GLOBAL**DETENTION**PROJECT

PHYSICAL FENCES AND DIGITAL DIVIDES

FINAL REPORT OF THE GLOBAL DETENTION PROJECT SPECIAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE USES OF ELECTRONIC MEDIA IN TODAY'S MIGRATION JOURNEYS

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THE GLOBAL DETENTION PROJECT MISSION

The Global Detention Project (GDP) is a non-profit organisation based in Geneva that promotes the human rights of people who have been detained for reasons related to their non-citizen status. Our mission is:

- To promote the human rights of detained migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers;
- To ensure transparency in the treatment of immigration detainees;
- To reinforce advocacy aimed at reforming detention systems;
- To nurture policy-relevant scholarship on the causes and consequences of migration control policies.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Tom Rollins, an investigative journalist who has reported widely on human rights-related issues in the Middle East and North Africa, was the lead author of and investigator for this report. Additional contributors included the GDP's Michael Flynn and Katie Welsford.

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Front cover image: Refugees charge their mobile phones in Idomeni refugee camp, 2015 © Francesco Malavolta

This report is also available online at www.globaldetentionproject.org

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PREFACE

In early 2019, a Finnish NGO that was supporting an Afghan family contacted the Global Detention Project (GDP) seeking assistance locating the family's son, who had reportedly been arrested and then detained at the Adana Detention Centre in southern Turkey. Unable to find information on the boy's fate or whereabouts, and fearful that he would be deported,[1] the NGO wrote: "We kindly inquire whether you at the Global Detention Project could investigate where [he] currently is exactly, and potentially assist in registering him as an asylum seeker."

This request was not a one-off. In recent years, we have received growing numbers of assistance requests, varying from appeals for information on how to ensure the release of a detainee from a specific location and requests for help in locating individuals, to emails from detainees seeking advice on how to legally challenge their detention. While the GDP is not in a position to locate individuals or to provide legal assistance, we attempt to direct people to potentially useful services, like the ICRC's online "Family Tracing" tool and local offices of UNHCR or non-governmental advocacy organisations. In most cases, like the one mentioned above, we never find out the ultimate fate of the person in question. After putting the NGO in touch with resources in Turkey, communications ceased despite our efforts to follow up. In a few cases, however, our efforts have been rewarded with news that families who had reached out to us were able to locate their loved ones as a direct result of the resources we put them in touch with.

Our experiences interacting with people seeking assistance in detention and other migration-related situations spurred a number of reflections. First and foremost, we recognised that there is an ever-increasing number of people who will seek us out because the GDP—with its dedicated webpages of more than 2,200 detention centres—is one of the few online resources with information about these facilities. In an age where migrants, refugees, and their families can have instant access to the web through their smartphones, and use social media to tell people in their networks about pages like ours, the GDP website starts to take on new, unexpected significance. In effect, what began as an academic research project aimed at carefully documenting detention practices across the globe has become a go-to resource for untold thousands of people who find themselves or their loved ones trapped in the world's burgeoning archipelago of detention centres.

This realisation led us to begin assessing more carefully how people use our website and how we should respond. One issue that has become abundantly clear is the urgent need to begin developing new tools on our website that could more effectively connect people in

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[1] Turkish authorities have deported growing numbers of Afghan asylum seekers in recent years. See: Global Detention Project, "Immigration Detention in Turkey: A Serial Human Rights Abuser and Europe's Refugee Gatekeeper," October 2019, https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/europe/turkey

need with resources on the ground. We also started testing Facebook to see if we could use its geo-targeting tools to post sponsored content that could reach people in various challenging migration situations. In one instance, we posted sponsored content drawing attention to a GDP submission to the UN Committee on Migrant Workers concerning Libya targeting a swath of countries in northern and sub-Saharan Africa. Although the ad ran for just 24 hours, it reached 23,000 users and featured 4,185 engagements, including a large number of comments. Most of the comments were from users from countries whose nationals commonly migrate through Libya—Nigerians and Gambians, among others—as well as Libyans. Many of the comments were emotive, with some users posting tearful emojis or short messages calling for change. One commenter even appeared to be someone claiming to be in Libya at the time, who wrote: "We are in Libya pls [sic] help us," and, "UN help us we are in Libya. God we help you pls [sic]."

While we were pleased to have been able to use social media in awareness-raising campaigns, we quickly grew wary of potential pitfalls. Could this sponsored content be interpreted as a fear-mongering initiative that dissuades people from fleeing persecution? Are the Facebook ads communicating inaccurate ideas about who we are? Is there a responsible way to use these tools to help reduce harm instead of aggravating it?

This GDP report was born of these reflections. With support and encouragement from our partners at the Human Security Division of the Swiss Department of Foreign Affairs, we contracted a journalist with experience reporting on migration and refugee issues in North Africa and launched our investigation in early 2018. Based on the consultant's reporting in key hotspots and a comprehensive review of the burgeoning literature on the use of new digital media by migrants and refugees, we have been able to produce a series of reports highlighting critical aspects about how people on the move use social media and new apps. This final report synthesises the material from the earlier reports and provides a number of key lessons that emerged from our investigation. It is our hope that these reflections can assist us at the GDP as well as other human rights practitioners and policy-makers to develop more effective tools aimed at ensuring the well-being of the world's growing populations of migrants and refugees.

Syrian refugees check their phones as they wait at the Serbian-Hungarian border. (Getty)

INTRODUCTION

> Digital infrastructure is as important as the physical infrastructures of roads, railways, sea crossings and the borders controlling the free movement of people."
> —*M. Gillespie et al., Mapping Refugee Media Journeys: Smartphones and Social Media Networks.*

> Witnesses said men, women and children were praying together when soldiers they believe to be part of the forces of the military strongman Khalifa Haftar, which are advancing on the Libyan capital to try to bring down the UN-backed government, stormed into the detention centre and demanded people hand over their phones. When the occupants refused, the soldiers began shooting. ... Phones are the only link to the outside world for many in the detention centres."
> —*D. Taylor, The Guardian, (24 April 2019)*

September 2014. Wandering at sea, Rami thought often of his young daughter, taken from him by an air-strike some weeks before. Rami had decided to leave Syria, history, the war behind, which was why he was now on a boat in the middle of the Mediterranean … or so he thought. On board, the Egyptian smugglers who'd just ferried them from Alexandria to international waters had been lying about their whereabouts for just about as long as they'd been on the water and now phone signal had stopped working. It was anybody's guess where they were.

Trailing a week or so behind Rami, Yousef counted the days on board by the portentous events that marked them. On the first, someone died of a diabetic coma. On the second (or was it the third?), a shipping container passed by. Yousef took photographs of the boat and the men playing cards out on deck throughout. With him were Khaled, Abdullah, and his 15-year-old brother Omar.

All of these young men were Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS), a detail that became significant the moment they were apprehended at sea, returned to shore, and detained by Egyptian authorities in Alexandria.[2] As PRS, they would be denied basic rights afforded to other refugees because Egypt does not recognise Palestinians as refugees and does not allow either the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) to operate in the country or allow the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) mandate to cover Palestinian refugees once they are outside of UNRWA areas of operation—notably, in

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[2] The lead author of this report has previously written about the young men's case, as well as Karmouz, for both research publications and media outlets. See: T. Rollins, "The Palestinian-Syrian 'Protection Gap': Inside an Egyptian Police Station," *Palestinian refugees from Syria: Ongoing Nakba, Ongoing Discrimination*, *Al-Majdal*, Volume 57(2), 2015; and T. Rollins, "Unwelcome Guests: Egypt's Failed Experiment in Refugee Detention," *Mada Masr*, 17 November 2014, https://www.madamasr.com/en/2014/11/17/feature/politics/unwelcome-guests-egypts-failed-experiment-in-refugee-detention/

Refugees detained in Karmouz Police Station (Alexandria) between 2014-2015 used an advocacy campaign on social media channels to call for their release from detention and resettlement to European countries. (لاجئي كرموز #Karmooz Refugees campaign)

contravention of Article 1(D) of the 1951 Refugee Convention and UNHCR's subsequent authoritative interpretations of it.

The young men were stuck in detention for months. After being ferried between police stations, they were transferred to Karmouz Police Station (*al-qism al-shorta Karmouz*)—a facility long used by Egypt for detaining refugees from Syria[3]—still trapped by their statelessness and lack of formal legal or refugee status. By November 2014, after another group was caught that month, some 80 PRS were being held inside Karmouz.

Those inside the police station followed news from outside using smartphones and mobile phones, which were permitted inside. They maintained contact with family members and friends making the journey from Turkey to Greece, which was being presented as a "crisis" by European journalists. Social media gave them access to loved-ones outside and hope. It allowed Yousef to share photographs through WhatsApp of the squalid conditions they were forced to sleep in—mice, cockroaches, and the rest—and kept them visible to activists, journalists, and international organisations when Egyptian police tried to deport members of the group.[4]

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[3] Global Detention Project, "Immigration Detention in Egypt: Military Tribunals, Human Rights Abuses, Abysmal Conditions, and EU Partner," 2018, https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/africa/egypt

[4] T. Rollins was in contact with one of the original five PRS during one such attempted deportation, when the group were transferred to Alexandria's Passports and Immigration Department and asked to sign a document saying they'd agree to return to Syria. All—unsurprisingly—refused, and they were returned to detention.

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After some months inside, Rami, Yousef, and the rest of the Karmouz group joined a hunger strike launched by activists inside and—in tandem with friends, family, and activists outside—launched a media and advocacy campaign through Facebook to push for their release and resettlement to three European countries. Detained refugees maintained contact with local and foreign journalists. In the end, social media had helped the group to mitigate risks (including deportations), raise awareness outside, speak to friends and family, and ultimately challenge the arbitrary, indefinite system of detention that had kept them there for months on end. By autumn 2015, everyone inside Karmouz had been released and resettled to new lives in either France, Germany, or Sweden.

> **Stories about how refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants pro-actively employ social media are *not* the ones we typically read about. Officials from governments and international bodies instead often emphasise what they regard as the failure of corporations to prevent the hijacking of technology by criminals to "lure" vulnerable people.**

Rami and Yousef's story is common across the globe and there are numerous remarkable cases illustrating the enormous impact digital media can have, including from inside detention centres, like the case of Behrouz Boochani on Manus Island (discussed in "Lessons Learned" below). However, stories about how refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants pro-actively employ social media are *not* the ones we typically read about. Officials from governments and international bodies like the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) instead often emphasise what they regard as the failure of corporations to prevent the hijacking of technology by criminals to "lure" vulnerable people. Thus, for instance, in late 2017, an IOM spokesperson claimed that major social media channels were ignoring how their platforms were monopolised by smugglers to allegedly entice migrants from West Africa to cross the sea. "People are being lured to deaths, to their torture," the official argued, claiming that social media companies were providing a "turbo-charged communications channel to criminals, to smugglers, to traffickers, to exploiters."[5] Europol has even coined a term of art for this phenomenon: "e-smuggling."[6]

However, a growing number of observers recognise that social media and other online platforms can give agency back to refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants in a world of borders and fences. Social media can allow people to make better-informed—possibly life-saving—decisions. This Global Detention Project Special Report is aimed at improving our understanding of how refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants have used social media and other tech apps, with a special emphasis on their use on the migration routes in North Africa and the Mediterranean during and since the 2015 "refugee crisis."

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[5] S. Nebehay, "U.N. Calls on Social Media Giants to Control Platforms Used to Lure African Migrants," *Reuters*, 8 December 2017, https://reut.rs/2YWNZzq

[6] S. Sanderson, "Refugees Fall Victim to the Other Side of Facebook," *InfoMigrants*, 12 April 2018, http://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/8579/refugees-fall-victim-to-the-other-side-of-facebook

Part I of this report reviews existing literature and online tools to chart the historical relationship between migration and social media, tech responses to the "refugee crisis," as well as the importance of human-centred design of new technologies to account for variations in social media use according to age, nationality, migration route, and local *modus operandi* of smuggling and trafficking networks.

Part II of the report investigates these variations from the ground up by comparing testimonies of Sudanese refugees in Egypt and West African migrants in Sicily, most of whom had been arrested and detained numerous times during their migration journeys. What do these testimonies—which were gathered by a GDP consultant during field research in 2018—tell us about how social media use changes across differing geographic regions, nationalities, and migratory contexts?

Part III concludes the report with a series of "lessons learned" for human rights practitioners to help them harness social media in ways that emphasise harm-reduction. How can new technologies be used in ways that reduce the harm of hazardous migration journeys, whether in the lawless regions of North Africa, the deserts of northern Mexico, the perilous seas of the Asia-Pacific, or any of the other numerous places across the globe where people are compelled to cross borders to improve their lives? Building on the conceptual framework used by the GDP for its 2018 report "Harm Reduction in Immigration Detention: A Comparative Study of Detention Centres in France, Germany, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland,"[7] the final section of this report seeks to identify instances where Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) have been developed or otherwise deployed in ways that avoid risky or detrimental uses.[8]

Ultimately, this special report shows that contrary to claims made by some government officials and non-governmental actors, social media is not merely a tool of smugglers and criminals. In fact, there is a real opportunity for migrants and those seeking to protect their rights to harness social media for good. But more work needs to be done to understand social media and to harness its various functions to better assist vulnerable groups. At the same time, it is critical to keep in mind pitfalls of viewing social media as some kind of tech wizardry that can resolve today's refugee and migrant challenges, as well as to be cognizant of how its use as an awareness-raising tool can easily slide into fear-mongering that may dissuade people from moving even in contexts where not doing so could cost them their lives.

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[7] I. Majcher and M. Flynn, "Harm Reduction in Immigration Detention: A Comparative Study of Detention Centres in France, Germany, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland," *Global Detention Project*, October 2018, https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/harm-reduction-immigration-detention

[8] The concept of "harm reduction" emerged in the United States to develop policies and practices that reduce the harmful consequences of illicit narcotic consumption. However, as the GDP's Majcher and Flynn point out in in their 2018 study, it has increasingly been used in the context of the human rights of migrants. For instance, in a 2014 letter to the European Commission, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants wrote: "Europe needs less repression of survival migration and more harm-reduction policies taking as a central concern the well-being of migrants." See: I. Majcher and M. Flynn, "Harm Reduction in Immigration Detention: A Comparative Study of Detention Centres in France, Germany, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland," *Global Detention Project*, October 2018, https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/harm-reduction-immigration-detention

A critical source of information and evidence for this series were interviews completed by the lead author with a representative sample of displaced and migrant populations in Egypt and Sicily during early 2018. He sought to structure an interview sample that broadly reflected nationalities crossing the Central Mediterranean, as well as the complex, mixed nature of migration flows transiting through Libya and North Africa—including West African migrants, Sudanese refugees, asylum seekers, and others. To help determine this sample, data from UNHCR was used to record the top 10 nationalities of arrivals who have crossed the Mediterranean to Italy and Spain during 2017 and 2018, seen in Figure 1.[9]

The GDP decided to select two locations as case studies to provide comparative perspective on social media use in Horn of Africa routes (via Egypt) as well as West Africa routes (via Libya). Cairo, Egypt, and Palermo, Sicily, were selected as locations because they provided contrasting situations that have experienced enormous change in recent years. The Egyptian government has severely cracked down on irregular migration on the north coast (with the EU's backing) whereas Sicily is still the—almost daily—arrival point for people moving through Libya. Sicily is also crucially important given its historical place as a dropping-off point for refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants; smuggling networks; and multi-stakeholder search-and-rescue operations. Interviews in Sicily were intended to provide a more accurate interview sample of nationalities currently transiting through Libya.

Nigeria	19,562
Tunisia	13,952
Cote d'Ivoire	11,591
Guinea	10,721
Eritrea	10,497
Bangladesh	9,753
Sudan	8,197
Mali	8,164
Morocco	6,575
Senegal	6,516

Figure 1: Top 10 nationalities of arrivals to Italy, 1 January 2017 – 31 October 2019. (UNHCR)

Each interview lasted between 30-60 minutes, and followed a semi-structured style combining human-centred design ("empathy") techniques with more narrative questions about an individual's journey. A central aim of these interviews was to understand how social media use either helped or hindered a journey, and mitigated risks or provided information about alternatives. Field interviews with migrant populations were supplemented by fact-

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[9] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Operational Data Portal: Mediterranean Situation," https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean

finding interviews with journalists and researchers, community activists, and local NGO staff, as well as representatives from UN agencies including UNHCR and IOM. In addition to face-to-face and remote interviews, the GDP undertook extensive desk research into existing social media projects as well as reviews of the literature on this phenomenon.

Throughout this study, the term "social media" is used broadly to refer to a range of electronic platforms that allow users to share, participate in, or collaborate.[10] The term is sufficiently broad that it can encompass collaborative information exchanges such as Wikipedia, social networking sites like Facebook or Weibo, as well as ICTs such as WhatsApp and Viber. While there are a multitude of definitions for social media, during the course of this investigation the GDP found particularly convincing definitions that view social media as a series of platforms that "support collaboration, community building, participation, and sharing."[11] With so much diversity and variation, it shouldn't be a surprise that there are seemingly endless ways to approach social media for research. The "massive and unprecedented generation of "big and broad data"' has necessitated development of 'novel and innovative approaches to make sense of the social world through social media data.'"[12]

This GDP investigation employed different research techniques during desk studies of social media channels, which was also guided by a desire to gain "empathy" and insights into social media use by different communities. The relatively new discipline of "netnography"—essentially a form of online anthropology—has been used by anthropologists and researchers to better understand online communities and served as a useful prism through which to view, assess, and understand Facebook use by displaced/migrant communities. This discipline, which was first coined by Dr. Robert V. Kozinets, Professor of Marketing and Chair of the Marketing Department at Schulich School of Business at New York University,[13] "describes the nexus between traditional ethnographic research and the free behaviour of people on the Internet," and presents benefits for the researcher aiming to understand and target communities because it is unobtrusive.[14]

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[10] T. O'Reilly, "What is Web 2.0? Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software," http://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html

[11] D. Omondi Otieno and V. Bosibori Matoke, "Social Media as a Tool for Conducting Academic Research," *International Journal of Advanced Research in Computer Science and Software Engineering*, Volume 4(1), 2014.

[12] A. Quan-Haase and L. Sloan (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*, London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2016.

[13] R.V. Kozinets, "The Field Behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities," *Journal of Marketing Research,* Vol. XXXIX, 2002.

[14] G. DeVault, "Netnography: Obtaining Social Media Insight," *The Balance*, 28 February 2017, https://www.plu.edu/msmr/blog/netnography-obtaining-social-media-insight/

PART I: A REVIEW OF KEY TRENDS AND CONCERNS

"A NEW AGE OF MIGRATION"

Standard migration text-books often begin with an exploration of the meta-narratives of modern-day global migration: the foundation of UNHCR and its noble but troubled mandate, push and pull factors, refugees and economic migrants, and the changes in our twenty-first century world that have helped facilitate a purportedly unprecedented era in the global movement of human beings. Readers might be directed through an explanation of globalisation and the imbalanced relationship between free trade and free movement of labour; broadening wealth/poverty discrepancies between the Global North and South; a new, post-Cold War age of war and terrorism; as well as an "unprecedented access to communication technologies, information and the development of extensive diaspora networks."[15]

That last point usually presents social media, technology, and broadening global internet penetration as a very modern facilitator for migration in our supposedly globalised world with its "widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life."[16] Through it, a Nigerian migrant might learn about what life is like in Europe from an internet cafe in his or her village, just as a Palestinian refugee in a camp in Lebanon might research statelessness determination procedures through a smartphone.

Today, the notion that technology facilitates migration is now an accepted fact of the migration trail. This is how one New York Times journalist characterised a year reporting on the Balkan migration route:

> The same forces that have shrunk the world for people in its wealthier precincts—instantaneous, pocket-size communication, mundane air travel, globalised culture—have also been an invitation, or perhaps a taunt, to those in less fortunate circumstances. Confronted with war, persecution and poverty, the migrants are well aware that people are living far better in a not-too-distant place, and that their smartphones and social networks can help guide them there.[17]

[15] P. Tinti and T. Reitano, *Migrant, Refugee, Smuggler, Saviour,* London: Hurst, 2016.

[16] D. Held et al, *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture,* Cambridge: Stanford University Press, 1999.

[17] K. Bennhold et al, "Times Insider: Reporting Europe's Refugee Crisis," *New York Times*, 12 November 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/11/11/insider/europe-refugees.html

Claims like this are not hard to find; less has been done to improve our understanding of these modern, electronic dichotomies between migrant and host, origin and destination, rich and poor, south and north. These same dichotomies are still very much sources of controversy. They are unstable, in flux. That is not to say there is not a veritable universe of research on the relationship between migration and technology—varying from more ethnographic investigations of what nationalities use what apps, to theoretical inquiries of inter-connectivity, cross-border communication, and social "ties." In fact, there has been a great deal written about how social media and technology facilitates migration, however there remain "gaps in the literature" regarding how they are used "by people for the purpose of and during irregular migration," including notably by people facing arrest, detention, and deportation.[18]

Palestinian-Syrian refugees from Yarmouk Camp, Damascus, pass away the time in a Cyprus church. The church became a temporary shelter for dozens of refugees after their boat was rescued in the Mediterranean in late 2014. (Tom Rollins)

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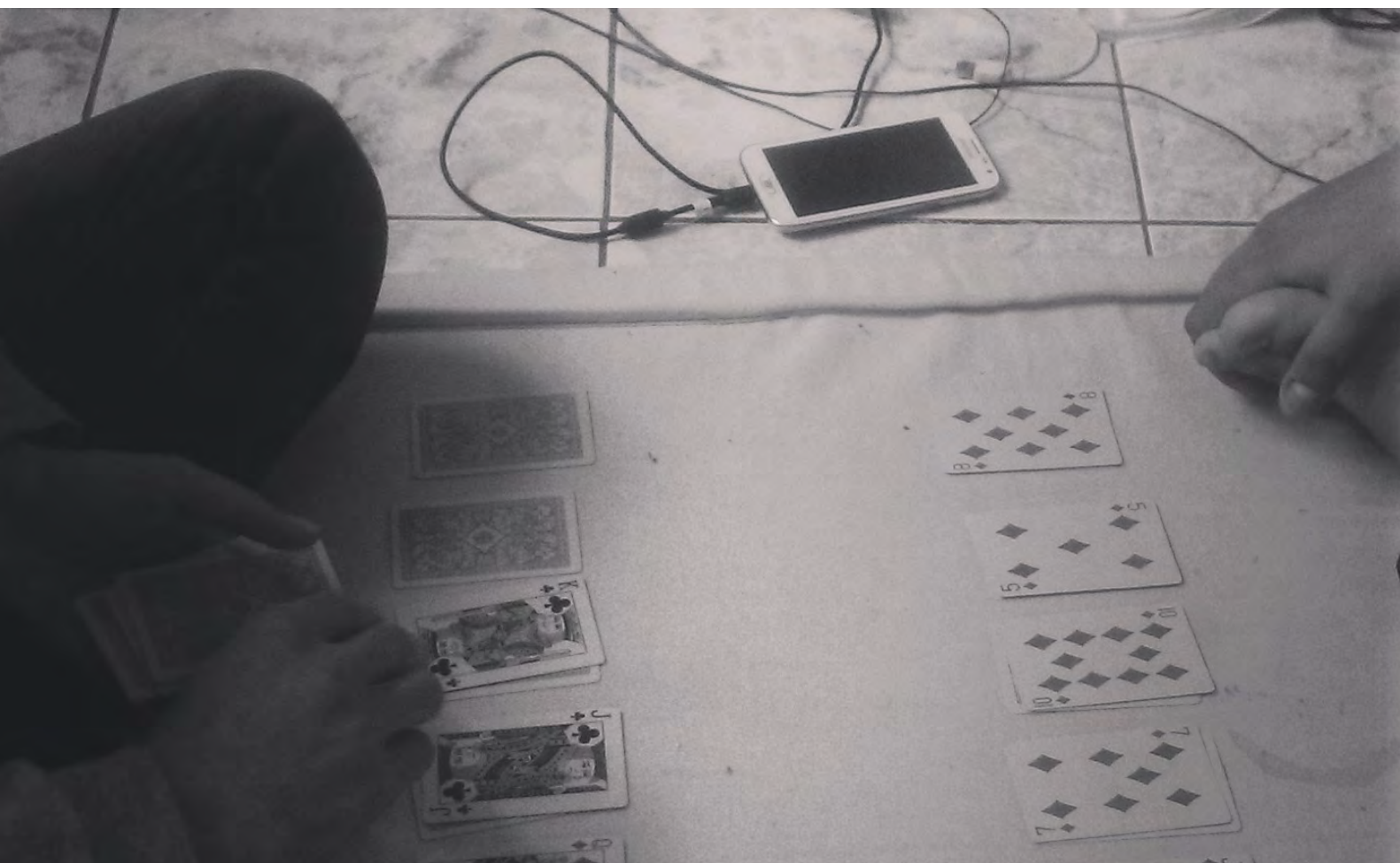
[18] B. Frouws et al, "Getting to Europe the 'WhatAapp' Way: The Use of ICT in Contemporary Mixed Migration Flows to Europe," *Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat Briefing Paper*, June 2016, http://www.regionalmms.org/images/briefing/Social_Media_in_Mixed_Migration.pdf

In an important 2012 study, Dekker and Engbersen assess how technology and social media facilitate migration through interviews with Brazilian, Moroccan, and Ukrainian migrants residing in the Netherlands. They argue that our present-day "Web 2.0," a more democratised and participatory environment than the earlier internet landscape, had helped create a "deterritorialized social space that facilitates communication among geographically dispersed people in migration networks."[19] The internet and social media, they argue, has opened up migrants—aspiring or actual—to the world in a way that did not exist before, so that social media can be expected to "not only … strengthen people's ability to migrate, but also to feed their aspiration to migrate."[20] This was largely found to work in four different ways, in that social media helped migrants to:

1. Maintain ties with family and friends;
2. Provide communication channels with "weak ties" for "organising the process of migration and settlement";
3. Establish new communication channels with "latent ties";
4. And provide social capital and "insider knowledge on migration."

Dekker and Engbersen were more concerned with ties and connectivity that are provided by social media, rather than with a detailed analysis of what apps or platforms are used and why. But their study details how social media facilitates migration in all kinds of ways: whether easing communication and fostering ideas of migration amongst communities back home, or giving a Facebook user access to more-established migrants in a destination country in a way that can ease integration and the migratory experience.

It is not surprising that displaced and migrant communities make use of social media and technology just as anyone else would—to speak to one's mother, to check the news about what's ahead, or to simply pass the time during the long, torturous waits that often define migration. And yet there has been a fascination, at times bordering on the hysterical, about how refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants in transit use social media that can be typified by one enduring phrase—"refugee crisis." Interest in migration and technology has flourished since the advent of that supposed "crisis"—refugee, migrant, or migration?— unfolding on Europe's borders. The phrase has since been used to such an extent, and in so many different contexts, that it has lost all valid meaning. But investigating its roots may help to understand different presentations of social media.

THE "REFUGEE CRISIS"

Several events and trends contributed to the birth of the term "refugee crisis," as well as its endurance in media and political discourse around the topic of migration. Although different analyses might disagree on the source of the "crisis," they usually centre on 2015 as its beginning. Take some very obvious open sources, first: A Google search of the question, "When did the refugee crisis start?" rather confidently places 2015 as the "start date"; while

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[19] R. Dekker and G. Engbersen, "How Social Media Transform Migrant Networks and Facilitate Migration," *International Migration Institute (IMI) Working Papers Series,* Volume 64, 2012.

[20] R. Dekker and G. Engbersen, "How Social Media Transform Migrant Networks and Facilitate Migration," *International Migration Institute (IMI) Working Papers Series,* Volume 64, 2012.

Migrants attempt to pass a barbed-wire-fence in Hungary, 18 August 2015. (Wikimedia Commons)

on the other hand, a quick browse of Wikipedia finds that the "European migrant crisis" or "European refugee crisis" refers to a period "beginning in 2015 when rising numbers of people arrived in the European Union" and that those flows included "asylum seekers, but also others, such as economic migrants and some hostile agents, including Islamic State militants disguised as refugees or migrants."[21]

Other sources point to the 19 April 2015 Lampedusa migrant tragedy that left some 800 people dead, arguing that this event "marks the beginning of a *narrative of crisis* associated with the movement of people to Europe."[22] Other recent migratory traumas have also helped force the issue to the forefront of newspapers, Twitter feeds, and blogs across the world. Undoubtedly the most widespread and tragic example was the ubiquitous image of Aylan Kurdi, his small body washed-up on a Turkish beach, in September 2015.[23] The year 2015 also saw the Syrian uprising/conflict enter its fourth year while Syrians were ranked as the largest displaced population on the move towards Europe. The movement of hundreds of thousands of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants through Turkey and Greece towards the Balkans throughout the year challenged European institutions and (supposedly) closely held values. Simultaneously, when a series of horrific Islamic State attacks on European soil began in January 2015, valid fears about the militants led to growing fears that Islamic State members might infiltrate groups of refugees crossing Europe's borders. [24] There was a

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[21] Wikipedia, "Search: European Migrant Crisis," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis

[22] M. Collyer and R. King, "Narrating Europe's Migration and Refugee 'Crisis'," *Human Geography*, Volume 9(2), 2016.

[23] R. Clarke and C.E. Shoichet, "Image of 3-Year-Old Who Washed Ashore Underscores Europe's Refugee Crisis," *CNN*, 3 September 2015, https://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/02/europe/migration-crisis-boy-washed-ashore-in-turkey/index.html

[24] BBC News, "Islamic State Militants 'Smuggled to Europe'," 17 May 2015, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-32770390

growing sense of some kind of nexus between terrorism and migration—the idea that migration was a threat.

It is important to note that several experts have since questioned the statistical and thematic justifications for this "crisis." Some have questioned how (or why) UNHCR and others regularly drum-up the idea that we are living in an "unprecedented era of human movement" when closer analysis suggests otherwise. One commonly heard argument is that we are living in a crisis "of politics, not capacity"[25]; another that if there is a crisis in global migration, in Europe there is not.[26]

Whichever way one chooses to understand this "crisis," it was inevitable that current events would lead to greater scrutiny of the ways in which refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants were using new technology and social media. Questions like "What technology do refugees use?" and "How do people stay in touch with their family members back home?" were followed by more xenophobic lines of questioning such as "Is this safe?" and "How can refugees afford smartphones in the first place?"[27]

> **The consensus was that social media facilitated migration (in the origin country), but also facilitated the irregular journey itself. It also kept migrants safe in the process. Social media had become a "migrant essential."**

The "crisis" called for extreme measures and extreme focus. With journalists pouring over the Balkan Route throughout 2015, they discovered that refugees and migrants were relying on "smartphones and social media to avoid police, find 'safe' people smugglers and accommodation," while using "Facebook pages that essentially serve as chat rooms for people leaving the Middle East and Africa for Europe."[28] One New York Times journalist noted how "Technology has transformed this 21st-century version of a refugee crisis, not least by making it easier for millions more people to move" through a range of life-saving tools that included "Smartphone maps, global positioning apps, social media, and WhatsApp."[29] The consensus was that social media facilitated migration (in the origin

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[25] K. Roth, "The Refugee Crisis That Isn't," *Huffington Post*, 3 September 2015, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/kenneth-roth/the-refugee-crisis-that-isnt_b_8079798.html

[26] C. Caryl, "If You Think Europe Has a Refugee Crisis, You're Not Looking Hard Enough," *Foreign Policy*, 2 February 2016, http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/02/the-weakest-links-syria-refugees-migrants-crisis-data-visualization/

[27] For examples of how this was reported/debated in British media see: J. O'Malley, "Surprised that Syrian Refugees have Smartphones? Sorry to Break This to You, But You're an Idiot," *The Independent*, 7 September 2015, https://bit.ly/35vymBH; A. Byrne and E. Solomon, "Refugees Seek Help from Social Media," *Financial Times*, 11 September 2015, https://www.ft.com/content/09625b90-56fc-11e5-a28b-50226830d644; and R. Barrell, "Refugees Can Have Smartphones — Get Over It!" *Metro*, 14 July 2017, http://metro.co.uk/2017/07/14/refugees-can-have-smartphones-get-over-it-6770816/

[28] D. McLaughlin, "Mass Migration Guided by Mobiles and Social Media," *Irish Times*, 9 September 2015, https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/mass-migration-guided-by-mobiles-and-social-media-1.2344662

[29] M. Brunwasser, "A 21st-Century Migrant's Essentials: Food, Shelter, Smartphone," *New York Times*, 25 August 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/26/world/europe/a-21st-century-migrants-checklist-water-shelter-smartphone.html

country), but also facilitated the irregular journey itself. It also kept migrants safe in the process. Social media had become a "migrant essential."[30]

Much of the early writing and analysis on the use of digital media tended to focus narrowly on Syrian refugees. As migratory routes continue to change, this literature can appear insufficient in serving as a useful gauge for assessing social media use by people on the move in different contexts, such as North Africa.

During the "refugee crisis" that started in 2015, refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants on the Balkan route were generally visible and reachable, which meant that journalists and researchers could easily communicate with their subjects. Journalists often travelled on foot alongside migrants, a style of reporting that often does not exist in other migration contexts because of the distances, smuggling methods, and security threats involved.[31] One of the implications of this is that much of the early writing and analysis on the use of digital media tended to focus narrowly on Syrian refugees. As migratory routes continue to change, this literature can appear insufficient in serving as a useful gauge for assessing social media use by people on the move in different contexts, such as North Africa.

The reports that do exist about social media use elsewhere suggest the phenomenon fluctuates according to different factors such as location, and that the "refugee crisis" is not a single homogenous phenomenon straddling the Mediterranean. Social media use varies widely around the Mediterranean, as well as North Africa, depending on everything from the nationality, gender, and age of the migrant to the local migratory risks and financial/logistical *modus operandi* of smuggling/trafficking networks. There are scattered insights into this in the literature. In 2015, a reporter found that no one at a Sicilian processing centre "had a cellphone or had been able to contact relatives in Africa" (as opposed to Syrians who "often travelled with smartphones").[32] Another journalist recounted time spent in the Sicilian town of Augusta with teenagers, "most … from West Africa" as well as "smaller groups from Egypt and Bangladesh," who:

> Pooled their money to buy cheap smartphones, and … chatted on Facebook with friends and family back in their home countries, and posted photos of themselves pretending to buy expensive clothes and electronic goods in the shops on Augusta's main street.[33]

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[30] M. Brunwasser, "A 21st-Century Migrant's Essentials: Food, Shelter, Smartphone," *New York Times*, 25 August 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/26/world/europe/a-21st-century-migrants-checklist-water-shelter-smartphone.html

[31] One exception might be in northern Morocco, where for instance journalists have often visited refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants staying in the forests of Nador close to the Spanish colonial enclave, Melilia. See S. Saez, "Melilla: No Asylum for Black Men," *Deutsche Welle,* 16 November 2017, http://www.dw.com/en/melilla-no-asylum-for-black-men/a-41404179.

[32] J. Yardley, "Displaced Again and Again, Some African Migrants Had No Plan to Land in Italy," *New York Times*, 1 May 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/02/world/europe/displaced-again-and-again-some-african-migrants-had-no-plan-to-land-in-italy.html

[33] D. Trilling, "From Africa to Kent: Following in the Footsteps of Migrants," *New Statesman*, 11 December 2014, https://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2014/12/africa-kent-following-footsteps-migrants

UNHCR, meanwhile, has found that Syrians and Afghans using the same migratory route from Turkey to Greece and the Balkans use Facebook and other apps in different ways, and that their reliance on and trust of smuggling networks through social media also varies. For example, UNHCR found that while Syrians might have been better-informed about the "geography of getting to Europe" than they were about the realities of a new life in Europe, Afghans were less-informed in general.[34] Afghans might be more likely to trust a smuggler because they speak their language and are generally regarded within Afghan communities as being more trustworthy than NGOs, whereas Syrians have more access to smartphones and the internet and therefore have different sources of information—good and bad—at their fingertips.[35]

Journalists have reported that refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants passing through the Central Mediterranean appear to use social media (and carry smartphones) less frequently than those on the move elsewhere. Migration experts have noted how the use of social media in origin, transit, and destination countries remains "uneven," depending on a range of factors such as age, gender, nationality, and basic socio-economics back home—which have led to the emergence of "digital divides"—while differing smuggling *modus operandi* on a given route leads to contrasting uses of social media.

Other bodies have also produced studies investigating these differences.[36] According to a recent European Commission (EC) report on West African migration, people from this region tend to "rely on word-of-mouth communication to devise and implement migration plans" because "people smugglers play a diminished role in motivating migration journeys." It found that communication from an origin country tends to depend on encouragement from diaspora networks, peer pressure from local networks, or the presentation of opportunity by a recruitment agent, broker, or smuggler. In contrast to the activities reported by some of the other populations covered in this GDP report—particularly people fleeing Syria—the EC report found that few migrants from West Africa "actively searched for information online before migrating." Social media and ICTs were "more commonly used as channels of communications rather than platforms to gather information on migration," and their primary role was to "facilitate private communication between migrants, potential migrants, and their networks."[37]

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[34] UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "From a Refugee Perspective: Discourse of Arabic speaking and Afghan Refugees and Migrants on Social Media from March to December 2016," April 2017, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/58018

[35] UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "From a Refugee Perspective: Discourse of Arabic speaking and Afghan Refugees and Migrants on Social Media from March to December 2016," April 2017, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/58018

[36] See: European Commission, "A Study of the Communication Channels Used by Migrants and Asylum Seekers in Italy, with a Particular Focus on Online and Social Media," January 2018, http://www.statewatch.org/news/2018/jul/eu-com-migrant-info-channels-in-italy-study-6-18.pdf; European Commission, "How West African Migrants Engage with Migration Information en-route to Europe," September 2017, http://www.statewatch.org/news/2018/jul/eu-com-migrant-info-channels-west-african-migrants-en-route-to-europe-6-18.pdf

[37] European Commission, "How West African Migrants Engage with Migration Information en-route to Europe," September 2017, http://www.statewatch.org/news/2018/jul/eu-com-migrant-info-channels-west-african-migrants-en-route-to-europe-6-18.pdf

Clearly social media use by refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants is going to require closer examination to understand its variations, particularly its use during arrest, detention, and deportation, when migrants are often at their most vulnerable. Do people on the move in North Africa use social media platforms differently than those transiting Turkey? If so, how? How do platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp allow migrants to access information and conduct research, facilitate migration, and protect their families, their security, and their rights during migration? What limitations as well as opportunities are there for social media to assist people, including family members of migrants and asylum seekers, in the context of detention and deportation? And how do these technologies facilitate the work of people smugglers looking to profit from people's need or desire to reach Europe?

DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE ON THE MOVE

A 2016 Open University/France Médias Monde study is arguably one of the better attempts to address the gaps in the literature about social media use during irregular migration. Through analysis of journalistic reporting, academic literature, ethnographic interviews with Syrian and Iraqi refugees who reached Europe, as well as social network analysis techniques, the study provides a comprehensive look at what social media tools refugees access during migration and how they use them, as well as the risks of social media (largely because of surveillance and migration management by state and EU actors).

The Open University study soberly reports that for people on the move today, the "digital infrastructure is as important as the physical infrastructures of roads, railways, sea crossings and the borders controlling the free movement of people." It is a vital infrastructure that "comprises a multitude of technologies and sources: mobile apps, websites, messaging and phone calling platforms, social media, translation services and more."[38] There are generally three central tech tools used by refugees and migrants—GoogleMaps, WhatsApp, and Facebook—with each providing their own tailored functions and benefits.[39] While it may be obvious how migrants use GoogleMaps, the analyses of WhatsApp and Facebook usage provide a number of important insights.

(i) WhatsApp: In transit, WhatsApp is often extremely popular for communication among small groups as it is perceived to be private and it is easy to send pictures, despite the fact that it requires an internet connection or potentially costly mobile data.[40] It might be used to

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[38] M. Gillespie et al., *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys: Smartphones and Social Media Networks*, Open University/France Médias Monde, 13 May 2016.
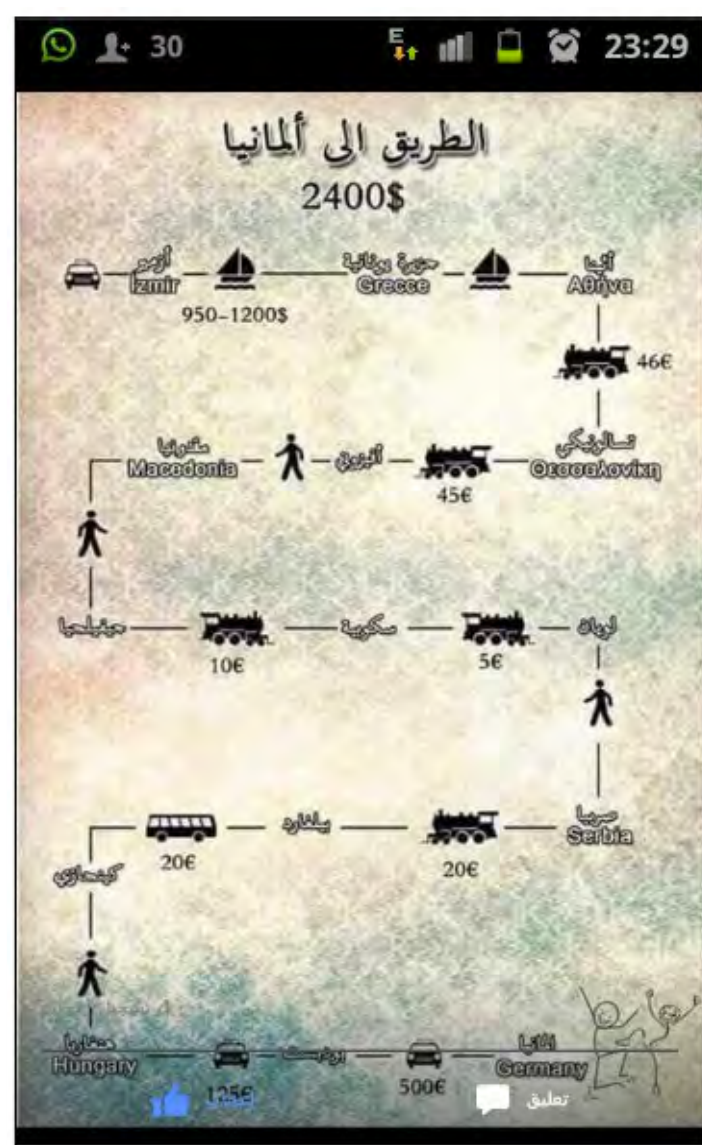
[39] M. Gillespie et al., *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys: Smartphones and Social Media Networks*, Open University/France Médias Monde, 13 May 2016.

[40] M. Gillespie et al., *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys: Smartphones and Social Media Networks*, Open University/France Médias Monde, 13 May 2016.

connect with smugglers or update friends, family, and acquaintances about a risk or incident on a particular route. Because of the widely held notion that it is secure, WhatsApp has been particularly attractive for people on the move because they believe that it diminishes the risk of surveillance.[41] There is plenty of evidence of both smugglers and refugees using WhatsApp as either an information or advertising tool regarding routes towards desired destinations. Figure 2, an advert shared amongst Syrians on the Balkan route, is ostensibly a simplified map of the route from Turkey to Germany, but exhibits a great deal of attention to detail—the changing currencies required to pay smugglers, which change from dollars to euros at one point; and European place-names carefully translated into Arabic in order to avoid mix-ups. This is an example of "meme-ification" of social media during migration.

 (ii) Facebook: Facebook provides a number of functions to the migrant: one can gather information through Pages or contacts via the Messenger app, easily stay in contact with family and friends during migration, or publish information (for example a photo after arrival in Europe). Anecdotally, more tech-savvy refugees may tend to prefer WhatsApp over Facebook Messenger for interpersonal or group communications because it is perceived to be more secure. Similarly, there are security concerns about Open (versus Closed) Facebook groups in that many refugees will not use open groups to share information because "they believe them to be too public and monitored by organisations that would be harmful to them."[42] Facebook users might mitigate those risks by using aliases on Facebook or restricting the amount of personal information they share

"The road to Germany," a WhatsApp-based 'meme' directing Syrian refugees about the various steps to make it to a destination country. (M. Gillespie et al, Mapping Refugee Media Journeys: Smartphones and Social Media Networks, Open University/France Médias Monde, 13 May 2016, p.47.)

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[41] There are many indications that WhatsApp encryption is compromised. See, for instance, Z. Doffman, "New WhatsApp Warning: Security Flaw Confirmed—1 Billion Users Told Update Apps Now," Forbes, 3 October 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/zakdoffman/2019/10/03/new-whatsapp-warning-security-flaw-confirmed1-billion-users-told-update-apps-now/#239040e42582

[42] M. Gillespie et al., *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys: Smartphones and Social Media Networks*, Open University/France Médias Monde, 13 May 2016.

online. Importantly, even though social media groups can be useful for "gathering important information related to the potential issues faced while crossing."[43] [NB: Close observers of this phenomenon told the GDP that "Infiltration of closed groups is a huge problem. At the end of the day a human chooses who will join a group, and social engineering is a well-understood and used technique of infiltrating closed Facebook (and WhatsApp) groups."[44]

It might be argued then that Facebook serves more as an information source, and provides that function to both prospective migrants and migrants in transit, as well as migrants newly arrived in a host country looking for information about integration and government services. Facebook also, obviously, connects migrants with smuggling networks—whether as a "gateway" that allows smugglers to post a contact-number and then conduct business-end chatter over secure ICT,[45] or as a kind of travel agency kitted-out with everything from customer reviews to detailed travel guides.

> "Digital infrastructure is as important as the physical infrastructures of roads, railways, sea crossings and the borders controlling the free movement of people."

Between March and December 2016, a project initially led by UNHCR monitored Facebook use by Afghan refugees and migrants, Arabic-speaking refugees and migrants, as well as the smuggling networks directing advertising at them. The "From a Refugee Perspective" project involved a research team of Pashtu, Dari, and Arabic speakers making use of Social Media Monitoring (SMM) techniques—including netnography—to monitor Facebook closely. The project illustrated just how inventive smugglers can be, both with services rendered and half-truths told, whether through self-styled "asylum and immigration consultants" available to answer the would-be traveller's questions; a trend of several Facebook profiles posing as "satisfied clients" in order to persuade certain users to employ a particular smuggler; or smuggling pages using logos of international organisations—including UNHCR—to promote their "respectability."[46] In one shocking example found on Facebook in September 2016, an advertisement targeting Afghan refugees and migrants promoted an e-book "that [the smuggler] claimed could be purchased online with a credit card and downloaded" and that, according to the purported publisher, "covered all aspects of asylum procedures under UNHCR rules."[47]

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[43] M. Gillespie et al., *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys: Smartphones and Social Media Networks*, Open University/France Médias Monde, 13 May 2016.

[44] T. Geber (tin.fyi), Correspondence with Michael Flynn (Global Detention Project), 13 December 2019.

[45] B. Frouws et al, "Getting to Europe the 'WhatAapp' Way: The Use of ICT in Contemporary Mixed Migration Flows to Europe," *Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat Briefing Paper*, June 2016, http://www.regionalmms.org/images/briefing/Social_Media_in_Mixed_Migration.pdf

[46] UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "From a Refugee Perspective: Discourse of Arabic Speaking and Afghan Refugees and Migrants on Social Media from March to December 2016," April 2017, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/58018

[47] UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "From a Refugee Perspective: Discourse of Arabic Speaking and Afghan Refugees and Migrants on Social Media from March to December 2016," April 2017, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/58018

Just as social media can facilitate migration through social or community ties online or offline, it can also facilitate the "criminal" (illegal, irregular, informal) aspects of it. There have been many attempts to better understand how social media facilitates criminal migration enterprises, although—certainly in terms of migration towards the EU—such research again tends to focus on the Aegean (Turkey-Greece) route rather than transit migration from West, and through North, Africa. Tied to interpretations of "crisis," this has also created a blanket analysis which states that social media facilitates criminal activities of smugglers and human traffickers without properly understanding the localised ways in which social media is used by people on the move. That same analysis also precludes discussion of whether or not social media, ICTs, and online communication can assist in harm-reduction in cases of detention.

THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN MIGRATION CONTROL

According to UNHCR, the findings of "From a Refugee Perspective" garnered attention and interest from a range of actors, before eventually being taken over by the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) in 2017.[48] This resulted in the research arguably morphing into something else entirely. EASO enlisted a dedicated three-member team in Malta to produce weekly SMM reports of Arabic, Pashtu/Dari, and Tigrinya social media activity related to "what smugglers are advertising and also what communities are saying," on behalf of a range of stakeholders including "law enforcement agencies of member states, asylum agencies, immigration agencies."[49]

This highlights a critical aspect of the use of digital tools by migrants and refuges: that security and law enforcement agencies increasingly monitor migration trends via social media. EASO, EU countries, and Frontex have all indicated an interest in monitoring open sources to inform their respective mandates. This is an important consideration for human rights practitioners and other actors considering how best to harness new technologies. With INGOs and UN agencies also increasingly interested in data collection and tech solutions to displacement, some have warned that the "collection of data, especially when it involves biometrics, raises important confidentiality and security issues" because of the risks of hacking, authoritarian states getting hold of that data, or fraud.[50]

Much of the official interest in social media and ICT use has come from border management agencies—not least the EU's border agency, Frontex—who arguably view social media as a means to monitor and/or disrupt smuggling activities and irregular migration at and within Europe's external borders. At the 2017 European Day for Border Guards (ED4BG), Frontex

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[48] UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "From a Refugee Perspective: Discourse of Arabic Speaking and Afghan Refugees and Migrants on Social Media from March to December 2016," April 2017, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/58018

[49] Anis Cassar (European Asylum Support Office), Skype conversation with Tom Rollins (Global Detention Project), 19 March 2018.

[50] J. Crisp, "Beware the Notion That Better Data Lead to Better Outcomes for Refugees and Migrants," *Chatham House,* 9 March 2018, https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/beware-notion-better-data-lead-better-outcomes-refugees-and-migrants#

invited industry specialists and researchers from the European border guard community to discuss a range of topics including the "utilisation of new sources of information (e.g. online news, social media) for intelligence gathering and situational awareness,"[51] while Frontex has also set its sights on social media because it is "used by smuggling networks to advertise their services and by migrants themselves to gather information about the journey ahead and to contact friends and relatives."[52] The agency's 2017 programming documents suggest that social media monitoring forms, or will form, part of EUROSUR, the EU's border management information-exchange hub, through the use of "high quality media monitoring products" designed to support Frontex's roles "related to swift information exchange and early warning mechanisms."[53]

In 2018, the European Commission launched a border control research initiative that aims to integrate monitoring of refugees' digital media with other high-tech surveillance tools. Called FOLDOUT ("Through-foliage detection, including in the outermost regions of the EU"), the research initiative has reportedly received eight million EUR financing from the EU and is headed by the Austrian Institute of Technology with involvement from the French military firm Thales and border police forces from Bulgaria, Finland, Lithuania and Poland. The aim is to assist border control forces in densely wooded areas, with the key target being areas that border Turkey, by integrating a range of tools and activities—from cell phone monitoring and motion detectors to geostationary "stratospheric platforms"—into a "systems of systems" in which all "incoming information will be processed and coordinated in a situation centre using algorithms "based on machine learning."[54]

> **Security and law enforcement agencies increasingly monitor migration trends via social media. EASO, EU countries, and Frontex have all indicated an interest in monitoring open sources to inform their respective mandates.**

Calls to crack down on social media don't just come from security officials. With INGOs and UN agencies becoming more involved in both monitoring ecosystems of information related to migratory intentions and irregular migration—and dissuading would-be migrants from setting out in the first place—there can sometimes exist an uneasy relationship between awareness-raising amongst migrant populations and national or international (e.g. EU-level) migration management objectives. The IOM, in particular, has expressed an interest in smuggling and irregular migration prevention by closing down Facebook pages. An IOM spokesperson claimed that major social media channels were looking on as their platforms were monopolised by smugglers enticing migrants from West Africa across the sea. "We

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[51] Frontex, "Invitation for Industry to Exhibit at ED4BG 2017," https://frontex.europa.eu/research/invitations/invitation-for-industry-to-exhibit-at-ed4bg-2017-6Jecl8

[52] Frontex, "Profiting from Misery - How Smugglers Bring People to Europe," https://bit.ly/36IH0wM

[53] Frontex, "Programming document 2017-2019," https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Key_Documents/Programming_Document/2017/Programme_of_work_2017.pdf

[54] European Commission, "Through-Foliage Detection, Including in the Outermost Regions of the EU," https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/787021/de. See also: M. Monroy, "Border with Turkey: EU Commission Wants to Track Down Refugees with Foliage Detection," *Security Architectures and Police Collaboration in the EU*, 8 December 2019, https://digit.site36.net/2019/12/08/border-with-turkey-eu-commission-wants-to-track-down-refugees-with-foliage-detection/

really… ask social media companies to step up and behave in a responsible way when people are being lured to deaths, to their torture," IOM's Leonard Doyle argued, claiming that social media companies were providing a "turbo-charged communications channel to criminals, to smugglers, to traffickers, to exploiters."[55] Doyle suggested that Facebook had to do more to police pages seen to be advertising smugglers' wares online, and criticised the widespread availability of the Free Basics function that gives phones access to Facebook without the use of the Internet.

CRISIS SOLVING THROUGH TECH?

On the other side of the arena, however, there has been an "explosion of creativity and innovation from tech entrepreneurs aimed at making life better for refugees."[56] From 2015 onwards, the new focus on social media and migration precipitated what has been called a "tech turn,"[57] itself a reflection of unprecedented interest in the migration-technology nexus, in which a variety of tools have been developed to harness digital communications to assist migrants and refugees in need. This has involved everyone from grass-roots European "No Borders" activists to professional humanitarian technologists working for UN agencies and other international organisations. Migration-focused "hackathons" have contributed to the development of a multitude of apps and online services.[58] In October and December 2015 for example, London hosted two "Techfugees" hackathons designed to bring together tech engineers, software developers, NGOs, and others from the "incredibly creative tech community with the organisations dealing with the European Refugee crisis [sic]."[59] Various initiatives and networks can be traced back to these events. Meanwhile, industry giants have also stepped in: In 2015, Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg announced plans to provide eased internet access to Syrians residing in Jordanian refugee camps through its Internet.org (later, Free Basics) initiative.[60]

Surveying this "digital humanitarianism," Benton and Glennie found a range of tech tools both new and old that could assist migrants before and during migration, as well as throughout integration in a new host country within Europe. Refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants could, for example:

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[55] S. Nebehay, "U.N. Calls on Social Media Giants to Control Platforms Used to Lure African Migrants," *Reuters*, 8 December 2017, https://reut.rs/2sEtb3S

[56] M. Benton and A. Glennie, "There's Not Always an App for That: How Tech Could Help Refugees More," *Refugees Deeply*, 20 October 2016, https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/community/2016/10/20/theres-not-always-an-app-for-that-how-tech-could-help-refugees-more

[57] Migration Policy Institute, "The Tech Turn in Refugee Protection and Integration: New Solutions or Hot Air?" Webinar, 11 May 2017, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/events/tech-turn-refugee-protection-and-integration-new-solutions-or-hot-air

[58] In mid-April, for example, Geneva hosted a "Hack4Good" event designed to "empower children to take control of their own protection and get better access to services along their migration journeys." See: Hack4Good, "The Event," http://hack4good.eventcreate.com/

[59] Techfugees, "The Techfugees Followup Conference, London – December 2nd 2015," https://techfugees.com/events/the-techfugees-followup-conference-london-december-2nd-2015/

[60] M. Specia, "Facebook To Give Free Internet To Refugees in U.N. Camps," *Mashable*, 28 September 2015, https://mashable.com/2015/09/28/facebook-refugee-camp-internet/#L5lwEpTO.uqX

A poster for the ICRC's "Trace the Face" initiative. (Trace the Face Facebook Page)

- Plan routes through south-east Europe with the help of the InfoAid app;
- Share advice about safety, travel routes, and developing situations on national borders through cross-platform ICTs including WhatsApp and Viber;
- Better plan the finer points of journeys, locate meeting-points, and alert rescuers at sea through geographic information systems (GIS) and the Global Positioning System (GPS);
- Collectively access internet services through a portable device like MeshPoint;
- Try to locate family and/or friends who had gone missing during migration through the Trace the Face initiative from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).[61]

These kinds of considerations have helped cause a tidal wave of new digital initiatives since the start of the "refugee crisis." And yet laudable as this wave of "digital humanitarianism" has been in some cases, there appears to have been a relative lack of organised innovation (particularly in assisting new arrivals during integration) and many designs have not been long-term in scope or were designed without proper input from migrants and refugees so as to "improve collective understanding of what is feasible, legal, and has the greatest potential

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[61] M. Benton and A. Glennie (2016), "Digital Humanitarianism: How Tech Entrepreneurs are Supporting Refugee Integration," Transatlantic Council on Migration/Migration Policy Institute.

to improve refugees' lives."[62] This has led to a scourge of what some analysts term "digital litter," out-dated or stagnant online tools whose continued existence imperils the well-being of migrants and refugees who rely on them to make crucial migration decisions.

Writes Benton: "The digital hangover that emerged from the sense of crisis—especially the lingering effects of dormant initiatives whose founders have now moved onto other things—has been largely ignored. Cleaning up this digital litter could be an easy fix, but it is unclear whose job it is, and requires the time and resources of actors driven by outcome, not ego. There are also lessons for future migration crises, not least about the importance of tying new initiatives to existing policies and processes to ensure sustainability."[63]

Another expert, Tin Geber, wrote in 2016 that hackathons had "become a veritable business model for globe-spanning organisations." He added: "There are countless apps, platforms and digital projects aimed at refugees, and so many of them are trying to solve the same problem again and again, in a confoundingly earnest series of attempts to processually fix systemic problems. … The main issue here, the one we don't want to admit, is that refugees don't need apps. In my talks to humanitarians, from big international organisations that make sure that each day refugees have a clean bed and a warm shower, to the volunteer community organisers who purchase mobile data access points out of pocket so that people stranded at train stations can WhatsApp their loved ones, there is only one, single, main issue that needs solving with tech: access."[64]

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[62] M. Benton and A. Glennie (2016), "Digital Humanitarianism: How Tech Entrepreneurs are Supporting Refugee Integration," Transatlantic Council on Migration/Migration Policy Institute.

[63] M. Benton, "Digital Litter: The Downside of Using Technology to Help Refugees," *Migration Policy Institute*, 20 June 2019, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/digital-litter-downside-using-technology-help-refugees

[64] T. Geber, "Hackathons and Refugees: We Can Do Better," *The Engine Room,* 21 September 2016, https://www.theengineroom.org/hackathons-and-refugees-we-can-do-better/

Figure 2: an overview of some of the various apps, online resources, and social media channels created in recent years, offering tech "solutions" to issues facing displaced and migrant populations.

Alarmphone/Watch the Med http://www.watchthemed.net/	Born out of a range of European/Euro-Mediterranean activist networks before 2015, Alarmphone is ostensibly a 24-hour phone-line for migrants in distress at sea to call–an alarm, not a rescue line, as the site is keen to stress. Staff maintain shifts to monitor developments at sea, and field calls from migrants in distress. Alarmphone's network includes refugees and migrants either as staff, key informants, or shift workers. It also uses physical (print) awareness-raising on top of an online presence that, for example through Facebook, publishes audio/visual materials in various languages including French, Arabic, West African, and Horn of Africa languages.
Ankommen ankommenapp.de/	An Android/iOS app actually designed by the German government for newly arrived refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants to help navigate the arrival, asylum, and integration process. It is available in Arabic, English, Farsi, French, and German, and does not require an internet connection. The app developers have said Ankommen will be regularly updated, although this has sometimes resulted in a top-down (rather than human-centred design) approach, such as when the social customs section was updated with information about gender equality in the wake of the Cologne attacks on New Year's Eve 2016.
EyeCloud	A sign that international organisations have realised the potential of tech in assistance and service provision, UNHCR launched this programme (with partners Cairo Amman Bank and IrisGuard) in January 2016 to deliver financial assistance to Syrian refugees in various locations across Jordan "through banking and biometric technology based exclusively on UNHCR biometric registration data." Many experts, however, are deeply concerned that while the use of biometric data can have an immense impact on efficiency, it almost never takes into consideration the privacy rights of refugees. Even more disconcerting, large corporations have sought to use refugee processing for testing uses of biometric data because consent is not seen as relevant.[65]

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[65] T. Geber (tin.fyi), Correspondence with Michael Flynn (Global Detention Project), 13 December 2019.

Gherbtna http://8rbtna.com/	Created by Syrian refugee Mojahed al-Akil, Arabic-language app and site Gherbtna (meaning "our exile") targets Syrians in Turkey with information on everything from news from within Syria, job offers, registration requirements for Syrian students in local universities, or regulations regarding residency documents. Designed by and for refugees, Gherbtna provides some memorable lessons about the importance of human-centred design in the refugee/tech world as opposed to the string of outdated or since defunct open-source websites developed top-down since the advent of the "refugee crisis."
Hababy www.alessandrocrimi.com/hababy/	Riffing/punning off the Arabic word for "sweetheart" or "baby," Hababy is a free and multilingual web app for prenatal and postnatal care for refugee women. It contains specific information based on symptoms, provides medication advice, and can give targeted information based on the country where the refugee is present. There is a note on the website warning that the app may be out-dated (it was last updated in 2016), a reminder that apps like this require constant, attentive updates to stay relevant and responsible.
ICRC Trace the Face https://familylinks.icrc.org/europe/en/Pages/search-persons.aspx	Every year, the Red Cross is contacted by hundreds of families who have lost contact with relatives in or on their way to Europe. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) developed this online resource to help people on the move and their relatives locate missing loved-ones. People can share their photos on the website, which is then "printed on posters and hung up at asylum centers, train stations, at border crossings, etc. in Europe," thereby combining online and real-world sharing of information.
IFRC Virtual Volunteer http://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/what-we-do/community-engagement/virtual-volunteer/	A one-stop information resource for refugees in Greece, Italy, Sweden (as well as Filipino nationals who are overseas) that was supported by IBM, Swedish Red Cross, Swiss Confederation and European Union Humanitarian Aid. The app "helps people migrating access reliable and practical information and support wherever they are," like nearby services, medical advice, and basic phrases in the local language. The app is based on the notion that "information is aid."

InfoAid http://appsforrefugees.com/infoaid/	An app developed by Hungarian volunteers at the height of the "refugee crisis," it provides news reports focused on migratory/border developments in Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Croatia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Slovenia. Updates tended to rely on the https://newsthatmoves.org/ website (no longer active). Clearly, because of its historical/geographical focus, the app is now very outdated and doesn't appear to have been updated for some time. A 22 March 2017 Facebook post stated that the app was being "rehauled" and would hopefully be back in "new and improved form" soon (no date specified).
Refugees Welcome http://www.fluechtlinge-willkommen.de/	One of several Airbnb-style initiatives aimed at refugees and migrants in Europe. Based in Germany (with offices in Berlin, Hamburg, Leipzig, and Munich, as well as an international network), the website connects refugees and migrants with flat-shares across the country. The German site has matched 420 people across Germany, while the international site (Refugees Welcome International) has matched 1,136 refugees.
Welcome to Europe (W2EU) http://w2eu.info/	W2EU is a web-based information service for refugees and migrants coming to Europe, and is available in Arabic, English, Farsi, and French. Its resources are divided by theme (e.g. Safety at Sea, Dublin III, and Regularisation) but are also broken down country-by-country.
Refunite http://refunite.org/	Another resource aiming to connect refugee families with missing loved-ones. The site has helped create (in its own words) a "user friendly, online global database of over 600,000 profiles" and has used networking/partnerships to expand its reach. Its partnership with Ericcson and various mobile network operators, as well as Facebook's Free Basics service, has made access to Refunite's platform free in 17 countries: Kenya, Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), South Africa, Niger, Rwanda, Liberia, Iraq, Pakistan, the Philippines, Malawi, Nigeria, the Republic of Congo, Algeria, Chad, Jordan, and Ghana.

PART II: ON THE GROUND

THE NORTH AFRICAN MIGRATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS CONTEXT

Public understanding of the hazards people face transiting North Africa during their migration journeys has arguably never been higher. News outlets are frequently dominated by reports about everything from the horrors faced by migrants in smuggling vessels plying Mediterranean waters to the involvement of corrupt officials in trafficking networks or the inhuman conditions of detention centres. Although migrants and refugees face severe and life-threatening situations across the region, from Egypt to Morocco, the main focus of European attention has been Libya, where the inhuman treatment people often suffer at the hands of officials and non-state actors alike has been well documented.[66] Political instability and violence, pervasive lawlessness and corruption, and apparent EU acquiescence in partnering with people accused of committing grave abuses have conspired to turn transit migration in Libya into a "human rights crisis," as the UN human rights commissioner has exclaimed.[67]

But this increased public awareness is also tempered by numerous misconceptions. For instance, although people arriving in Europe via Libya are typically called "economic migrants," such a characterisation masks the extreme vulnerabilities faced by particular groups. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), for instance, has warned about the high numbers of unaccompanied minors transiting Libya and their vulnerability to abuse. The IOM estimates that nearly 10 percent of the more than 400,000 migrants in Libya are children, including a staggering 14,000 unaccompanied children.[68] Nigerian women are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking, and the irregular movements of Nigerian migrants are sometimes facilitated by brutal, coercive Nigerian and Sicilian organised crime networks.[69]

European migration management policies have aggravated protection problems. Given Libya's position as a key transit country for those seeking to enter Europe, the EU and its

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[66] United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "Detained and Dehumanised: Report on Human Rights Abuse against Migrants in Libya," 13 December 2016, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/LY/DetainedAndDehumanised_en.pdf

[67] United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "UN Report Urges End to Inhuman Detention of Migrants in Libya," http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21023&LangID=E

[68] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "36,000 Child Migrants in Libya in Need of Assistance – IOM and UNICEF," 18 December 2017, https://www.unicef.org/media/media_102341.html

[69] N. Elbagir, "Human Trafficking in Nigeria: "Don't Struggle if You're Raped,"" *CNN News,* 27 February 2018, https://edition.cnn.com/2018/02/27/africa/nigeria-migrant-smugglers-intl/index.html

A member of an "Anti-Illegal Immigration" force stands guard during a UN visit to the Abu Saleem detentyion centre in Tripoli, Libya, 19 May 2016. (Reuters / Ismail Zetouni)

member states have long seen the country as a vital target for externalisation policies designed to reduce migratory flows across the Central Mediterranean. Since 2015-2016 in particular, the EU and individual member states have sought to work closely with Libyan authorities to outsource search-and-rescue (SAR) and in some cases to support militias that operate detention facilities.[70] UN reports have warned about the consequences of an EU agreement outsourcing SAR to the Libyan coastguard and, in November 2017, Human Rights Watch (HRW) called on the Libyan authorities to "end the torture, forced labour, and sexual violence that has been the lot of detained migrants for years."[71]

Although it received much less attention, Egypt has also witnessed mixed migration flows for many years. While asylum seekers (mostly from Eritrea and Sudan) have used Egypt as a transit-point towards Israel or Libya, a wave of departures by Syrians and Palestinian refugees from Syria beginning in summer 2013 expanded a route directly from Egypt's north coast and a dynamic smuggling infrastructure developed alongside it. Today, Syrians have essentially stopped migrating from Egypt—either from the north coast or across the border, into Libya—although INGOs and community activists have observed a significant number of Syrians crossing from Sudan into Egypt in the hope of accessing work, family reunification, and resettlement opportunities.[72] Other nationalities have instead taken their place, or been diverted to Libya.

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[70] Global Detention Project (GDP), "Immigration Detention in Libya: 'A Human Rights Crisis,'" August 2018, https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/africa/libya

[71] Human Rights Watch (HRW), "Libya: End 'Horrific' Abuse of Detained Migrants," 14 December 2016, https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/14/libya-end-horrific-abuse-detained-migrants

[72] M. Mahmoud, "Syrians Take Lethal Desert Road to Egypt: "We Went Through Death to Live,"" *Middle East Eye,* 8 March 2017, https://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/syrians-entering-egypt-through-borders-sudan-1289316019

Physical Fences and Digital Divides: Final Report of the Global Detention Project Special Investigation into the Uses of Electronic Media in Today's Migration Journeys

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Egypt is sometimes an "overlooked player in trans-Mediterranean smuggling,"[73] but the EU has not ignored the situation in the country. Concerned about rising numbers of migrants attempting to reach Europe and a possible displacement of irregular routes in the Mediterranean, the EU has sought to work more closely with Egypt in halting flows from the north coast.[74] In 2016, Egypt passed landmark counter-smuggling legislation that criminalised people smuggling for the first time in Egyptian law.[75] The Egyptian government and its inter-ministerial migration body, the National Coordinating Committee for Combatting and Preventing Illegal Immigration (NCCPIM), present this legislation as proof of Egypt's expertise in, and commitment to, addressing migration. These claims, however, are contradicted by the severe lack of adequate SAR on the north coast, the country's punitive immigration detention practices (including arbitrary arrests, administrative detention without a time-limit, and *refoulement*), and the notoriously poor state of the human rights landscape in the country.[76]

Concerned about rising numbers of migrants attempting to reach Europe and a possible displacement of irregular routes in the Mediterranean, the EU has sought to work more closely with Egypt in halting flows from the north coast.

In September 2018, European officials (including Donald Tusk and Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz) met with Egyptian counterparts in Cairo and then— later in the month—in New York. Migration was at the forefront of both meetings. Sebastian Kurz stated that Europe must "ensure that as few people as possible leave northern African countries for Europe," and that, "If they do, the situation should be dealt with as close to the African coast as possible."[77]

It is also important to highlight that EU policymakers have discussed creating reception centres in North African countries for processing asylum seekers. Although some people would presumably be successful in their asylum applications and be granted entry to an EU country if such a system were created, these proposals are part of EU efforts to externalise border controls and shift responsibility for the caring of migrants and refugees. Similar ideas, in fact, have been on the agenda for decades, going back at least to the early 1990s, when the Tony Blair government in the United Kingdom suggested establishing "transit processing

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[73] Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, "Integrated Responses to Human Smuggling from the Horn of Africa to Europe," May 2017, http://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/global-initiative-human-smuggling-from-the-horn-of-africa-may-2017-web.pdf

[74] Global Detention Project, "Immigration Detention in Egypt: Military Tribunals, Human Rights Abuses, Abysmal Conditions, and EU Partner," September 2018, https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/africa/egypt

[75] M. al-Kashef and T. Rollins, "Egypt's Anti-Smuggling bill: New Criminals, Old Victims," *Mada Masr*, 19 October 2016, https://www.madamasr.com/en/2016/10/19/feature/politics/egypts-anti-smuggling-bill-new-criminals-old-victims/

[76] NCCPIM representatives did not respond to several interview requests before, during, and after the GDP researcher's trip to Egypt.

[77] L. Cook, "EU Looks to Egypt, Africa for Help with Migrant Challenge," *Associated Press*, 20 September 2018, https://apnews.com/d058f70d8aab401fa6f1d4bd2a47561f

centres" outside the EU.[78] To date, however, there has been little interest among North African countries in hosting such centres.[79]

HOW DO MIGRANTS IN NORTH AFRICA USE SOCIAL MEDIA?

In 2018, the lead investigator for this report travelled to Egypt and Sicily to speak with refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants about how social media and other tech were employed during their migration journeys through North Africa and towards Europe. What follows are the lessons learned from these on-the-ground investigations. The material presented here challenges some of our current assumptions about the relationship between digital media and migration, including oft-repeated claims that social media can serve as an "awareness-raising" tool to help limit migration flows.

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Al-Rayih remembered the sea at midnight, and the fear of drowning. He vowed to never try his luck in the Mediterranean again.

A Sudanese asylum seeker originally from Darfur, Al-Rayih fled to Egypt in the hope of receiving protection from UNHCR and ultimately resettlement for himself and his young family. But long waiting times and a perception that UNHCR wasn't doing enough for Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers pushed him towards the Mediterranean—a journey he would attempt twice. Before setting off, Al-Rayih learned about the trip from his community rather than researching online.

> Before I came to Egypt, my use of social media was very limited. At that time we only used social media socially—within the community—and it didn't have any connections with migration, or connecting to people who were smuggling or being smuggled.

Al-Rayih also says that social media played little or no part in his decision to seek asylum or in his route to finding a smuggler.

> Even if you trust someone who took the journey before and who is now outside Egypt—maybe in Europe—then he'll tell you, 'Don't try this migration. It's dangerous.' He's seen what he's seen, and so he tells people not to follow.

Al-Rayih had little awareness of what a trip from Egypt might actually involve other than what he'd heard from friends and smugglers' go-betweens (*simasra*—literally, brokers) who are, for obvious reasons, often viewed as untrustworthy. Still, Al-Rayih was horrified by what he experienced.

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[78] M. Flynn, "There and Back Again: On the Diffusion of Immigration Detention," *Journal on Migration and Human Security,* 2014, http://jmhs.cmsny.org/index.php/jmhs/article/view/31

[79] Global Detention Project, "Immigration Detention in Egypt: Military Tribunals, Human Rights Abuses, Abysmal Conditions, and EU Partner," September 2018, https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/africa/egypt

The first time, we were at sea for 13 days just going around in circles, cruising around. We didn't know at the time that that was what was happening, but the smugglers were keeping us waiting at sea so they could wait for other groups to join the boat. They lied to us and said things like, 'We're close to Italy,' and 'We'll reach Europe soon.' In that time, we ran out of food and fuel for the ship—even the water on-board finished—so that we were just waiting for death.

After 13 days at sea, Al-Rayih's boat was apprehended by the Egyptian authorities and towed back to Alexandria. The group were divided-up across several detention facilities, and Al-Rayih was held for two weeks.

We spent 14 days moving from prison to prison before we were released. When we were released, UNHCR didn't help us at all, though. We were released and they just told us, 'Go.' Afterwards I felt that there was no protection from UNHCR [in Egypt] so I tried the journey again. It started all over again.

Al-Rayih's second attempted journey was more or less similar to the first—although this time the group were initially held in *takhzeen* (storage), what he called a "detention site used by the smugglers," without adequate food or water. One man drowned during a transfer from one vessel to the next.

It was then that he decided never to try the sea again.

"Telephones were forbidden": Why social media often has less impact than is commonly thought

What is striking about Al-Rayih's testimony is how it immediately distinguishes itself from testimonies about social media use elsewhere in the Mediterranean. Social media had played little or no role in his preparations for migration, and there was no possibility to mitigate risks or remain in contact with friends or loved-ones during the journey.

Telephones were forbidden. We weren't even allowed to take telephones with us because the smugglers control you. Phone calls weren't allowed, even. We had to hide our phones somewhere because if they saw you had one, they'd take it from you. And because we were trying to cross the sea, we covered our phones in plastic and hid them so as to protect them from the water.

That meant stowing-away telephones during periods of *takhzeen* on-shore as well as on the boat. Egyptian smugglers will often threaten violence against passengers seen to be disobedient or unruly, something that NGOs and activists in Alexandria have previously pointed to when suggesting that smugglers are known to employ practices "halfway between smuggling and human trafficking."[80]

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[80] T. Rollins, "Smugglers Threw Asylum Seekers into the Mediterranean," *Al-Monitor*, 18 September 2014, https://www.globalresearch.ca/smugglers-threw-asylum-seekers-into-mediterranean/5403554

Of course, another element limiting the use of social media, and its usefulness, is purely the fact of how far one has to travel between Egypt and Italy. Al-Rayih added that although the internet is important, once a boat reached international waters, "there was never any connection anyway. There wasn't even phone-signal to make calls on the boat. The smugglers only have the *thuraya* [satellite phone]."

Stories like Al-Rayih's are not uncommon. Aisha, a 37-year-old woman from Darfur, headed with her son for Egypt's north coast in 2016 in search of a "better life because our people don't have good educational prospects." She had been in Egypt for two years before that, but her plan was always to reach "Egypt to [then] go by the sea."

"That was the idea for my journey," she said. "Sudan, Egypt, and then Europe." And much like Al-Rayih, Aisha did not conduct research through online resources or social media before leaving for the north coast.

> I didn't have any idea about the dangers we'd face or how the route would be. But I asked the smugglers and they'd told me, 'The trip will be safe, the boat is very big and you'll reach Europe without a problem.' I didn't do any additional research or ask the community about it. I just decided to take the journey and believed what the smugglers told me.

There was a small decision-making process regarding whether to travel from Egypt or Libya but the information that Aisha discussed was very general, and the discussions she had were with smugglers in Egypt who would clearly have had a vested interest in persuading her to travel via Egypt as opposed to Libya.

> In Libya, they say, there's only a small boat and it's extremely dangerous. Most of the people die crossing the sea. So [the smugglers] told us that Egypt was a safer way to go.

Possession of phones was also forbidden during Aisha's trip.

> The smugglers told us to hand over our mobile phones; they said that we were already on the way to Europe and so we wouldn't need them. They also asked us if we had Egyptian money, but we didn't so we gave them our phones instead. Then we were transferred to the bigger boat—the ship.

By the time Aisha and her son were at sea, in late 2016, Egypt had started to actively crack down on smuggling networks and irregular departures. This partly explains what happened to her next: apprehended at sea, she was briefly detained before being deported back to Sudan. Aisha was not registered with UNHCR at the time, which meant that the Egyptian government was able to expedite her deportation. She later returned to Egypt irregularly, again with the help of smugglers whom she contacted through community networks. Importantly, Egyptian law prohibits deported persons from re-entry unless granted explicit

A Janjaweed militia walks through the marketplace in Geneina. (Wikimedia Commons)

permission by the Interior Ministry, and violations of this law can lead to imprisonment. Aisha nevertheless remains in Cairo, where she apparently intends to stay for the time being.[81]

If Aisha's journey seemed extreme, it pales when compared to the almost 10-year trail of border-crossings and deportations undertaken by 30-year-old Adam. An asylum seeker from Sudan who said he had well-founded fears of individual persecution by the notorious *Janjaweed* militia in his native region of Western Darfur, Adam had decided to migrate from Sudan to Egypt, and then to Israel in 2008. He was later deported from Israel to Uganda where, that first night in his hotel, armed men arrived and robbed him along with the other deportees. So began a journey across most of north-east Africa: Uganda to war-torn South Sudan, South Sudan to Sudan while hidden in the boot of a car, and onwards.

In South Sudan in particular, Adam said, possessing a smartphone exposed you to risks. He concealed his whenever possible. A smartphone was seen as a "sign of wealth," and everyone from militia-men and armed criminals to geared-up civilians were more than happy to relieve you of it.

> If you had a smartphone, they'd say that you had money. And instead of stopping to ask you about it, they'd shoot you before asking. That could happen to anyone. Everyone at that time in South Sudan had guns—even the civilians.

In Egypt, sources recounted how smugglers either stole or confiscated individuals' phones, prompting migrants to instead rely on community/social networks for contacts in smuggling networks in order to facilitate their migration. Based on the interviews conducted in Egypt, it seemed clear that social media was used less in general than what has been reported elsewhere in the Aegean, with more of an emphasis on social networks than digital networks.

This lesson was reinforced by West African migrants interviewed in Sicily, who down-played social media use—as well as the significance of apps like Facebook. On the whole, West African migrant communities have comparatively less financial resources and education than their counterparts from Syria or Sudan, and the majority engage in migration for economic reasons. This impacts social media use in a number of ways. West African migrants

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[81] Articles 31 & 39, Law of Entry and Residence. See also, Global Detention Project, "Immigration Detention in Egypt: Military Tribunals, Human Rights Abuses, Abysmal Conditions, and EU Partner," September 2018, https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/africa/egypt

appeared to have less access to phones, smartphones, and the internet before and during transit migration through North Africa, meaning that only limited research of routes was conducted prior to departure and there was less awareness of migratory risks and alternatives. Freedom of movement within and between the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) also means that there is a "culture of circular migration from the Sahel and West Africa to Libya," so in the past it was not unusual for West African migrants to travel around the region—and to Libya—in search of work.[82]

In Egypt, sources recounted how smugglers either stole or confiscated individuals' phones, prompting migrants to instead rely on community or social networks for contacts in smuggling networks.

At the same time, several participants even said that the first time they owned a mobile phone—let alone a smartphone—was after arriving in Sicily, and so they had not conducted research online or even contacted smugglers before leaving home. Abu, a Ghanaian migrant in his 40s who arrived in Sicily more than a decade ago, joked, "I barely even knew what Facebook was when I came here. People do not use their phones for things like that when they travel." A Nigerian migrant named Frank, who also reached Sicily before social media became widespread, similarly downplayed the role of social media in migration when considering a question about whether social media had facilitated migration amongst Nigerians. "I can see where you're going with this," he said, suggesting both an awareness of, and frustration with, notions that social media facilitates migration.

> Look, we could think before Facebook. We could think before social media. How many people came to Europe before social media? These people who were in Libya don't have social media, they don't have a phone. They might be kept in a camp in Libya without a phone, even on their own. Maybe one person has a phone and so everyone in there uses that one phone. I think that social media has nothing to do with this.

As an asylum seeker from Biafra who clearly saw himself as a political actor from that area, Frank described social media in more political terms rather than as a facilitator for migration.

> What I think that social media *does* do, is what the world saw in 2011. That power. There you can point to social media and say, 'Yes, that has done something in the world.'

For Frank, social media platforms—and particularly Facebook—have facilitated his political activism and criticism of the Nigerian government for its policies vis-à-vis the Biafran community. It has also helped ensure the maintenance of contact with his family, friends, and community in Nigeria.

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[82] Peter Tinti (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime), Skype conversation with Tom Rollins (Global Detention Project), 27 December 2017.

> We use social media to connect people in the diaspora and tell them what's going on. This is what I use social media for. And I also stay in touch with the guys that I grew up with.

Some participants tied this lesser importance of social media to trends back home—namely literacy and poverty rates. Asked whether migrants in Libya used social media or ICTs during their journey, Modou from Gambia explained:

> Some people might use social media like this, using GPS and their phones to know where they're going, but that's people who were educated back home, people who went to school.

> People who are not educated basically just go into the hands of the traffickers and say, 'I want to go to *this* place.' They give them the money, the vehicle comes and takes them away. That's it.

Moussa, a 23-year-old from Guinea, also referred to this digital divide between the illiterate and those "who'd been to school" back home when describing his own social media use.

> I never used social media before because I didn't go to school. I didn't know about these things. I had a phone during the journey but it was just an old phone—it didn't have WhatsApp or Facebook or even the Internet.

Using social media to mitigate risks

Another important take away from the interviews was that lack of access to smartphones and social media can make it harder for people to know about and mitigate risks. As Sekou from Mali said:

> When you are in West Africa, you hear that if you go to Libya that there'll be work. But when you get there, you realise the situation is different. You might be killed, beaten, detained. …So many things can happen to you. But West Africans think that if they go there then there'll be work.

Sekou did not have access to social media before he left Mali for Libya, nor did he on the journey itself, meaning he was less able to navigate the situation and avoid risks. Then again, Modou from Gambia said he "knew there were some difficulties, at different points," but did not have "much" information or awareness beyond that. However, he then spoke hypothetically about "where I'm from" and "where I'm going," to explain why sometimes the concern is not about Libya and the risks one might face there, but the possibility of a better life at the destination and its role in motivating one to migrate.

> Where I was going—maybe I could have peace there?—and where I'm from, there was no peace. So where I'm going is better than where I'm from. Maybe the government is trying to put you in prison and then you'll be in prison for the rest of your life? Or maybe you have family problems back in Gambia? It means you can't stay and you have to move. So you might have heard about what's happening [in Libya] but you don't know for sure if it's real. I found that out later.

Another problem is that the information that is available online can be subject to projection. According to Richard Brodie from Palermo's Arci Porco Rosso Centre, an activist-run community centre that provides legal aid and other services to migrants and refugees, most people migrating from Libya to Sicily are doing so for economic reasons and are therefore less collective.

> I feel that West Africans do not share information about the route as much, because they are less collective in their aspirations. Again this might be really wrong, but I feel like their migratory objectives are more individual and less aspirational as a collective. And I think people hoard the information and their contacts more.

By way of example, Brodie referred to past discussions between Euro-Mediterranean activist initiatives concerning how to raise awareness about risks among West Africans and other migrants who are heading to Europe. One such discussion, he recounted, focused on a proposed project that would use audio/video messages from Sudanese refugees already in Europe to communicate the risks of crossing the Mediterranean from Libya. There had been some discussion about whether to attempt something similar for West Africans.

> The project just made very little sense [to me] because the idea of West Africans—or at least the West Africans that I know (and we talked about this)—was that if you're posting things on your Facebook profile about the migratory route then firstly, you're sharing precious information; and secondly, your Facebook profile is your way of communicating back home about your success. Often a lot of people post pictures of themselves on planes, for example, or maybe some guy sitting next to me *here* might be posting pictures making it look like he's in Paris. Because you want to show that you've made it, not that you're stuck in Palermo helping other people escape from war-torn Libya. So information gets blocked like that. So I don't think Facebook gets used to communicate *anything* about the journey.

The projection of such "success" exists in an ecosystem in which not everyone is aware of the risks involved in migrating, to the point that it's not so much that Libya's myriad risks exist, but that the situation is so perilous and uncontrolled that even migrants with a pre-existing awareness of what they were heading into couldn't expect the extent of it. Testimonies often focus on extortion or summary violence from local communities, kidnapping or detention by militias (commonly referred to as "mafias"), trafficking and extortion, and summary executions. Amadou, A 21-year-old from Senegal, first experienced such treatment while in Mali.

> Small kids were carrying knives and bottles in the streets, and if they saw you walking alone then they'd attack you—stab you or beat you. They would demand money from you and if you didn't have it, they might even kill you. I was with my friend there, and he told me that once he was caught by these boys. They asked him for money and then stabbed him with a knife. Luckily someone was there to help him, otherwise they would have killed him.

Once in Libya, armed civilians were replaced by armed militias. Amadou's *passeur* convoy was stopped by a militia while passing through the Libyan desert.

> The mafias attacked us on the route. When we were heading through Libya, this mafia took my phone and my money and everything. Wherever you kept your money, they'd find it—undressing you and telling you to strip-down so they could find the money. And they'd be beating you. If you didn't have money, maybe they'd kill you.

By contrast, on Syrian Facebook community pages and groups, such risks might be shared and collectively discussed. Friends and family would be warned, and statements issued. However, for the reasons mentioned above, West Africans and other migrant populations transiting through Libya might not share such information online, relying more on social networks as opposed to social media.

Nigerian migrant Frank, for example, said he had never used social media to tell Nigerians to come to Italy: "I've never asked or told anyone to ... cross the sea." This, however, suggested some do just that. And other participants would also mention this, again suggesting that some migrants either explicitly use social media to encourage friends, family, or others to make the journey, or project images of success that encourage others to follow.

"The mafias attacked us on the route. When we were heading through Libya, this mafia took my phone and my money and everything."

Amadou said that, "I used to call my boys [friends] who were here, in Sicily, and they'd say, 'Come! The route isn't that dangerous.' But later you realise that it is dangerous." Such communication isn't always remote, with Ebrima stating that it was face-to-face contact that encouraged him to travel towards Libya for work (before he was then pushed towards the sea).

> I went to Senegal and met with one of my friends there, he told me, 'Let's go to Libya. You can find work there.' People were saying there was work in Libya. I'd heard that there were so many problems there and I wasn't sure.

> But that boy was like, 'No, no it's fine, there are opportunities there.' That boy convinced me to go to Libya, but I wasn't really willing to go before.

Commonly, this type of communication takes place privately through Whatsapp or phone-calls, but the projection of success is perhaps easiest to find on Facebook because—rather obviously—it is a forum with greater public visibility that allows users to post photos. It is the perfect place for migrants to market themselves as success stories, and several participants referred to fellow community members posing besides expensive-looking cars or designer clothes to create such an image. Facebook tended to be a site of projection rather than sharing genuine information—something that Ebrima explained when discussing a similar point.

Social media at times will convince people to come to Europe, because of the things people put on Facebook—the lifestyle and so on. Maybe it does that. But I would never tell people to come through Libya, to make this journey.

Brodie, from Arci Porco Rosso, suggested that ecosystems of false information actually exist on WhatsApp more than Facebook.

There are round-robins on WhatsApp. A lot. And aside from the religious messages, there are—and this is particularly among Nigerians, although that might be that it's different among the French speakers—there are messages about being scared of deportations. Things like, to pick an example (and this was among Gambians actually), there was a photograph of…like a legal aid form. And it was going round saying, 'Don't sign this! If you sign this then they're going to deport you.' And so on. This went round hundreds of people, all around the island. There were protests in some of the camps.

Brodie added that this mode of communication exists as "mass messages through WhatsApp, sent to everyone in one person's contacts—'Send this to 25 people you know…'—you know?—classic round robin messages."

In reality, both Whatsapp and social media platforms are often used to share false information, and some participants suggested that this mode of communication had damaged community trust for online sources of information, or information distributed through social media. As Patrick, from Gambia, commented:

Most people don't trust things posted on Facebook. Nowadays you see so many things on Facebook that say, 'Do this, do this…if you don't then something bad is going to happen to you.'

Or like, 'If you don't share this message on WhatsApp with people then you'll have bad luck.' It means people don't trust social media anymore.

Connecting the community: How social media helps real-world community-building

For Adam (from Western Darfur), the most important social media app through his journey was Facebook. In the same way that "The Cloud" allows people to save and back-up all of their files in a secure and remote digital location, Facebook kept Adam's contacts intact—despite the fact he was deported from Israel, robbed of everything in Uganda, and transiting irregularly through two countries afterwards.

When I got to Uganda, I lost all of my contacts—phone numbers and everything—because my phone was taken by those people in the hotel. But afterwards, once I'd logged into Facebook again, I found all my contacts and I contacted people and told them what happened.

Facebook would then assist Adam in his plans to head back to Sudan, and eventually back to Egypt all over again, after that. He outlined the various ways that Facebook helped him during that time through contact with family, contact with community members who advised him on routes and risks as well as useful people to know, and contact with smugglers.

> You can contact your family and ask them about the journey that you're going to take. I talked to people in South Sudan when I was in Uganda, and asked them how to get there.
>
> I asked like, 'Which way is better to go to Sudan?' I was given two options. One was that I could go to the UN in Uganda and I'd get a travel document to Chad, and then from Chad go back to Sudan from the west.
>
> But in the end I decided to go through Juba because this would take a long time, to get this document, and also I'd face other problems. To get from Chad I'd have to go through Geneina and that's the place that I fled in 2003. Almost all the people in Geneina know who I am—like now, the whole state is controlled by the *Janjaweed* and if I came home, they'd know. I'd face problems and it'd put my family in danger as well.
>
> So I was told that in South Sudan there were Darfuri people working there and that I could get help from them.

And that's what he did. Once Adam returned to Khartoum and realised security forces knew he was back, he also used Facebook to reach smugglers to get him across the border to Egypt.

> I found the smugglers who helped me to get to Egypt through Facebook. I found a friend who was in the UK and he told me how he'd been caught [in Egypt], in the sea, and was deported back to Sudan. Then he'd gone to Port Sudan and was smuggled back into Egypt in order to try the trip again. That was all done through Facebook.

Adam preferred to use Facebook rather than WhatsApp. He explained that WhatsApp use was contingent on local country-by-country contexts (Egypt and other repressive states have blocked WhatsApp calls in the past because of its end-to-end encryption) and WhatsApp functions often depend on the availability of internet and data services which may be unavailable in some places where signal is patchy. Facebook, on the other hand, was collaborative and quick, easy to use on the move, and not dependent on internet access. "In Sudan, we have free Facebook," he said, referring to the Free Basics function used by RefUnite and others. "Even if we don't have internet on our phones, we can chat and sometimes even make calls." For all of these reasons, Facebook was key for a quick, often emergency-based community transfer of knowledge that both facilitated Adam's migration, but also kept him safe.

> It's easy to find new people or new information through Facebook. For example, let's say that I have 200 people on Facebook as friends and if I made a small post asking for help—something in particular—then from these 200 people I will find help with it. That's why Facebook is the most important thing.

However, it appears that social media and WhatsApp are of more importance to refugees and migrants once they have arrived in Sicily. As well as being used to remain in contact with friends and family back home, they are used by those going through the motions of

Eritrean migrants arrive in Messina, Sicily, 8 October 2015. (VOA – Nicolas Pinault)

reception, integration, and so on. Facebook, according to Brodie, tended to be "more useful for people who move around a lot."

And this trend was particularly pronounced among new arrivals.

> Usually one of the rare times that we have contact with someone who's just arrived ... people will say that they want to use Facebook. They might want to use a WhatsApp number to tell someone already in Europe that they've arrived, so they've got a German number or something that they need to contact. But they want Facebook to *get the number* that they'd left on their Facebook, and once they have the number then they use WhatsApp to call them. So Facebook acts as this repository, like a cloud.

Certain specialist functions that Whatsapp provides, and which Facebook does not, has resulted in the application bearing particular importance to West African migrants—more so than for those migrating to Europe from the Horn of Africa (and via Egypt).

Aside from offering a cheap call functionality, perhaps the most interesting use described by West African migrants in Sicily was "WhatsApp community trees." At least two participants in Sicily stated that they were members of WhatsApp community trees based either on nationality or hyper-local lines, whereby their village or local town had a WhatsApp group including members in the origin country and destination country. These community trees provided different functions for participants. Not only were they a way of staying in touch with

friends, family, or fellow community members, but they also provided a two-way migratory forum in which aspiring migrants and arrivals in Europe could converse.

As mentioned previously, Moussa from Guinea did not use social media before migrating but, since arriving in Italy, he uses WhatsApp to communicate with friends back home.

> Now that I'm here, I do speak to people through WhatsApp. Those people want to come. But I want to tell them that, 'The journey is like *this*…you might experience all these kinds of things on the journey.' People might lose their lives.

Moussa elaborated that "WhatsApp has so many groups" including those used by "people from my village and the villages nearby."

> I try to use these groups to convince people not to come because of the difficulties of the journey. I try to explain everything that happened to me along the way.

> Using WhatsApp and Facebook is important for sure, but I think WhatsApp groups are more important because you're communicating with your people directly. People can post whatever they want on Facebook. WhatsApp groups are more helpful.

Marley, from Gambia, remembered the moment in Italy when he was invited to a similar group by Gambian migrants from his village and surrounding area back home.

> I was at home [one day] when I saw a lot of messages on my phone. One of my friends had added me to it. And after I started following the messages, I started hearing voices that I knew but I didn't have their contacts. But through those messages, I was able to get so many contacts that I used to see when I was in Gambia. Some of them had travelled before me.

The group allowed Gambians to discuss how to develop their local area and assist the village, whether through fundraising or exchanging social capital to organise projects such as "trying to make a new bore-hole so the village can have a better water supply" and locating "generators for electricity." It rendered the diaspora small, and WhatsApp allowed for exchanges that would usually take place at hyper-local—village, mosque, cafe—level.

"Most people that left Bangladesh haven't studied or been educated, so they struggle to communicate through Facebook, or to write."

> [The group] was very important because it was connecting everyone from the village who was abroad. It was connecting us together. Whatever happened in the village, you heard about it. Whatever we had to send, they knew that the boys outside would do it.

Physical Fences and Digital Divides: Final Report of the Global Detention Project Special Investigation into the Uses of Electronic Media in Today's Migration Journeys

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> If somebody passed away in the village, in the next three minutes we would know about it because you'd have got a message from the group. So we'd message people there like, 'Sorry … we send our condolences.'

This was community-building albeit in a more private, secure, and discrete way. Some group members wrote, and others spoke through voice-note messages, again allowing for unprejudiced communication between literate and illiterate social media users.

Other times, communities accustomed to lower rates of smartphone, social media, and internet penetration resorted to more traditional forms of communication that were eased by WhatsApp. Bangladeshi migrant Abir runs an office typical of the kind of business that fuels daily life in the diaspora—somewhere to get help with documents or buy telephone cards to call home, a go-between for migrants and embassy staff, a money wire. Abir stated that Bangladeshi migrants, who formed one of the top 10 nationalities arriving in Italy last year, did not tend to use Facebook or other social media channels in this way either.

> I've never seen that from our community. I haven't seen people on Facebook, or people using social media like that. Most people that left Bangladesh haven't studied or been educated, so they struggle to communicate through Facebook, to write. Out of 1,000 [people] you might find 10 people who use social media communications.

Instead, Abir claimed, Bangladeshis tend to rely more on community "associations" within Sicily or familial networks outside—interestingly making a similar point to Brodie that economic migration necessitated more individualistic concerns.

> Everyone is thinking about themselves. Everyone who arrived here has their own difficulties, their own problems, so they don't care. If you have parents, then you try to help them. Otherwise you don't care.

Before, a Bangladeshi migrant may have had to go to a shop like Abir's to buy an international calling card. Now it was possible to do so cheaply through a data connection, or via the internet. WhatsApp therefore hadn't innovated how people communicated, it had just made it cheaper and easier for lower-income families to stay in touch with friends and relatives on the other side of the world.

THE MANY USES OF DIGITAL TECH

An important lesson from this research is that usage of digital tools is far more varied than is often reported or popularly understood. For instance, interviews with migrants and asylum seekers in Egypt and Sicily both suggested that social media use among those groups differed significantly to their use in other contexts, such as the Balkan Route circa 2015, with variations often based on:

- Age;
- Nationality;
- Literacy/education rate;

- Socio-economic/class position in origin country;
- Pre-existing awareness of migratory risks;
- Smuggling modus operandi on a given migratory route;
- Distances on route;
- Individual vs. collective migratory aspirations.

Ultimately, Facebook is the migratory app of choice. WhatsApp was sometimes more attractive because it provided one-on-one communication through calls back home, or community trees that connected community members at either end of the migration trail. But the above patterns of social media use leave migrants, to varying degrees, vulnerable to rumours, misinformation from fellow community members, and deliberate disinformation by different actors.

Clearly, transit migration through North Africa and the Central Mediterranean is not the same as transit migration through Turkey, Greece, and the Balkans. And on top of the differing nationalities (and socio-economic demographics) of those moving on these routes, the distances and risks involved also necessitate differing uses of social media than elsewhere in the Mediterranean.

A 2017 report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime found a "widespread and well entrenched" smuggling industry between the Horn of Africa and Europe,[83] to the extent that it is "never hard to find a smuggler in the region or throughout the journey." Journeys are long and often incredibly dangerous, and the "need for a smuggler is ubiquitous."[84] Payment models used by smuggling (and trafficking) networks are also different. Social media and social networks "are absolutely critical for the functioning of human smuggling networks…an enabling feature for both migrants and smugglers, and a crucial safeguard around which the industry is built."[85]

But the other main route leading towards the Central Mediterranean, from West Africa, appears to have its own variations. The majority of people migrating from West Africa towards Libya and the Mediterranean are classed by UNHCR and the IOM as economic migrants. The smuggling industry is different, and growing risks in Libya necessitate different—and sometimes scant—use of social media.

The Global Initiative's Peter Tinti compared preconceptions about social media use, largely built around the "refugee crisis," with social media use among mostly West African migrants who are now currently transiting through Niger and Libya.

> Very few people arrive in Agadez knowing who their transporter for getting
> into Libya is going to be, and then—once in Libya—it's a bit of a free for all.

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[83] Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, "Integrated Responses to Human Smuggling from the Horn of Africa to Europe," May 2017, http://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/global-initiative-human-smuggling-from-the-horn-of-africa-may-2017-web.pdf

[84] Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, "Integrated Responses to Human Smuggling from the Horn of Africa to Europe," May 2017, http://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/global-initiative-human-smuggling-from-the-horn-of-africa-may-2017-web.pdf

[85] Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, "Integrated Responses to Human Smuggling from the Horn of Africa to Europe," May 2017, http://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/global-initiative-human-smuggling-from-the-horn-of-africa-may-2017-web.pdf

The goal is to get from Sabha where you're usually dropped off [from Agadez], and then to Tripoli in one piece, and then once in Tripoli then to try and find people who can introduce you to people to get on a boat.[86]

Social media and ICTs are used for advertising, and WhatsApp in particular can be useful for quick communications and transactions as well as "memes" distributed either by smugglers or fellow community members to give individuals a sense of what lies ahead. Tinti further explained how smugglers in Agadez and Libya might share, "advertising in the form of a screenshot that then kind of ricochets through WhatsApp" including, perhaps, a "photo of a migrant who is stood next to a fancy car in Italy."[87] This "meme-ified" communication between the migrant and the smuggler can be fast, dynamic, and not necessarily dependent upon good literacy.[88]

At the same time, Tinti said, growing knowledge of the risks in Libya in particular means that increasing numbers of migrants transiting through Libya are attempting to "mitigate [the] risks."

The general sense I'm getting is that migrants are more aware [of risks]. They've always been aware of the dangers it entails, but they are more aware than ever of the dangers they will face. It's not clear to me that that's translating to necessarily fewer people going, so much as it is people who are taking greater measures to mitigate the risks. The Agadez to Libya route at its height was basically operating like you would a bus company in a lot of ways. So there really wasn't vetting, it was more, 'Can I get a spot on the convoys or can't I?' [But] now migrants need to … vet their smuggler a little more or find their smuggler via things like WhatsApp or Facebook and also through *coxeurs*[89]—people from their community who are in hubs like Agadez, who can introduce them to trustworthy people.[90]

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86 Peter Tinti (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime), Skype conversation with Tom Rollins (Global Detention Project), 27 December 2017.

87 Peter Tinti (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime), Skype conversation with Tom Rollins (Global Detention Project), 27 December 2017.

88 It also bore several similarities to the—admittedly more sophisticated—migratory memes described by Gillespie et al (M. Gillespie et al., *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys: Smartphones and Social Media Networks*, Open University/France Médias Monde, 13 May 2016) that, in 2015-2016, were advising Syrians about the various steps in a journey from Turkey to Germany.

89 *Coxeur* is a word used in Francophone countries in West Africa, including Niger and Senegal, to describe recruiters, touts, or brokers working on behalf of smuggling networks. For more information on the term, see: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants 2018: Africa," June 2018, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glosom/GLOSOM_2018_Africa_web_small.pdf

90 Peter Tinti (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime), Skype conversation with Tom Rollins (Global Detention Project), 27 December 2017.

It is worthwhile, at this point, to compare findings from filed interviews in Egypt and Sicily with experiences of Syrian refugees—arguably the most visible and written-about displaced population today. The literature review featured in Part I of this report found a disproportionate focus on Syrian refugees and social media use. There is some reasoning behind this—Syrians are generally understood to have used social media and ICTs in their home country more than other displaced populations, and it stands to reason that refugees from a country with higher rates of internet and smartphone penetration would be more prone to using social media before, during, and after their displacement from that same country. (The International Telecommunication Union's World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database found that in 2011, the percentage of individuals using the Internet stood at 22.5 percent in Syria, 17.46 percent in Sudan, and 0.7 percent in Eritrea.)[91]

Displacement may also have precipitated an increase in use of social media because of the need to maintain contact with distant family members and to prepare for unthinkable journeys. Examples in the literature point to Syrians in the Balkans combining Google Translate, Google Maps, and GPS to navigate language and geography, while there are countless examples of Syrian refugees self-organising and community-building through Facebook Pages and Groups. There is generally consensus that, "Refugees fleeing the turmoil of Syria are, perhaps more than any other displaced community, using their phones to plot and document their journeys to a better life."[92]

The lead author of this report previously observed first-hand how, between 2014-2015, Syrians in Egypt were using Facebook pages to find smugglers—Facebook pages with names that "euphemistically conjure images of tourism companies or advocacy groups, rather than smuggling routes … bearing record numbers of migrants across the Mediterranean."[93] This was usually not in lieu of face-to-face meetings with smugglers (or brokers/fixers) and/or recommendations from existing social networks, which supplement a refugee's research about who to trust and which way to go.

Many Syrians conducted face-to-face market research within their own communities, whether by discussing the pros and cons of a particular smuggler with friends or by meeting members of a smuggling network to discuss routes, prices, and the possibility of discounts.

The author met several smuggling brokers in Alexandria and Cairo between 2014-2015, and noted how easily reachable they were in high-density Syrian neighbourhoods such as Al-Hossary in Cairo's 6th of October neighbourhood, or Al-Agami 20km west of Alexandria. Smugglers' names were known to almost everyone in a Syrian neighbourhood, as were their

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[91] UN Data, "Percentage of Individuals Using the Internet,"
http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=ITU&f=ind1Code%3AI99H

[92] A. Ram, "Smartphones Bring Solace and Aid to Desperate Refugees,' *Wired*, 5 December 2015,
https://www.wired.com/2015/12/smartphone-syrian-refugee-crisis/

[93] P. Kingsley, "People Smugglers Using Facebook to Lure Migrants into 'Italy Trips,'" *The Guardian*, 8 May 2015,
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/08/people-smugglers-using-facebook-to-lure-migrants-into-italy-trips

A screenshot of the Facebook group "Karajat al-Mushuntiteen," which roughly translates as "Traveller's Platform." The group has more than 312,000 members who share and access information regarding the journey to Europe. (Facebook)

phone numbers. Sometimes the *simsar* (broker) was the man sipping tea down at one's local barber shop; other times he was standing outside one's apartment block talking amicably to neighbours.

But social media played a role, and related digital platforms played other roles, too. For instance, a Palestinian refugee from Syria recounted his and other passengers' use of Google Maps when their boat was prematurely abandoned by smugglers—they were running low on fuel and wanted to avoid arrest by European authorities. Using sporadic GPS signal and the notoriously inaccurate directional arrow function, they attempted to navigate their way to a SAR zone in Italian waters before running out of fuel. Elsewhere, in Alexandria's Karmouz Police Station, Syrian and Palestinian refugees detained in the facility used Facebook and Twitter to campaign for their release and resettlement to Europe. Having created a dedicated Facebook page and Twitter hashtags, they were ultimately successful.[94] Meanwhile in Lebanon, community activists used WhatsApp as a community organising tool, creating a series of "local committees"—committees that exist both in the real-world and in the digital world of the Facebook-owned messaging service—for areas with high concentrations of refugees.

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[94] T. Rollins, "The Palestinian-Syrian 'Protection Gap': Inside an Egyptian Police Station," *Palestinian refugees from Syria: Ongoing Nakba, Ongoing Discrimination*, *Al-Majdal*, Volume 57(2), 2015, http://www.badil.org/en/publication/periodicals/al-majdal/item/2077-article-6.html

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Community-building innovations such as that seen in Lebanon can traverse arbitrary legal landscapes, challenge discriminatory measures, and give agency back to the displaced. They are adaptable too. An Egyptian human rights defender and migration researcher remembered observing the different ways in which Syrians self-organised online—first as a displaced population newly arrived in Egypt in need of ties, social capital, and information about services (before mid-2013) and then as a migration-prone population keen to know about smuggling options and legal migration channels (after mid-2013). "Syrians use it for *everything*," he said.

> They announce jobs inside the Syrian community—in a restaurant, a supermarket, anything—by using their own groups. Every neighbourhood has a group. I remember in late 2013, they started to add me to these groups. So you'd find [listing examples of names of groups]: Syrians in Agami, Syrians in Alexandria, Syrians in Miami, Syrians in 6th of October Cairo, Syrians in Ain Shams. Also they have groups for each university college. If there is a scholarship opportunity or any new law concerning them, Syrians will publish it. They use it for every single detail in their lives.[95]

These social media functions tend to be well-connected, tailored to particular needs/causes (in some cases, emergencies), and adaptable to changing circumstances. Pages were even set up to spread word about security checkpoints and arrests in Alexandria following the 2013 popular coup against Muhammad Morsi (when Syrian refugees were targeted for perceived support of the Muslim Brotherhood). Crucially, Syrians in Egypt have created an online community infrastructure that exists but can then adapt to changing circumstances—so a local page set up by Syrians in Alexandria that might have once been warning about flying checkpoints nearby nowadays talks about resettlement and scholarship opportunities.

However, it is also crucial to remember that being this "connected" can have risks. "Getting refugees online" can sound like a great topic for funding proposals, calls for tender, and fluffy web journalism, but it's also important to understand the implications of this online ecosystem. Research has found, for example, that reliance on community-built social media channels can lead to the spread of accidental (but possibly quite well-intentioned) misinformation as well as more deliberate disinformation. Refugees may migrate or seek refuge based on false information, leaving them vulnerable to dangerous journeys and false hopes. The Author met one such family in Cairo's 6th of October City, a sprawling suburb on the desert-swept western outskirts of Cairo that has become home to tens of thousands of Syrian refugees since 2011.

It is crucial to remember that being "connected" can have risks. Reliance on community-built social media channels can lead to the spread of accidental (but possibly quite well-intentioned) misinformation as well as more deliberate disinformation.

Abu Majed, a 41-year-old Syrian refugee from southern Syria's Druze majority city of Sweida' had been living in Jaramana (eastern Damascus) when he first heard about the possibility of migrating towards Europe. "I was walking one day in the streets of Damascus,"

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[95] Anonymous Egyptian human rights defender (name withheld for security reasons), Skype conversation with Tom Rollins (Global Detention Project), 25 January 2018.

he said, "when I heard a woman speaking […] about her son's experience traveling to Egypt, and from Egypt to Libya and Europe."

The family sat on the idea and waited because, with two young children to feed and educate, they were reticent to leave. But last year, they finally decided to leave for Egypt. A community contact garnered through Facebook had told them that if they travelled to Egypt, then they could get resettlement to Canada within a matter of months.

> We did [research online] until we found someone who had done it before us and showed us a way. We kept contacting him for two months until we made our way here.

Abu Majed said they reached this community contact over Facebook through mutual friends. He trusted the man enough to sell his home and leave Syria, taking his family on the dangerous irregular desert crossing from Port Sudan to Upper Egypt. The information seemed solid. But when the family arrived their dreams of resettlement were crushed, according to Abu Majed's wife, Im Majed.

> We were shocked by the fact that their [UNHCR's] mission was not to serve and protect refugees and provide a safe environment. We were surprised by UNHCR's disappointing performance—our first interview was two months after our arrival. The hope was that UNHCR would help to pave the way for legal travel, but I was shocked to discover that there was no clear path to resettlement [for us].

PART III: LESSONS

Social media and tech tools have become an integral part of the phenomenon of 21st-century migration. The "refugee crisis" helped accelerate a "tech turn" in both how people travel across borders and how governments and others respond to these movements. Everyone from civil society organisations and individual activists to professional humanitarian technologists, government officials, and international organisation bureaucrats have experimented with social media and other new forms of digital technology to assist, prevent, or otherwise influence the movements of people across borders.

Those migrating have also played an important role: While social media has been used to both facilitate and discourage migration, it has also helped those migrating or fleeing war and persecution to protect themselves, research alternatives, mitigate risks, or find online communities to share experiences and learn. Critical to all these developments is another crucial fact—that all of this is taking place during an age of unprecedented border controls, where securitisation of the physical migratory sphere has predictably led to securitisation of the digital sphere.

As our review of the pitfalls of humanitarian technologists in Part I and the testimonies from refugees and migrants presented in Part II demonstrate, the impact and usefulness of new digital media should not be overstated. This is not to argue that social media, smartphones, and other tech tools are *not* "migrant essentials"; rather, this report seeks to encourage correctives to oft held views that overvalue these resources, fail to take into account variations in usage by different groups of people in different locations, or neglect important hazards in the way tools are designed and deployed.

While Syrian refugees have clearly used tech tools throughout their displacement, and tailored them for community-building purposes both to stay connected and also to mitigate the risks and realities of diaspora life, other communities may use those same tools differently or not use them very much at all. Differences in literacy, socio-economics, and other factors mean that West African migrants, for example, use social media and ICTs differently to Syrian refugees. At the same time, there are positives and negatives, risks and benefits, to how these tools are used, depending on a wide range of factors including: who is using these tools and for what purpose; and more basic considerations, like the age, nationality, and literacy rates of migrants and refugees seeking to employ these tools.

There are also macro-level considerations such as whether there is a pre-existing awareness of migratory risks, the smuggling *modus operandi* on a given migratory route, the distances involved, and also the presence of individual vs. collective migratory aspirations within a given community or individual. And, finally, there are on-going concerns that growing amounts of digital refuse, such as outdated apps that linger online way past their expiration dates, are not benign artefacts of this tech revolution but rather potentially deadly

traps that could lead migrants and refugees to make poor decisions during their migration journeys.

The GDP's investigation into this phenomenon has helped us identify several "lessons" that may assist human rights practitioners who seek to harness social media and other digital platforms in ways that emphasise harm reduction.[96] An over-arching message that emerges from these lessons is that quick fixes should be avoided. Human-centred design, coupled with a sincere interest in preserving people's agency, should serve as cornerstones of any effort to develop long-term, harm-reducing digital solutions for migrants and refugees. And there is a need for more caution and humility when considering the "solutions" that new tech and mobile apps can really provide refugees and migrants.

LESSON 1: FOCUS ON EXPOSING HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

A critical—albeit obvious—characteristic of social media's potential harm reducing impact is its ability to draw attention to particular situations, including from inside detention centres and jails. Smart phones are an important tool that migrants and refugees can use to raise awareness of problems in detention centres that otherwise would not reach the light of day. When detainees have access to these devices—which appears to be increasingly unlikely in most detention centres—it makes it extremely difficult for authorities to attempt to disguise detention conditions, rush forced deportations, or commit violations without larger audiences being made aware of these actions.

Although the act of bringing attention to harmful migration situations is rarely a sufficient measure to righting a wrong, it is often a necessary one to prevent or mitigate harmful migration control practices. As high-profile activist interventions in Europe targeting imminent deportations have highlighted, deportations become harder the moment more people know about them, and communications platforms make this instantaneously and enduringly possible. As exemplified by the "Karmouz group" referred to in the introduction to this report (see pages 7-9), detainees can themselves also conduct advocacy on the issues impacting them on a day-to-day basis—violations by prison guards, waning supplies of food, restricted access to telephone calls, or other key issues—providing them with oft-denied agency.

A widely heralded case of a detainee utilising social media to highlight the harsh realities of detention is that of acclaimed author Behrouz Boochani. A former journalist in Iran who reported on minority rights and Kurdish culture, Boochani was forced to flee his home country in 2013 to escape political repression. But on his second attempt to cross the unpredictable and hazardous waters between Indonesia and Australia, he was intercepted and transferred to Australia's notorious immigration centre on Manus Island—a facility he has described as "a prison, even worse than a prison."[97] During his many years of detention

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[96] See Footnote 8, page 11, for more information about the concept of "harm reduction." See also: I. Majcher and M. Flynn, "Harm Reduction in Immigration Detention," Global Detention Project, October 2018, https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/harm-reduction-immigration-detention

[97] Al Jazeera, "Behrouz Boochani: Living in Limbo on Manus Island," 10 February 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/inthefield/2018/02/behrouz-boochani-living-limbo-manus-island-180208113527825.html

From Manus Island, Behrouz Boochani sought to cast light on the conditions that he and other detained asylum seekers faced (Twitter)

on Manus, he made use of mobile phones, social media channels, and ICTs to broadcast on-the-ground journalistic reporting, depicting the stark realities and everyday brutalities immigration detainees face at the facility, which served as a the basis for his award-winning memoir *No Friend But the Mountains*. "We started our day on Manus by another suicide attempt. A young man who did not eat for four days tried to kill himself and was sent to hospital. The situation on Manus is out of control. At least 10 suicide and self harm attempted over past two weeks," he tweeted on 21 November 2018.

Recently, some experts have been begun developing tools to be used specifically in detention situations. For example, a group of Australian researchers are currently developing a handheld mobile app for use inside detention facilities around the world called AppCID.[98] As well as providing information on human rights standards and points of contact for complaints and advice, the app is intended to be designed for "monitoring conditions in immigration detention" by detainees, visitors, relatives, detention monitors, and others, with the aim of giving detainees the space to report on conditions safely. There are in-built features designed with the immigration detainee in mind, including a "panic" button, which sends information before removing any sign of the app from the phone—for example, if a prison guard witnessed or suspected something awry. This is also a feature for use by whistleblowers, an increasingly important actor in future detention-monitoring dynamics as underscored by several recent high-profile cases in the UK and elsewhere.[99]

Similar apps with user protection utilities have been developed by human rights groups documenting, for example, airstrikes and civilian casualty incidents in Middle Eastern conflict zones. They are designed to create remote information-sharing spaces while also protecting users in sensitive, repressive, or high-risk environments. However, these initiatives have often failed to live up to their presumed potential, faced irresolvable design problems, and/or failed to generate adequate funding. A case in point is Amnesty International's effort to develop a "panic button" for use by human rights defenders under threat. The project was initially launched in 2012 with funding from the Ford Foundation. However, in addition to encountering technical problems associated with false alarms, the project failed to get adequate long-term funding. Thus, the "Panic Button project became a lesson in 'what

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[98] AppCID Promotional Video, *Bonigi*, September 2019, https://www.dropbox.com/s/kt9gbatg9btwn7i/AppCID promotional video final.mp4

[99] See, for instance, A. Holt, "What I Saw When I Went Undercover," *BBC News*, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/g4s_brook_house_immigration_removal_centre_undercover

comes after innovation,'" wrote the project heads in 2017. "Despite broad community buy-in and a clear and stated need for the app by users, we couldn't secure the funding that would move the project beyond its first, fledgling phase."[100]

Some observers are also sceptical about the utility of these kinds of tools beyond limited awareness-raising and information-generation potentials. Says Geber, "I have seen many apps like these being proposed, built, and then ultimately turning into digital litter. The main factor is that no app can substitute the need for understanding how to act in high-risk scenarios and ultimately can bring a false sense of security to people using them." He points to his experience collaborating on AI's Panic Button app. "Thanks to the human-centred design approach they took, they quickly learned that the real strength behind the app is the training they designed around it. In the end, they decided to sunset the app because it never managed to actually do what it promised—but the trainings are still happening."[101]

LESSON 2: CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING

The "refugee crisis" is not a homogenous phenomenon straddling the Mediterranean and thus the experiences that migrants and refugees have engaging social media and ICTs before, during, and after migration vary widely. As such, the usefulness of new digital tools, including social media and ICTs, are heavily context-dependent. A large range of factors must be taken into account, including everything from countries of origin, transit, and destination to literacy levels and smuggling modus operandi.

Geber organises the various factors according to three key "verticals": regionality; individual v. community migration; and education level. "Each vertical, and their interplay, will define how (and whether) digital platforms are being used. There is such a wide difference in how those verticals play out that planning a one-size-fits-all approach cannot work. In fact, we go from one extreme to the other (no phones versus using Google translate to learn pronunciation on the fly)."[102]

LESSON 3: FOCUS ON HUMAN-CENTRED DESIGN AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

The best results for refugees and migrants are found by employing human-centred design practices that build up networks committed to reducing harms during migration journeys. It is critical to focus on "empathy" as a guide in engagements with refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants so that projects are "by and for refugees," which has been the ostensible approach of various digital projects, including for instance the Techfugees initiative, one of

[100] The Engine Room, "Panic Button: Lessons for the Tech For Good Sector," 1 September 2017, https://www.theengineroom.org/panic-button-lessons-learned/

[101] T. Geber (tin.fyi), Correspondence with Michael Flynn (Global Detention Project), 13 December 2019.

[102] T. Geber (tin.fyi), Correspondence with Michael Flynn (Global Detention Project), 13 December 2019.

whose "guiding principles" is: "Aim to make your targeted users not only beneficiaries of your technology but aim to build it with them and make them co-creators."

In recent years, much emphasis has been placed on awareness-raising campaigns designed to influence migratory behaviours (and ultimately dissuade would-be migrants from departing). But how effective are such campaigns? Abu Shadi, a Syrian aid worker in Egypt who is also an administrator of a popular Syrian community Facebook page, was previously involved in face-to-face awareness-raising campaigns on behalf of the IOM. Their "main focus," he said, was always the "risks that refugees and migrants will face if they travel illegally by the sea."[103] That had often proved ineffective, in Abu Shadi's view, because people were "already aware of the risks." And as the GDP discovered when using Facebook geo-targeting tools for its sponsored ads, it was far from clear what the meaning or impact of those ads were, raising concerns about whether they could ultimately have negative consequences for refugees and migrants (see page 6).

Measuring the "success" of these kinds of campaigns is notoriously difficult. How do you measure changes in behaviour? Even more, what kind of change is being sought and by whom? A 2016 study commissioned by the UK government's Department for International Development acknowledged that there has been "extremely little evidence on the impact and effectiveness of [these] campaigns" ostensibly designed to dissuade migrants, while pointing to a "strong anecdotal narrative in the literature that information campaigns have very limited effect on migrants' decisions to leave."[104] Other studies, such as one commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security examining 33 information campaigns, have similarly found that "there is reason to believe the effects of migration information campaigns will be limited."[105] Instead, the existence of alternative sources of information—often based on existing relationships of trust along community or familial lines—means that community transfer of knowledge about a story of migratory success or failure may ultimately be more persuasive than a glossy, seemingly well-thought-through messaging campaign drafted by government staff, INGO consultants, and PR companies working from the other side of the sea or border in tandem with sound-board interviews with members from the relevant displaced and/or migrant community.

> Given that such knowledge and stories are generally transmitted by people connected to each other by prior relations of trust—by relatives, friends, neighbours, work colleagues etc.—beliefs and understandings (and ultimately behaviour) will be more likely influenced by trusted networks than by foreign authorities.[106]

Awareness-raising that tries to tap into these "prior relations of trust" does exist—something that is arguably easier to do through remote messaging and social media as opposed to face-to-face community-building in often remote or potentially sensitive locations. UNHCR

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[103] Abu Shadi (anonymous for security reasons), face-to-face interview with Tom Rollins (Global Detention Project), Cairo, January 2018.

[104] E. Browne, "Impact of Communication Campaigns to Deter Irregular Migration," *GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report,* 31 July 2015, http://gsdrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/HQ1248.pdf

[105] Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security, "Raising Awareness, Changing Behaviour?: Combatting Irregular Migration Through Information Campaigns," November 2016, https://bit.ly/38NJYC1

[106] Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security, "Raising Awareness, Changing Behaviour?: Combatting Irregular Migration Through Information Campaigns," November 2016, https://bit.ly/38NJYC1

has begun prioritising more community-led and human-centred awareness-raising campaigns. Although far from perfect, the agency's emphasis on an adaptive, human-centred mass information policy is summarised in the guidance on "Communicating with Communities" (CwC) found in the fourth edition of the UNHCR Emergency Handbook, republished in digital-only format in 2015.

> Emergency responders need to understand the information needs of different groups and individuals, as well as their preferred channels of communication and most trusted sources. Equally important, the views of communities should inform humanitarian decision making.[107]

Staff are reminded that,

> While technology should not drive communication, new technologies can help operations to reach certain populations and to communicate in certain contexts. Focus on the purpose of dialogue, the needs of the target population, and content, when selecting channels of communication.[108]

The handbook subsequently provides practitioners with a series of recommended "best practices" for how to communicate with communities, including how to,

- Run an information and communications needs assessment;
- Coordinate communications initiatives;
- Provide factual, objective and actionable information that enables people to take well-informed decisions;
- Make use of many communications channels to promote inclusivity and accessibility;
- Don't assume that communication channels flow in a single direction;
- Manage expectations, counter misinformation, and address rumours;
- Don't duplicate effort: build on staff capacities and work with established services to ensure that communication initiatives are sustainable;
- Identify the resources you need to maintain your capacity to communicate, handle reactions, and respond to them;
- Test and refine your communications activities.[109]

Diaspora networks and community "ties" are sometimes vilified for facilitating migration. Participants in Egypt and Sicily discussed how community transfer of knowledge about migration from North Africa to Europe had resulted in misinformation—people moving to Libya in search of work without a prior knowledge of the risks involved, and people moving from Libya to Sicily without a prior knowledge of the situation there in terms of asylum, access to legal status, documents, and so forth. At the same time, different practitioners can work alongside those same networks—rather than *using* them—to focus on trustworthy

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[107] UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *UNHCR Emergency Handbook, 4th edition* (2015), https://emergency.unhcr.org/

[108] UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *UNHCR Emergency Handbook, 4th edition* (2015), https://emergency.unhcr.org/

[109] UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *UNHCR Emergency Handbook, 4th edition* (2015), https://emergency.unhcr.org/

information exchange while still affording would-be migrants their agency and right to make informed decisions about their futures.

Euro-Mediterranean activist and rescue network Alarmphone has been particularly effective in using human-centred design practices and grassroots networks to guide awareness-raising and social media outreach. Alarmphone tends to enjoy significant grassroots credibility because its network includes refugees and asylum seekers, former migrants, and various community members. One German Alarmphone representative explained that the network's approach was not "to avoid people coming, but to provide information so that people can base their decision on that information."

This form of awareness-raising has been conducted through radio advertising in origin or transit countries along with videos, published on social media, that explained migratory risks in key languages including Mandingo, Somali, and Tigrinya. Videos featured individuals from these communities who had already made the crossing; and the content of the videos was not simply that the sea was dangerous, but included detailed information about particular risks in order to warn people and equip them with knowledge should they subsequently decide to migrate. A representative at Alarmphone gave two such examples:

(i) Teaching people about the "very crucial point of the first approach of the sea rescue" when migrants on-board often "start panicking or jumping into the water";
(ii) Teaching people about the importance of smartphones including, "How to use a smartphone on the sea crossing" and "how to use geo-tracking" on WhatsApp.

Also worth underscoring is the importance of learning from migrants and refugees how they use already existing apps and finding ways to optimise such usage instead of constantly trying to build new apps and platforms. A 2017 ICRC report titled "Humanitarian Future for Messaging Apps" concluded that "humanitarian organizations need to better understand the opportunities and challenges of Messaging Apps, and that strategies and standards need to be established to determine where Messaging Apps might be most appropriate and effective."[110]

Practitioners should:

(i)   build ties with community interlocutors on the ground who form part of a broader network encompassing community-based activists, refugees, and trusted local NGOs;
(ii)   create partnerships with European, Euro-Mediterranean, and African civil society networks as a first step in community-building;
(iii)   learn from refugees and migrants how they use existing messaging apps to optimise the usefulness of such apps both to them and to those seeking to assist them.

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[110] International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), "Humanitarian Future for Messaging Apps," 2017, https://www.icrc.org/en/document/messaging-apps-untapped-humanitarian-resource

A key over-riding concern about digital platforms is their easy ability to mislead migrants and refugees, including as a result of purposeful disinformation campaigns waged by criminal groups. Smugglers and traffickers heavily use digital tech to promote sometimes dangerously false information, and refugees and migrants—indeed, most people—can be ill-equipped to cognitively and rationally factor this into their assessments.

On the other hand, the IOM and others have complained that social media is providing a "turbo-charged communications channel to criminals, to smugglers, to traffickers, to exploiters."[111] This has fuelled criticism of initiatives like the Free Basics function that gives phones access to Facebook without the internet. Nevertheless, as the GDP discovered in field interviews in Egypt and Sicily, while it might be argued that Facebook's Free Basics facilitates migration and the work of smuggling and trafficking networks, the service can also be a force for good. Platforms such as RefUnite have used the same function to reach migrant populations across the African Continent in an attempt to reunite families, for example.

Harm-reduction, or harm-mitigation, is often the primary objective of the social media/ICT user on the move, crossing borders, or at risk of detention. Adam, a Sudanese refugee in Egypt, explained how Free Basics had helped him during his highly dangerous journey from Uganda to Egypt, after deportation from Israel. Similarly, Marley, a Gambian migrant in Sicily, used the function in Agadez to research safe routes through Libya.

Given the present-day state of irregular migration and the egregious rights abuses experienced by refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, it might be tempting for any organisation to start securitising online spaces, preventing social media activity, or firing-off strongly worded warnings and awareness-raising campaigns about migratory risks. The possibilities of social media can sometimes seem limitless, both for criminal syndicates and technocrats. However, this approach is unlikely to have any impact on the multi-faceted, complex drivers of migration—either in the short or long-term.

Ultimately, it is counterproductive to think that we can or should seek to weed ut all disinformation campaigns online, or disable the tools that make such campaigns possible. At the same time, it is critical that practitioners remain aware of the false uses of digital platforms. If they wish to counteract smugglers spamming their advertisements, they should learn whether there are existing systems in place to counteract malicious campaigns and find ways to strengthen them.

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[111] S. Nebehay, "U.N. Calls on Social Media Giants to Control Platforms Used to Lure African Migrants," *Reuters*, 8 December 2017, https://reut.rs/2PWysvo

The lessons above have largely been shaped around considerations that practitioners may have when developing tech tools. However, these reflections have constantly bumped up against two larger, systemic issues that complicate any effort to craft harm-reducing digital tools for migrants and refugees: access and money. If migrants are prevented from having smartphones in detention centres, there is no digital app that can help them document what is happening to them. Similarly, what is the use of a smartphone if a refugee does not have the means to access a network? On the other side of the equation: Donor fatigue concerning new tech projects, like we saw with AI's panic button project, threatens to curtail innovations that could make a difference because project's fail to have long-term sustainability, which can lead to increasing amounts of potentially harmful digital litter.

And finally, as Tin Geber has cautioned, it is deeply misleading to view new tech and apps as a way to resolve the world's refugee and migration challenges: "We don't need to make 'digital solutions' for all the random issues that we think refugees might have: we aren't even able to fix those at home, what gives us the gall to think we can solve it for someone else? … Refugees need access: access to internet, and access to power. By 'power' I mean the type that charges your devices, not political power: I have no idea how to change that profoundly embarrassing imbalance."[112]

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[112] T. Geber, "Hackathons and Refugees: We Can Do Better," *The Engine Room*, 21 September 2016, https://www.theengineroom.org/hackathons-and-refugees-we-can-do-better/

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