview. Expecting to hear that the Signpost project was temporarily paused because of the pandemic, I was surprised. Not only was the Signpost project still operating, but it was also in fact expanding rapidly. Jessica, who works as a Partnerships Officer at IRC, filled me in on the progress. While there had been a brief period of a few weeks where the private sector donors turned inward and slowed down donations, the IRC had seen a surprising willingness from the tech sector to contribute specifically to the Signpost project. In fact, Jessica and the team behind Signpost had just secured a new tech partner to establish the next instance of Signpost, covering a notoriously controversial and politicized (and therefore difficult to fund) border in the US context: the US-Mexican border. I was puzzled. How did the issue of refugees go from being "too political" for tech companies to support to a cause attracting new tech donors and partners amid a global pandemic?

When I asked Jessica how she would explain the sudden success of the Signpost project, she replied that the pandemic had expanded the need for accurate and life-saving information, not just for refugees but for all of us. "We're all in the same boat now," she claimed. Therefore, the tech

companies saw a potential to tie in the refugee-focused initiative to their broader social impact strategies. While other industries collapsed, profits in the US tech sector skyrocketed due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic (Ovide, 2021). The digital tools and information sources provided by companies like Google and Microsoft were now perceived as essential healthcare and education tools, which reinforced the claims of Signpost to deliver "information as aid."

Thus, during the pandemic, the Signpost initiative expanded from a project that provided specific information to refugees and migrants about travel routes, health services, and legal procedures to being a pandemic response mechanism and crisis information service, through which migrants, refugees, and other "vulnerable populations" (Signpost documents adopted this terminology) could access information about risks, safety measures, and vaccines. The project thereby tapped into a major public and political agenda of fighting the spread of online misinformation, which also tied Signpost even closer to the philanthropic priorities of the Silicon Valley tech sector. This shift in Signpost's focus signifies a capacity of corporate humanitarian solutionism to adopt and transform to fit new crisis contexts, which raises questions about the future of Big Tech's involvement in humanitarian aid and prompts further research on corporate humanitarianism.

In this dissertation, I have examined the phenomena of corporate humanitarianism from a critical perspective, highlighting the tensions and problematic aspects of Big Tech's engagement in refugee aid. For instance, I have highlighted how the application of simplistic technical solutions to complex problems works to de-politicize humanitarian crises. However, the practices which I have examined in this dissertation as corporate humanitarian solutionism can also be seen as a response to the lack of political solutions to on-going migration and refugee crises. Digital humanitarian initiatives, whether created by volunteer hackers or in partnerships between transnational corporations and aid agencies, attempt to offer tangible solutions for refugees and migrants as governments drag their feet and continue to negotiate over how to place humanitarian responsibilities outside of their own territories. Although the European refugee crisis was declared over in 2019, thousands of migrants continue to die at sea every year. So far, in 2023 alone, more than 2,500 people have lost their lives attempting to reach European shores (UNCHR, 2023). Many more have died at borders around the world. Now, nearly a decade since the "European refugee crisis," politicians and media are again talking about a migration crisis (Champion, 2023; Jacqué & Pascual, 2023). In this continued political crisis with no political solutions, what are the alternatives to de-politicized corporate solutions? Recent research has begun to expand the concept of humanitarianism to include local, vernacular (Fechter & Schwittay, 2019) everyday

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(Richey, 2018a), and decolonial forms of helping (Sulley & Richey, 2023). While my dissertation has focused on the critical aspects of corporate humanitarianism, more research is needed to explore how alternative forms of solidarity can challenge the power asymmetries in transnational humanitarianism.

The arguments I have made in this dissertation could also be taken further by historicizing the use of digital technology in the realms of development, migration, and humanitarianism, focusing for example on current debates on generative AI technology. As AI technologies are increasingly implemented in humanitarian aid and migration management (Molnar, 2019), scholars are calling for research to "unhype" AI by historicizing its use and problematizing the emergence of an "AI common sense" (Aradau, 2023). In May 2023, a group of more than 350 influential AI industry leaders, researchers, and engineers signed an open letter stating that the AI technology they were building could pose existential threats to humanity. Therefore, "mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks, such as pandemics and nuclear war" states the letter (Center for AI Safety, 2023).

However, female scholars of AI have warned about the potential harms and societal consequences of AI for years. These women include Timnit Gebru and Safiya Noble who have called out Big Tech's algorithms and AI technologies for embedding and reproducing gendered and racial biases (S. U. Noble, 2018). As part of this group of critical AI scholars, computer scientist and researcher Joy Buolamwini explained in a recent *Rolling Stone* interview: "People's lives are at stake, not because of some super intelligent system, but because of an overreliance on technical systems" (O'Neil, 2023). Others define the dangers of AI as its capacity to enforce the mechanisms and power of capitalism (Chiang, 2023). How this overreliance on AI and the links to capitalism play out in future humanitarian crises will be a critical site of study in coming years.

The dissertation has highlighted the dual role of technology companies and their technologies in both helping and governing migrants. However, this area deserves much more attention in order to bring out the ethical implications and potential consequences of corporate involvement and data practices in refugee aid (see for example Lemberg-Pedersen & Haioty, 2020). I have focused on the practices of imagining digital solutions for refugees, but what do these practices obscure about how border technologies are actually impacting migrants and refugees in the present moment? While digital technologies might be a source of hope for some, they are simultaneously used to distribute hopelessness for others as border agencies and immigration controls deploy new

advanced surveillance technologies to deter and penalize migrants (Kleist, 2023, p. 4). As such, there is an asymmetry between the people who are allowed to imagine technology and the people who are forced to feel the consequences of these technologies. In the sites I have studied here, people are free to imagine the transformative potential of technology, but for migrants and refugees such technologies have visceral effects.

Scholarship on the experimental practices, logics, and politics of technological development are already beginning to address these issues (Aradau, 2022; Fejerskov, 2022; Madianou, 2021). Importantly, such research should consider perspectives from the Global Majority to avoid a "digital universalism" in critiques of datafication and Big Tech (Greenwood, 2020). In their call to shift our attention from datafication to data activism and data justice, Milan and Treré (2019) argue that critical data scholars "continue to frame key debates on democracy and surveillance – and the associated demands for alternative models and practices – by means of 'Western' concerns, contexts, user behavior patterns, and theories" (Milan & Treré, 2019, p. 320). To avoid this universalism, future research on the role of technology and business in humanitarian aid could usefully focus on refugees' and other beneficiaries' acts of "thriving otherwise" to recognize "the forms of life, thought, and action that persist in the face of multifaceted structural, epistemological, and material violence" (Elwood, 2021, p. 210). Foregrounding the agency and creativity of refugees themselves would be a much-needed alternative to tech companies' corporate humanitarian "solutions."

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