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**Reconnected in Refuge: Navigating ICT Use by Migrants and Refugee Assistance Organizations in Humanitarian Contexts**

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“It's not easy to start over in a new place,' he said. 'Exile is not for everyone. Someone has to stay behind, to receive the letters and greet family members when they come back.”

― Edwidge Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying*

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# Abstract

In the wake of the 2015 European refugee crisis, much attention has been drawn to the role of internet and smartphone communication in helping migrants navigate towards Europe. However, much less research has been done on how smartphones and internet messaging aids refugees and migrants with navigating resources available. A thorough understanding of how refugee services organizations – both government and non-governmental – have adapted is absent from the literature. My research consists of understanding how smartphone and internet messaging applications increases the agency of refugee populations in departure, transit, and arrival.

Briefly, this research seeks to understand:

* How are refugees utilizing internet-based messaging technologies to navigate migration, asylum, and reintegration or resettlement?
* How have internet-based messaging technologies impacted the relationship between refugees and refugee assistance organizations?

Through a series of extensive, in-depth interviews with aid workers at different refugee services agencies, refugees with experiences using internet messaging in the context of forced migration, and or researchers working at the intersection of migration and media studies. These interviews show the significance of internet messaging and social media on refugee-decision making, as well as the range of adaptation strategies from refugee services agencies years after their adoption. While internet-messaging offers refugees a greater sense of agency in navigating migration and meaningful psycho-social support, these come with increased fears of surveillance, information anxiety, and murkier boundaries in the relationships between refugees and refugee assistance organizations.

Based on my findings, I ultimately recommend strategies that will work to increasing internet and wireless data access for migrant populations in urban areas and camp settlements. In addition, I urge for the adoption of country-level legislation safeguarding data privacy within asylum proceedings, as well as initiatives to better define best practices for communication between organizations and migrant beneficiaries via internet messaging applications. Internet communication technologies have become near-ubiquitous in refugee contexts, but without properly understanding their usage, we limit the ways to help refugees on their own terms. This research is a sincere attempt to do so.

# Introduction

This qualitative thesis investigates how refugees are increasingly relying on internet-communication technology usage to make decisions at different stages of forced migration and how humanitarian organizations have adapted to this new mode of communication. In this paper, I argue that and created a more developed sense of agency for refugees and asylum-seekers in the process of departure, transit, and arrival – allowing migrants to rely on larger networks of social capital in seeking out asylum resources and remain in contact with these connections over long period of time. Extending from existing theories of social capital, this research sheds light into how people are using internet-communication technologies to pool information about migration routes and spread them through their personal networks, as well as exploring if this has offered potential migrants more opportunities and agency in the process. On the non-profit side of humanitarian crises, this research explores how internet-communication technology usage has been incorporated into non-profit operations, how this has impacted accessibility for beneficiaries, what level of trust refugees maintain in these communications and if it has impact trust in their services, and what limitations or uncertainty have remained for non-profit organizations as they transition from using internet-communication technologies in a period of crisis to strategically implementing their use in the long-term. This research is conducted through a series of interviews with humanitarian relief workers aiding refugees seeking asylum services in Europe, technical advisers to large-scale humanitarian organizations, and refugees in the United States that employed the use of internet-communication technology in the process of migration.

By the end of 2016, nearly 5.2 million refugees and migrants reached Europe by sea, undertaking dangerous journeys from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries. During the European refugee crisis, the widespread use of internet communication technologies (ICTs) and social media became increasingly understood as a tool migrants and refugees increasingly relied upon for information while making the decision to migrate and to access information on where to go next.

Migrants increasingly rely on ICT use to seek out and make decisions at various points of the forced migration process: to seek out rescue services while in desperate situations, to receive information on traveled upon migration routes or find reliable smuggling networks, or to locate information on the intended country of destination. In addition, wide-scale messaging applications serve uses that have not been fully documented by researchers. Aside from searching for information and communicating with loved ones, in many cases, members of the diaspora actively participate as parts of a larger information network, passing valuable information down to migrants intending to make journeys themselves. Constant communication through ICTs facilitate wider social networks, allowing refugees and asylum-seekers to utilize social capital in desperate situations and exercise a greater sense of agency in determining their modes of migration. Humanitarian organizations have been pushed to incorporate ICT use for interactions between non-profit staff and beneficiaries – to provide information about the non-profit services, to send and receive necessary information from beneficiaries, and to offer faster and more accessible responses, especially for beneficiaries that prefer vocal interactions through in-person messaging.

Existing research informs that people are increasingly relying on ICT usage and social media to make crucial decisions in migrating, even when there are great technological disparities in who can access this information. However, less is known about how this increased connectivity spreads through social networks, and little is known about how migrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees interact with humanitarian organizations over these platforms or the levels of trust they hold in these communications. Investigating this research question and the role of ICT use for refugees, asylum-seekers, and internally displaced persons have great importance for policymakers and providers of humanitarian aid. While it commonly accepted that refugees to Europe rely on ICTs to learn about services, the policy implications of this are not completely understood – perhaps because of hasty nature of non-profit agencies trying to utilize them and perhaps because ICTs can be used to facilitate clandestine forms of migration to Europe. There are many gaps in research surrounding how non-profits strategically utilize ICT communication. At the moment, humanitarian organizations have no agreed upon codes of conduct or ethical frameworks for integrating internet-based messaging communications into their operations. Organizations often adopt them on an ad-hoc basis, only after realizing that its staff or impacted population is already using them for information access, and because of this have not fleshed out procedures for their use. While dealing with sensitive information that a migrant can potentially pass through this channel, there is no ethical framework to guide its usage, and with a technical company as an involved third party in facilitating this communication, there is little control over where this information goes or even changes in particular messaging applications. ICT usage has become widespread, to the point where it is irresponsible for humanitarian organizations to take them into account in strategic interventions. Unfortunately, due to the speedy nature of humanitarian crises, humanitarian organizations have employed messaging applications to communicate with impacted communities in crisis situations, but they have neglected to evaluate and properly understand the nuances of how communities locate, utilize, and share information to adjust their own operations in response. If left unaddressed, humanitarian organizations will be unable to employ messaging technology in a responsible and effective manner.

# Background

#### *European Migration Crisis*

In 2015, over 1.3 million asylum seekers presented their claims, marking the largest flow of asylum seekers to Europe since 1985.*[[1]](#footnote-1)* Between 2015 and 2016, Syrians made up the largest population seeking asylum in Europe at 46.7 percent, along with significant populations migrating from Afghanistan, Iraq, and other countries.*[[2]](#footnote-2)* During the crisis, hundreds of thousands of refugees made their way to Europe by crossing the Mediterranean in rickety boats and rubber dinghies.*[[3]](#footnote-3)* Thousands of deaths have occurred along the Mediterranean routes. In 2016, 5,096 deaths were recorded in crossing the Mediterranean.*[[4]](#footnote-4)* It is an understatement to say that the escalation in migration towards Europe was caused by many factors. Ongoing conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq have been the primary drivers of migration. These conflicts are not new, with the most recent beginning the Syrian Civil War in 2011, but the years following saw their escalation. Mass displacement overwhelmed countries of first asylum, particularly Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, which sheltered 3.6 million Syrian refugees between them. causing countries to tighten their borders and limit access to host country services by refugees.*[[5]](#footnote-5)* This caused many to migrate towards Europe for protection. In addition, the failure of the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya to leave behind a cohesive central government led to the country emerging as a major hotspot for clandestine migration towards Europe.*[[6]](#footnote-6)*

Frontex, the EU border patrol and coast guard agency, identified several routes utilized by irregular migrants to enter Europe, which have been grouped together in three common routes below in the context of this influx.*[[7]](#footnote-7)* Broadly speaking, the Central Mediterranean route largely sees migrants pass through North Africa and travel by sea towards Italy or Malta. The Eastern Mediterranean route sees migrants from the Middle East and West Asia crossing from Turkey into Greece by sea. The Western Balkans route sees typically travel by land through the Balkans and continue along this route further into Europe.

#### *Dublin Regulation*

Adopted in 2013, Dublin Regulation III mandates that asylum seekers must claim refugee status in the first EU country they arrive in.[[8]](#footnote-8) This EU state becomes responsible for examining their asylum applications and utilizing Eurodoc, the EU fingerprint database, to trace back if this state is the asylum seeker’s first entry point.[[9]](#footnote-9) Using Eurodac, government authorities can determine whether asylum seekers have already applied for asylum in another EU state or if they have entered into another EU state unauthorized.[[10]](#footnote-10) Through the Dublin Regulation, asylum seekers have only one opportunity to apply for asylum in the EU, and if this request is denied, this decision is recognized by all EU states.” If one is registered in the first country of arrival, they will be unable to seek asylum in other EU states. With the exception of family members with refugee status or pending asylum status in another EU state, asylum seeker cannot choose the country they submit their application to and may be transferred back to their state of first entry if found to be violating this.

The main objectives of the Dublin Regulation are to avoid someone seeking asylum in the country of their choice (often referred to as “asylum shopping”) or live in Europe with no country taking responsibility for their asylum request (often referred to as “asylum orbiting”). The Dublin system has been widely criticized for keeping much of the pressure of refugee influxes on EU border states, such as Italy, Greece, and Hungary, disproportionate to the rest of Europe. The underlying assumption of the Dublin agreement is that states have the same ability to process asylum applications, but with large-scale migration to the EU, this has not proven to be the case; the wait times of asylum applications vary greatly from state to state. By the end of 2016, Pew Research Center estimates that 94 percent of applicants entering Europe during the 2015 influx in Hungary and 90 percent in Greece were still waiting for an application decision, compared to 49 percent in Germany,[[11]](#footnote-11)

“Asylum-shopping” has coined as a derogatory term for asylum seekers decisions to choose the country they apply for asylum in.[[12]](#footnote-12) But refugees often have practical reasons to not claim asylum in the first country in which they arrive. As a result, this can create significant detriments to navigating asylum, reception conditions, and opportunities for employment – further encouraging refugees to claim asylum in other European countries. In addition, the presence of friends and acquaintances in a country, knowledge of a country’s language and the country’s past reception of refugees shape asylum-seekers preferred destinations – in a manner that must be understood not as picking and choosing, but learning which country they can be expect to have their rights recognized and have the best opportunities for permanent settlement.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Throughout the 2015 – 2016 refugee crisis, the international community was confronted with the assertion that the Dublin Regulation simply does not work.[[14]](#footnote-14) Greece, for example, faced severe difficulties in processing asylum applications and providing for the basic needs of arriving asylum seekers. In 2015, only 13,197 people applied for asylum in Greece as most people subsequently traveled through the Balkans to other countries.[[15]](#footnote-15) In 2015, Germany agreed to process Syrian refugees that had claimed asylum in other countries in the EU as if they had claimed asylum in Germany first.[[16]](#footnote-16) At the same time, Hungary announced it would no longer accept returns of asylum seekers who had first arrived in Hungary and traveled to other EU countries.[[17]](#footnote-17) In 2017, despite the failures of the past refugee crisis, the European Court of Justice ruled to keep the Dublin Regulations in its present form.[[18]](#footnote-18) Without its removal, refugees will remain motivated to migrate past first entry countries despite the illicit nature and dangers of doing so.

#### *EU Turkey Deal & Libya Deal*

Negotiated in March 2016, the EU-Turkey deal intended to limit irregular migration to the EU through Turkey. Upon implementation, any migrant having entered the EU through Turkey without having applied for asylum in Turkey would be returned. In exchange for Turkey’s commitment to limiting irregular migration into Europe, the EU agreed to resettle Syrian refugees hosted in Turkey on a one-to-one basis, i.e. for each asylum seeker returned to Turkey, the EU would resettle a Syrian refugee, as well as provide significant amounts of financial aid and reconsider Turkey’s bid to join the EU.*[[19]](#footnote-19)*

The deal had immediate impacts on migration towards the EU; in the three years since the European migrant crisis, the number of migrants entering Europe dropped by over half. While stemming migration towards the European Union, the deal came under harsh criticism from human rights groups internationally. The deal characterizes Turkey as a “safe, third country,” allowing for returns of asylum seekers without directly violating the 1951 Refugee Convention.*[[20]](#footnote-20)* However, human rights groups argue that Turkey fails to create adequate conditions for hosting asylum seekers and refugees and that many refugees, particularly non-Syrian refugees, do not have consistent opportunities to apply for asylum.*[[21]](#footnote-21)* Critics argue that the deal is little more than deterrence strategy, which encourages migrants attempting to reach Europe to simply take more dangerous routes. Mass migration to the EU diminished greatly, but irregular migration to Europe continues despite its illicit nature and the risk of being returned.

As of 2020, the current state of the EU-Turkey deal is shaky and shows signs of reverting to the large-scale influx of migrants in 2015. In March of this year, Turkey announced it would no longer block refugees attempting to migrate to Europe, pushing thousands of migrants to attempt passage into Europe. Immediately following this declaration, the Greek government announced a move to freeze asylum applications as a deterrence measure.*[[22]](#footnote-22)* Without an agreement on sensible migration policies, the EU risks neglecting refugee protection mandates, as well as failing to uphold principals of non-refoulment in the face of new waves of irregular migration.

Meanwhile, in Libya, the EU has attempted to bring back border controls and deterrence strategies to stop migrants from making the journey to Europe. Tens of thousands of migrants have been indefinitely detained in Libya over the past two years. Since 2017, the EU provided the Libyan coast guard with equipment and training for preventing migration towards Europe.*[[23]](#footnote-23)* Human rights organizations have repeatedly condemned the support of the Libyan coast guard, which consistently risks the safety of asylum seekers and refugees.*[[24]](#footnote-24)* Between 2017 and 2018, non-governmental groups performed approximately forty percent of search and rescue operation the central Mediterranean, but many began facing legal battles or restrictions from Italian or Maltese authorities.*[[25]](#footnote-25)* Little evidence exists to suggest that emergency rescues by non-governmental organizations encourage sea journeys to Europe, showing an increasing disregard for the human rights of migrants.

# Defining Terms

Within this report, it will be useful to distinguish between migrant, asylum seeker, and refugee and resist the urge to use them interchangeably. A refugee is recognized as a person fleeing “conflict or persecution on the basis of race, religion, nationality, or membership of a particular social group or political opinion.” Under the 1951 U.N. Refugee Convention, refugees are entitled to protection and states are not allowed to expel or return refugees to places where their life or freedom could be threatened – a principle referred to as non-refoulement. Asylum seeker refers to an individual who has applied for asylum but whose refugee status has not yet been determined. Migrant, however, refers simply to “any person who changes [their] country of usual residence” – a umbrella term which can encompass asylum seekers and economic migrants who are seeking jobs and better lives. While helpful for contextualizing current discourse on migration policy, I acknowledge that these distinctions become rather blurred in practice. People with well-founded fears of persecution may have their claims denied by governmental authorities if they are unable to skillfully present these claims to asylum officials. A person’s reasons for asylum can often combine economic and political elements, without making these claims less valid; however, highlighting economic reasons within the asylum application process runs the risk of characterizing vulnerable populations as less in need of international protection. In coverage surrounding the European migrant crisis, news media has tended to conflate these terms that are critical to this discussion.

In addition, attached below is a list of terms related to ICT and smartphone usage, which although common, may serve helpful in delineating the ways they emerge in information sharing practices among migrant and refugee populations, as well as non-profit agencies.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **INTERNET & SOCIAL MEDIA TERMS** | |
| **Terminology** | **Definition** |
| Messaging App | A mobile-phone-based software program that allows users to send and receive information from and to their phones over an internet connection (either via Wi-Fi or mobile data networks). |
| SIM Card | Subscriber Identity Module; a portable memory chip used primarily in mobile phones, which holds personal information of including the phone number, text messages, and other user data. |
| Smartphone | A mobile phone offering advanced features, typically including a GPS  sensor, the ability to access the internet over mobile-phone networks and Wi-Fi connections, and the capacity to download apps from the internet. |
| Feature Phone | A mobile phone with the capacity to make calls and send SMS messages, but with few other advanced capabilities. |
| SMS | Short Message Service; commonly referred to as “text messaging”, is a service for sending short messages of up to 160 characters to mobile devices, including mobile phones, smartphones, and web-based applications. |
| 2G, 3G, or 4G Wireless Network Technology | G refers to the “generation” of the underlying wireless network technology; 1G was a purely analogue network designed to carry voice and nothing else; 2G arrived in the early 1990s and transported data via a digital signal. 3G was launched in the early 2000s and offered significantly improved speeds and higher traffic capacity. 4G purely carries data and offers the highest upload and download speeds available. |
| Metadata | Data about the transmission of information on messaging apps, including the date and time at which messages or files were sent, the user’s location, the identity of the person to whom data was sent, and in some cases, even the phone’s manufacturer and operating system. |
| Social Media | Forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content. |
| Information-Sharing Ecosystems | Complex adaptive systems that include information infrastructure, tools, media, producers, consumers, curators, and sharers. Within these systems, different types of news and information may be received from outside then passed on to others through word of mouth, key community members, telephone, the internet and other media within a defined community or space. |
| VoIP | Voice over Internet Protocol; a method and group of technologies for the delivery of voice communications and multimedia sessions over Internet Protocol networks, such as the Internet. |
| WhatsApp Messenger | A freeware, cross-platform messaging and VoIP service owned by Facebook, Inc. It allows users to send encrypted text messages and voice messages, make voice and video calls, and share images, documents, user locations, and other media. |
| Facebook Messenger | A messaging app and platform developed by Facebook, Inc. It allows users to send messages and exchange photos, videos, audio, and files. |

# Literature Review

#### *Theories of Social Capital and Inequality*

Social capital is a widely reaching sociological construct aimed at capturing the value of social relationships. While definitions of social capital can differ across disciplines, the term remains valuable for its ability to recognize the resources embedded in social relationships and understand structure and agency within the study of social networks and inequality. The concept originally stemmed from writings of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, but the contemporary definition of social capital emerged from Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman, who developed their theories in separate directions – Bourdieu viewing social capital as the consequence of resources embedded within social networks and individuals’ investments, and Coleman understanding social capital as composed of a variety of different social structures that can facilitate certain actions of actors within the structure.[[26]](#footnote-26) Social capital can encompass civic and community life, social connections, norms of reciprocity, and trustworthiness, but for the purposes of understanding social capital within migrant networks we will draw upon Bourdieu’s definition: “it is the sum of actual or potential resources related to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.” More individualistically, it can refer to investment and use of embedded resources in social relations for expected returns.[[27]](#footnote-27) In simpler terms, social capital conceptualizes that resources embedded within an individual’s social network, such as family, friends, neighbors, acquaintances, or community, can be used by an individual for expected returns. While conceptualized in the last few decades, empirical studies have strongly confirmed that access to resources through social networks impact action outcomes – in the form of employment, professional advancement, and other investment outcomes.[[28]](#footnote-28)

While social groupings and the utilization of network ties is ubiquitous, not all individual or social groups acquire social capital in the same way or receive the expected returns from social capital that other do. Social groups that emerge at relatively disadvantaged positions in societies, further cemented by the tendency for individuals to associate those of a similar group, will often establish social networks with poorer resources, resulting in poorer social capital.[[29]](#footnote-29) Resource-rich networks are characterized by relative richness in the quantity and resource heterogeneity, providing access to a larger range of information and influence. Further arguments drawn from Lin’s research have characterized people with lower socioeconomic statuses tend to rely more on strong ties that were centered around family and community connections, which are typically homogenous in resources because their access to resources is similar and impacted by the same structural constraints.[[30]](#footnote-30) While cross-group ties can facilitate better social resources and outcomes for the disadvantaged groups, their homogeneity and underlying structural constraints reduce this possibility.

#### Social Networks in Migration

In the sociological literature on migration, social networks are examined as a set of strong ties, largely based on kinship, friendship, or a shared origin community, providing opportunities to connect migrants and non-migrants within a new country.[[31]](#footnote-31) The enclave-economy hypothesis describes how ethnic economic enclaves often provide opportunities for laborers and entrepreneurs to gain a foothold in the local economy and labor market. As conceptualized by Alejandro Portes, participation in the enclave economy provides immigrants with alternative, speedier options for achieving economic mobility within a host society.[[32]](#footnote-32) In the case of migrant groups, ethnic ties or similar community origins are viewed through a social capital framework, as they provide valuable access to resources but are also likely to be disadvantaged in social resources as a direct result of societal standards and culture.[[33]](#footnote-33) Upon arrival in a foreign country, migrants face unique challenges in assimilation and integration that can be met through their social networks. However, networking within these social networks further pushes poor social capital, and as a result, researchers argue that immigrant networks contain less resources and are further disadvantaged in accessing others.[[34]](#footnote-34) For instance, studies by Montero found that increased educational or occupational attainment weakened reliance on ethnic ties among Japanese Americans in the United States.[[35]](#footnote-35) Similar sociological studies found that the longer immigrants lived in Canada, the less they relied on ethnic ties as a means for accessing resources.[[36]](#footnote-36)

In understanding how migrants mobilize through their social networks, Granovetter hypothesized that weaker ties are often more advantageous that strong ties.[[37]](#footnote-37) Comparatively, weak ties serve as links between social groups that harbor different pools of information and can in many situations be more valuable.[[38]](#footnote-38) Granovetter writes at length about the strength of weak ties, distinguishing between 'bonding' and 'bridging' forms of social capital – the former of which refers to the value of networks for homogenous groups and the latter of which increases the society-wide spread of information. 'Bridging' forms of social capital allow migrants – potential, arrived, or otherwise – to gain access to larger pools of information that do not overlap, increasing their likelihood of receiving valuable information related to asylum and integration services.[[39]](#footnote-39) Since the advent of ICT and social media, migrants are less bound to the traditional, tight-knit communities examined in previous literature because they facilitate access to larger, looser, and frequently changing networks with weaker bonds but a wider range of potential sources for new information.[[40]](#footnote-40)

In observing how social media has impacted the structure and further development of migrant networks, researchers identified four relevant functions of social media, all dealing with either the activation and reactivation of social capital or opportunities to exchange practical knowledge on migration at different stages of the migration process.[[41]](#footnote-41) First and foremost, online media plays a vital role in maintaining connections between migrants and past social networks of families and friends – creating instant forms of communication that are more intimate than ever before. Because they can facilitate contact in this way, they have lowered some of the emotional and social costs that come with migration – easing the difficulties of migration and providing the potential to encourage others to take on the same journey. In addition, the introduction of new technologies has fundamentally altered the communication that can occur before, during, and after migration. The simultaneous messaging that ICTs offer is instant and low-cost, and, in addition to written and spoken communication, ICTs offer more visual communication through photographs and video chatting.[[42]](#footnote-42) Second, social media and internet messaging creates further opportunities to reestablish important weak ties, in a way that is far more efficient than traditional or individualized mediums. These opportunities become vital for migrants as forms of bridging social capital. Because they are more likely to gain access to information from a wide range of relatively weak connections rather than a few close contacts, these weak ties offer information or connections that are useful in migration. Third, they offer the potential to surpass originally established ties to activate new ties through these communication mediums, mainly to locate potential housing, employment, or other services available to migrants. Lastly, while serving as a communication medium, ICTs also function as an open information source, often dubbed as a democratization of knowledge. ICTs offer access to information through non-institutional and typically unmonitored institutions – creating opportunities to compile information from various internet sources as part of the migration process outside structures of legality.

In this way, ICTs have established an infrastructure composed of strong and weak ties, useful in gaining access to information that can play a substantial role in decision-making about migration, allowing migrants to subvert some of the inequalities in social capital that Lin notes. However, ICT access creates significant limitations in the process. Digital inequalities, typically correlated with socio-economic status, education level, age and gender, can cause significant differences. Logistically speaking, gaps can also exist between the information that can be utilized by migrants and the preferences of migrants in accessing them. For example, the popularity of certain ICT applications can vary due to cultural preferences or national origin, and this can create social networks that do not often overlap. In addition, the resources offered through social media can vary in reliability and trustworthiness as migrants have often become victims to false information and outright deceit.

Based on examining existing theories of social capital, we understand that migrants rely on existing social networks, often within their own ethnic or community grouping because of institutional and structural limitations, in the process of migration. The emergence and widespread use of ICTs have necessitated further developments on social networking theories. In the context of global migration, ICTs and social media provide opportunities for migrants to develop broader social networks with weaker ties, creating a more diverse set of sources helpful in procuring information about asylum services and other helpful resources.

#### ICT & Social Media Use Among Refugees & Asylum-Seekers

In research examining Syrian refugees’ information practices in Amman, Jordan, researchers discovered a prevalent condition of information precarity, where their information access is often unstable and can potentially place them at economic, political, or social risks in attempting to use them.[[43]](#footnote-43) Refugees within this context typically depended on family, friends and neighbors within similar social circles, and organizations for information, but they were confronted with difficulties in using this information to make decisions – due to residual fears of surveillance from the Syrian state and the fact that this information can be easily tainted by rumors and misinformation. Organizations existed as a consistent information resource available, but this ever-present sense of information precarity created threats to their well-being, as they could be left unable to access timely and helpful information or information helpful in improving their economic circumstances, while the shrinking social networks they had previously relied upon provided them with less access to information.[[44]](#footnote-44)

As of 2019, 2.53 billion people around the world regularly use messaging applications to communicate, a number that is expected to grow to three billion users in 2022.[[45]](#footnote-45) The most popular applications consist of WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and WeChat, along with many others. Messaging applications have rose to global prominence, surpassing SMS in the number of daily messaging in 2013 and overtaking social media networks in monthly active user accounts in 2015.[[46]](#footnote-46) This rise in ICT use has also been as common amongst refugees. A recent UNHCR survey among refugees living in Lebanon found that respondents with access to a mobile phone massed 92 percent, compared to 54 percent for when that same population had been residing in Syria, and those with access to ICTs had risen to 75 percent from 10 percent.[[47]](#footnote-47) Surveys with UNHCR staff members in 2016 related that 80 percent of them saw refugees at their sites using a variety of internet-based messaging applications at least once per week.[[48]](#footnote-48) In the process of transit, a recent International Organization for Migration (IOM) survey of Iraqis in Europe found that twenty-three percent and twenty-two percent of people used social media and the internet respectively to plan their journeys.[[49]](#footnote-49) Organizations often comment that Syrian refugees prioritize paying for data because they intend to use it for internet-based communications, and the overall cost of sending messages over ICTs can be lower than paying to send SMS messages, even with a lower-costing phone. Many international organizations and non-profits have done surveys and studies to understand how many people are using ICTs to plan their journeys, but little is known outside of this – how people utilize messaging applications and social media has largely gone unanswered.

There are great disparities in who has access to ICT that are relevant to humanitarian contexts. Refugees in urban locations are much more likely to have access to an internet-capable phone than those in rural areas; in 2015, UNHCR found that 68 percent of refugee households urban areas had access to an internet-capable mobile phone, compared to 22 percent in rural areas.[[50]](#footnote-50) In many countries, men own smartphones and have access to ICT at higher rates than women, and globally, eighteen to thirty-four-year old people utilize messaging applications at higher rates than those over the age of thirty-five.[[51]](#footnote-51) But despite this, humanitarian organizations are presented with countless reasons for employing internet-based messaging communication, in addition to SMS, voice calls, and radio, during a crisis, because their target population is already using the application, because they can reduce communication costs for the non-profit and refugee beneficiaries, and because they can enable faster communication and mitigate SIM card issues that arise while crossing borders.

Non-profit organizations have been forced to adapt to the increasing online presence of refugees and asylum-seekers. For example, the International Rescue Committee and Mercy Corps have both launched websites focused on bringing together and making information about the services available to refugees publicly available in Southern Europe and Jordan. Large-scale organizations have been pushed to incorporate ICT use for interactions between non-profit staff and beneficiaries spread information non-profit services but identifying trends in communication strategies for smaller, grassroots operations has been a challenge for researchers.

# Methods

#### *Data Collection*

My data collection takes the form of semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders involved in the surge of reliance on ICT usage from refugee beneficiaries. I conducted fourteen interviews for my qualitative research study between September 2019 and April 2020. These interviewees can be sorted into three categories – interviewees with experiences using ICTs to communicate with other refugees (directly affected), interviewees working at a non-profit employing ICTs in their communications towards refugee beneficiaries between 2015 and 2019 (aid workers), or interviewees researching ICT-accessible information and services for refugees and asylum-seekers at large-scale humanitarian non-governmental organizations (researchers). These interviews were conducted in a variety of locations – at their place of work, over the phone or video-call, or at another agreed-upon location – and typically lasted between forty-five minutes and one hour. The interviews were recorded with consent of the participants and transcribed immediately in order to ensure the accurate representation of their experiences.

In all my interviews, I first provided a list of questions beforehand and asked general questions about the experiences and opinions of the study participant. For people with experiences using ICTs during migration, questions were more open-ended to allow participants to share details about what ICTs they were using, how often they used them, where they accessed information relevant to asylum access and locating resources, and if they interacted with refugee aid non-profit organizations in the process, as well as their perceptions towards them. Questions towards refugee assistance workers were focused on the work that they are doing, their observations on how refugees utilized ICTs in forced migration and social integration, how they employed ICT-use in organizational implications, and what limitations they saw in the process. With my phone, video, and in-person interviews, I reworked and developed new questions based on their responses, making the interviews less structured as a result. Sample interview guides for refugees and refugee assistance workers are included in the appendix. A snowball approach was used during these interviews as well, due to many of the interviewees’ professional relationships with others working in humanitarian aid and refugee resettlement.

The intersection between migration and media studies is an emerging field of study, and much effort has gone into place this research in conversation While much anecdotal evidence exists to support the increasing use of ICTs during the 2015 European refugee crisis, little qualitative research regarding the perceptions of those using ICT access within the process of forced migration has been done. While many non-profits have been quick to employ ICT-use in their communication towards refugee beneficiaries, more must be done to assess what has been gained from doing so, as well as the potential limitations and risks. This project’s strengths are derived from the level of depth provided through these interviews, that cannot be obtained through survey data or quantitative research that seeks to estimate how often refugees choose to communicate through these applications.

Limitations of my approach become evident within my analysis. Much of the data collected is based on personal perceptions and unique experiences from the participants, making it difficult to compare or generalize the gathered information. The project identifies similar trends in the experiences of participants – whether they were using ICTs during forced migration or provided services to refugee beneficiaries – and gain valuable information on ICT use in strategic communications from non-profits, but the low quantity of participants is a concerning limitation. In addition, participants with experiences using ICTs during the migration process were recruited without focusing on a specific refugee population. The refugee assistance workers, for instance, I was able to recruit mainly observed internet messaging use among the refugee populations listed in the table below. Given my reliance on the immigrant-enclave hypothesis posited by Alejandro Portes, I began my research with the underlying assumption that internet messaging practices among refugee populations would differ across different communities. After completing my research, this assumption finds its support in the observations and comments of my interviewees as information sharing through online mediums is often centralized by nationality or ethnic grouping. Unfortunately, this makes this research difficult to generalize to refugee populations overall. Among those with personal experiences of forced migration, I spoke entirely with Eritrean refugees. This insight is wonderful to shaping the analysis and conclusions I come to in my research, but this comes naturally with similar limitations. In addition, I was unable to examine if there were any trends in internet messaging use based on nationality, income, or gender, which can introduce increased likelihood or barriers to accessing ICTs. Future research would ideally seek out a larger sample size and conduct research separated by different refugee populations to examine differences in internet communication that occur.

#### *Researcher Positionality*

I do not have experiences with forced migration or asylum processes in Europe or the United States, and as such, I do not maintain the same familiarity with these subjects as my interviews. However, I am incredibly passionate about issues surrounding forced migration, humanitarian assistance, and refugee rights, and in the process, I specialized my policy studies around human rights, became President of our University’s Partnership for the Advancement of Refugee Rights, and interned at the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration at the Department of State. I am a child of refugees, and for most of my life, my family has been at the other end of – watching family and friends employ technology to expand their pool of resources in migrating from their home country. In watching the 2015 – 2016 refugee crisis in the Mediterranean unfold, I also saw the everyday elevation of smartphones and ICTs in the process of migration – interlinking of networks that helped migrants access emergency services, asylum information. and immediate forms of communication.

As an aspiring sociologist, I became interested in understanding this increased connectivity as a form of bridging social capital – of allowing refugees and asylum seekers to rely on larger social networks and remain in contact with these connections over longer periods of time. From a practical mindset, as someone interested in pursuing a career in policy work and social work practice, I wanted to learn how this increased technology usage impacted the relationship between refugees and refugee assistance organizations as the latter attempted to integrate this into their strategic communications. I became drawn to this topic because I noticed stark differences between the migration stories of my parents from Ethiopia and Eritrea in the 1980s and my relatives now – in how they approached migration, information-sharing, and social integration. The interconnectedness brought on by internet communication was immediately apparent to me, and I knew this was a question I genuinely sought answers to.

Online communication had the potential to give migrants stronger forms of agency in the migration process, and non-profits were attempting to utilize them in providing humanitarian aid, but they were still plagued with unreliability and divides in technological accessibility. I hope that this thesis can shed some insight into the impact of technology and internet communication on the mobility of refugees, asylum-seekers, and migrants, as well as government and the humanitarian non-profit sector’s attempts to utilize them. If anything, this thesis can better conceptualize digital space and how refugees use them in shaping refugee identity and community.

#### *Interview Subjects*

Attached below is a completed table with the pseudonyms of my interviewees, their role, and date of the interview. Their names have been changed to preserve their privacy with the exception of Anisa Abeytia, who is a well-known researcher in the field of internet media studies and refugee integration. To further preserve the identities of my interview subjects, I will not include the names of their organizations, but I have included where they are active. All interviews have been condensed and edited for clarity within my data analysis.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **ALL INTERVIEW SUBJECTS** | | |
| **Interviewee** | **Role** | **Interview Date** |
| Wesley | Aid Worker | September 11, 2019 |
| Samiya | Aid Worker | January 18, 2020 |
| Vera | Aid Worker | January 20, 2020 |
| Khirad | Refugee | January 20, 2020 |
| Noha | Refugee | January 21, 2020 |
| Sasha | Aid Worker | January 21, 2020 |
| Muira | Aid Worker | February 10, 2020 |
| Jill | Aid Worker | March 9, 2020 |
| Amara | Aid Worker | March 29. 2020 |
| Anisa Abeytia | Researcher | March 31, 2020 |
| Piper | Aid Worker | April 2, 2020 |
| Farrah | Refugee | April 5, 2020 |
| Anya | Aid Worker | April 10, 2020 |
| Aisha | Aid Worker | April 21, 2020 |

Further below is a breakdown of refugee worker affiliations – the country the operate in, the refugee populations they mainly work with, and the services their non-profit organization provided to refugee communities. All worked at non-profits in positions that required daily interactions with refugees while going through the asylum process or in local integration.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **AID WORKERS** | | | |
| **Interviewee** | **Country** | **Refugee Populations** | **Nonprofit Services** | |
| Wesley | Greece | Afghani, Syrian | Cash Card Distributions | |
| Samiya | Greece | Afghani, Syrian | Education, Psycho-social Support | |
| Vera | Midwest, U.S. | Cambodian, Kurdish, Syrian | Education, Reintegration | |
| Sasha | Germany | Syrian, Eritrean | Translation Work, Asylum Processing | |
| Muira | Canada,  Germany | Syrian, Eritrean | Translation Work, Asylum Processing | |
| Jill | France | Afghani, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Ghanaian, Iranian, Iraqi, Kurdish, Syrian | Registration, Psycho-social Support | |
| Amara | Egypt | Ethiopian, Eritrean, Iraqi, Sudanese, South Sudanese, Somalian, Syrian, Yemeni | Legal Aid, Community/Housing Support | |
| Piper | Brazil | Congolese, Syrian | Family Reunification | |
| Anya | Greece | Afghani, Pakistani, Syrian | Emergency Services, Education | |
| Aisha | Midwest, U.S. | Afghani, Burmese (Rohingya), Congolese, East African, Iraqi, Syrian, Tanzanian | Education, Adolescent Mentorship | |

In addition, I conducted three interviews with Eritrean refugees that had left Eritrea sometime in the 1980s that were still in contact with refugees leaving the country now. They have provided intimate understandings of how internet messaging and social media are utilized in experiences of migration and reintegration. Lastly, I spoke to Anisa Abeytia on how refugee integration in Europe has evolved in tandem with internet messaging and social media usage.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **DIRECTLY AFFECTED** | | |
| **Interviewee** | **Country of Migration** | **Country of Origin** |
| Khirad | Great Britain | Eritrea |
| Nora | Germany | Eritrea |
| Fatma | Canada | Eritrea |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **RESEARCHERS** | | |
| **Interviewee** | **Country of Study** | **Population of Study** |
| Anisa Abeytia | Norway, Sweden, Germany | Syrian Refugees |

# Data & Discussion

As we observe increasing connectivity among refugee populations, promising research has developed examining the means and methods of refugee communication in migration. In this emerging body of research, my study seeks to understand their implications through the experiences of refugees and refugee assistance workers. To begin, I examine much of which is already known about the use of ICTa in migration. Through weaving the insights and stories of my interviewees, I contextualize these experiences in our existing understanding of how they are used to navigate migration, temporary assistance upon arrival, and asylum proceedings.

Following this, I move into a discussion structured around understanding the offline structures that shape digital spaces, information anxiety, and the impact of immediate communication on social networks for refugees. My second section is primarily concerned with how existing community structures of refugees manifest themselves in digital space and impacts information sharing on navigating asylum, integration, and resettlement. My third section primary assesses the impact of information anxiety on refugee communications and examines what precautions refugees and refugee services agencies took towards data protection. Combating misinformation, and in many cases, communicating over digital platforms despite fears of surveillance or privacy invasion – from host country governments and their countries of origin. Lastly, I explore the impact of immediate communication brought on by ICTs on refugee welfare. This analysis manifests in two main themes: understanding the psycho-social value of constant communication with loved ones in coping from trauma, as well as blurrier boundaries between refugee assistance workers and refugees as much of this professional relationship moves online. how this changes refugee’s relationship and positioning to home.

### Navigating Asylum and Aid with ICTs

*Lifelines Far from Home*

“Every refugee, their lifeline is their phone. They all have phones.” This is the first comment Anya made to me in talking about the role of internet messaging technologies for refugees navigating towards safety:

That mind-was boggling to me at back in 2015 where you'd see them tumbling out of the boats with nothing but a backpack if they were lucky. And I recall helping a gentleman – [they] were disembarking, and we were trying to get them into warm clothing on the beach. I offered him a snack and like a granola bar or something and he said, “no, thank you. He asked, but he did say, “Can you please get everything out of my backpack? Because I fear it's going to get wet.” He couldn't do it himself because his hands were shaking. There was a phone and an extra battery and that was it. I just remember being really rattled by that.

In many instances, smartphones become lifelines for people far from home – facilitating connections to family and friends that can provide access resources in departure, transit, and arrival in a new country. In her observations, Samiya remembers seeing Messenger, WhatsApp, and Telegram being used most often by her organization’s beneficiaries:

Messenger was our primary form of communication. We had groups for volunteers to communicate logistics about the camp, and then volunteers could communicate with people individually. Most people had data, but Wi-Fi was plenty at the center. I’d interact with over 300 people daily, and I’d say over ninety percent of people had access to a smartphone.

Previously, Samiya worked as a volunteer with a small refugee services non-profit organization providing psycho-social support and cultural programming in Greece, notes the importance of their presence and absence:

Phone-stealing was the cause of most conflicts at the camp. Sometimes, we’d hear a fight breaking out and rush over there, and it'd be because someone had their cellphone taken.

In Greece, cash assistance is aimed at empowering refugee and asylum seekers by providing them with the ability to choose how to cover their basic needs while creating opportunities for beneficiaries to contribute directly to the economy of their host community. The amount of cash assistance typically ranges between ninety euros for a single individual living in catered accommodations to 550 euros for a large family a month, which Samiya notes is a slight reduction from years past and not enough to cover these expenses. While UNHCR-cash assistance cards were ideally meant for food purchases and other necessities, Samiya observed that people often reserved these funds for data purchases to enable wireless internet calling and messaging:

Minors would rather get data than food. I doubt it was something UNHCR was really aware of, but people were prioritizing data because it could keep them in contact with their networks. People would rather skip meals if it meant they could call their families.

ICTs provided many practical resources to refugees in the process of migrating and navigating asylum. In speaking with people with experiences using internet messaging in migration, I spoke to Khirad, who used internet messaging technology to keep in touch with her family after migrating from Eritrea to Britain because of its affordability:

It’s cost-effective. We think about how much we used to spend buying those [phone] cards, we used to buy credit and then dial from your phone using the call number. It takes time to do that, and it’s very expensive. Sometimes, you buy a ten-pound code, and it barely lasts ten minutes. With this, you can just spend time. My son used to call from internet cafes, through Messenger, and we used to communicate.

Khirad has seen the necessity of this in watching relatives now flee the country. After being forced to serve in the national service, her nephew fled Eritrea to Sudan, with the intention of further traveling to Europe:

Once he was eighteen years old, he wanted to leave. He didn't want to go to national service, and then he was caught…when they released him, they made him join the national service.

Her nephew was taken by traffickers twice, once in Sudan and once in Libya. Both times, he was only able to get in contact with his relatives through internet messaging applications to pay the ransom. Throughout his journey, he updated Khadija constantly updating her through Facebook and Viber:

Even when he left Libya and suffered all that trauma, he went to Italy, and he was able to get in touch with us through Facebook Messenger. It connects people – wherever you go, your friends are there, [and] you never need to remember their contact information.

For Noha, an Eritrean refugee living in Germany, migration has changed rapidly in the last five years than when she initially migrated towards Europe:

The difference is whenever they wanted something, you’d write a letter and wait for weeks, but now, you can connect live and have your answers within minutes. Now, if they wanted to do an organized demonstration and within an hour, they collected a group in Europe to go against the government, it’s enough to say enough is enough…I see so many developments in this media, I remember how hard it was to communicate with each other from place to place, but now everyone can hear from me.

While useful in aiding her nephew, Khirad notes that these technologies may contribute to the pull factors that cause people to migrate in the first place:

Obviously the youth, if they had a hopeful country, they wouldn’t leave it, but now, you find children wishing to migrate because they don't even understand what is going on politically but they just want to leave the country because it's very difficult, they see people looking good eating well, because when you are hungry, when basic need is not met, you just want to leave the country.

While working for a large-scale humanitarian relief organization in Athens, Wesley worked with refugees and asylum-seekers as part of the main humanitarian response in 2016. In his time there, his team worked on renovating shelters, setting up psychological support services, and managing cash card distributions for asylum-seekers, which used WhatsApp messaging to operate a regular helpline for issues with the cards.

WhatsApp was just a no brainer. Everybody knew how to use it…you could use it without a SIM card, you could use a Syrian SIM and you’d just need Wi-Fi.

For Wesley’s team, the ability to send pictures and flyers through WhatsApp messaged often facilitated the feedback responses his organization was able to give. WhatsApp offered more immediate responses to problems or inquiries and allowed audio messages as well as typed messages, making it a preferred alternative for older asylum-seekers who were less tech-savvy or those with lower levels of literacy in English or Arabic.

*Constructing Refugee Identity*

By providing people with logistical access to identifying documents, smartphones and internet communication played an integral role in constructing refugee identity in asylum cases. Sara works as a translator within the Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (BAMF) in Germany, also known as the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees. BAMF operates as the central migration authority in Germany. For the past year, Sara has been working with migrant beneficiaries to translate interviews for asylum cases, accompanying them on doctor visits, and assisting with translation for legal casework:

It is the most important. It’s the only connection to home, so it’s valuable. Not everyone has a phone at home, so if one person in the family has a cellphone, maybe they can see each other, get pictures, talk – that’s valuable.

On a daily basis, she sees the importance of them in providing emotional support and family connections, but in her position, she has found that they maintain a practical importance within establishing credible asylum applications:

People transfer documents with it. When [the government] asks to bring identifying documents, they’ll get their family to send photos through WhatsApp until the real documents are sent through the mail. Mostly they leave it behind when they leave the country, so instead of waiting for family to send it, they can move forward to get asylum…For Arabs, they usually ask for their family register, for Eritreans, they always ask for baptism certificates or marriage certificates also…for younger generations after independence, almost everyone has a birth certificate with the new government now.

Outside of practical importance, online messaging serves as an active means of catching the information that slipped through the cracks in consultations between case workers and refugees. While in college from 2012 – 2015, Muira provided translation work and other services. In Canada, Muira worked with a refugee legal aid office for eighteen months as an Arabic and Tigrinya language translator; there, she accompanied people to appointments with lawyer and helped process asylum paperwork. While refugee assistance workers took great care to inform clients of their rights through the asylum application process, Muira would often notice that online messaging groups provided substantial support in an informal way:

You have your lawyer, you have your paralegal legal aid and everyone's around you, social worker and even volunteers – they do everything legally for you, yes. But you don't know what you're missing if you don't know it…this kind of information only you can get while talking to others, asking questions, communicating, reading through blogs and stuff like that.

One detail that Samiya mentioned during our interview had to do with the development of asylum applications for refugees afraid of delays in their own processing:

Some people do use counterfeit documents. Some people would adopt Syrian or Palestinian identities, so they would use [Facebook] Messenger to learn more about Syria or gain information to appear more Syrian or they’d look up locations in the cities to describe their life. It’s something I noticed while interacting with people, but I didn’t ask questions. It’s not my business, and I think it’s best not to judge.

### Online Worlds, Offline Structures

*Reexamining the Immigrant-Enclave Hypothesis*

My conversations with refugee aid workers show countless examples of civil society organizations broadly leveraging social media to bring refugees into their services. Among refugees, however, this information was largely passed among through private messaging or social media groups which relied on a common nationality or ethnic group for inclusion. While speaking to Anisa and Muira, they provide much anecdotal evidence to support that the valuable information refugees passed on about crossing borders, navigating complex asylum systems, and receiving assistance. In practice, this served as a process of reconstructing the immigrant-enclave hypothesis in the digital world – creating networks online that mimic the phenomena of physical immigrant-enclave. ICTs allowed people to utilize them as means of bridging social capital, but practical concerns of fear and necessity caused them to group around a common identity in flight.

Anisa has done extensive research in Norway on the use of online platforms and social media as tools of self-integration and community-building among Syrian refugees over the past two years. Since 2013, she has worked with several organizations on shaping U.S. humanitarian policy in Syria. At the height of the European refugee crisis in 2015, she began following a group of Syrian refugees from Syria to Norway while making a documentary on why they left Syria and how they were adjusting to life in Norway. In describing her research, she refers to the private messaging groups among Syrian refugees as “digital jamieas” – coining them with the Arabic word for “university” because they tended to form around young, college-aged Syrian students who fled from political persecution.

When they went to Europe, they wanted to use social media as a tool because a lot of them used social media to find their way from Syria to Turkey to Eastern Europe, Western Europe, communicating with people, through these WhatsApp groups or through the “Refugee Welcome” pages.

As refugee organizations noticed the rise of smartphone usage among refugee, they formed more diverse ways of interacting with refugee populations over them. The emergence of “Refugee Welcome” pages on Facebook came as a direct response by civil society to the mass influx of refugees into Western Europe. These pages were operated on the national, local, and municipal levels. In their first phase, they served a triage for refugees seeking services to assess what people needed. In Norway, where Anisa was active, “Refugee Welcome” pages quickly evolved to become hubs that structurally disseminated information about how to assist refugees from a country-wide level to a local level, where volunteers often had little guidance on how to aid refugees with social inclusion and integration on the grassroots-level.

When [the refugees] arrived in Europe, these small little towns were receiving upwards to hundreds of thousands of refugees, and there was no expert on the ground to tell them where to go. In Norway, there was this hotel owner who became the local authority for the refugees because…it was the place where all the refugees were staying. But this person didn't have any idea how to teach them language or how to help them adjust.

By 2019, many of these pages showed decreased levels of activity. In Sweden, almost all pages had gone inactive, while other countries such as Norway and Germany, they remained relatively active. Examining the impact of “Refugee Welcome” pages on actors at the local level has her to believe that their activity was tied to how well a country fared on social inclusion and integration for refugees. Meanwhile, private groups for disseminating and learning information related to asylum and integration remained active everywhere – regardless of initiated contact or the active presence of refugee aid organizations online. While national and local pages across Europe have seen a noted decline in activity, these private messaging and social media groups are still incredibly active in 2019, at the time of Anisa’s research.

Broadly speaking, these groups were usually grouped around a common nationality. Private groups emerged in tandem through groups such as “Syrians in Kristiansand,” “Syrians in Stockholm,” or “Syrians in Brussels.” In her experience, Anisa remarks that they were grouped around Syrian identity or often enough simply Arab identity within Northern Europe.

[Arabs] weren’t a big population anyway in Northern Europe, and there practically were no Syrians at all. In Norway, the majority of immigrants were from Poland and the ones that weren’t, most of them were from Pakistan, and they had been there since about the 70s and then after them were the Somalis. There were already established groups, [but] that there was really no linguistic or cultural connection for them, so the easiest thing for them was just to make Syrian groups because that's who they came with.

In general, Syrian refugees felt more comfortable posting requests in these groups – everything from language translation, employment search assistance, to connecting with local people. In addition, the role of language commonality in forming these private groups cannot be understated; in many cases that Anisa describes, language translation was the primary need the group fulfilled:

Say one person knew English in group. English really was the language that people were using to communicate because very few people knew German, or Norwegian, or Swedish. One person would come and translate for them, so they would bring information from the local European page and translate it.

Working with Syrian and Eritrean refugee populations in Germany, Muira noticed this tendency in how information trickled down to refugees through online platforms:

It's not a utopia where we live, so there are lots of people from different nationalities where they prefer to help someone from their own country or from the same background, and they would give, maybe, ten percent more information to the person who is from the same background as to [someone of] a different nationality.

While translating for Eritrean refugees, she found that many people consulted others through their information-sharing networks in choosing how to present their asylum cases “because to them, it's a trustworthy source because it's someone from their country, someone who would not betray them.”

Outside of practical concerns, much of communication was based out of a shared sense of trust or obligation that came with having a shared background. Most groups operating over Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, and social media groups attempted to keep their groups private by controlling who could be added. Refugees within the group would have to add others within their existing social networks, in a manner that caused widespread recreations of immigrant and ethnic enclaves online. In the process, these existing social networks, despite their informational and resource-based necessity to all refugees, were largely restricted based on a shared national or ethnic identity.

*Shaping Physical Space*

In many ways, the social media infrastructure of refugees played an integral role in shaping where they chose to inhabit space. Muira, Jill, and Aisha all touch on the ways access to internet messaging impacted where refugees clustered. While working for a refugee youth organization in Calais, France, Jill describes that they would use the draw of free charging stations to spread more information about their organization and register unaccompanied minors.

It was the Red Cross that provided free charging. and there were other organizations providing free charging through generators they would bring out into these jungles…most organizations knew the refugees responded to the generators, so they’d schedule whether to have some workers show up with information about our organization. We knew the refugees were going to come because they needed it.

In Muira’s experience working as a translator in Germany, refugees would often Internet messaging technologies were increasingly accessible to refugees, who leave voice messages and contact translators outside of normal work hours. Many purchased wireless data, but she recalled those who could not would often cluster around places with free Wi-Fi during the day to send these voice messages or make calls.

You would see them in front of the mall, in the mall…sometimes sitting on the benches around and there's another mall behind it. There are small cubicles around in between different stores, and there are plugs. So, almost every plug is occupied cause they're sitting there charging their phone, connecting to Wi-Fi on their phone with their headphones.

In working with clients over a long period of time, Muira often provided a personal WhatsApp number in case they needed translation assistance. For people with limited access to wireless data, they would typically send written or voice messages through WhatsApp to her and then move to a public place to send them over Wi-Fi.

Since 2013, Aisha has worked for a refugee services agency operating in Illinois, which works to provide mentorship to young refugee girls. When they first started operations, they established a drop-in center nearby immigrant and refugee communities because most of their clients did not have access to the internet. Four or five years ago, Aisha remarks that they would work with the assumption that none of their clients had access to the internet, but as technology access has become more affordable and available through public school systems, she believes this is no longer the case.

Most girls have access to some sort of smart device, [but] it's still completely a tossup as to whether it has an actual cellular plan on it or if it's just the device that they can connect to internet. But we've also seen a huge increase in Wi-Fi access in the homes as well.

While Aisha had noticed that more girls greater access to technology now, she still finds that the wireless internet access is one of the main draws of the center.

Girls will come in just to use the internet sometimes…they may have internet at home, but it's also [about] finding spaces where you feel there's an element of privacy. Like where they might be able to call and have a conversation – finding spaces where you can like talk to people and talk to your friends without your parents listening is like a really important part of being sixteen.

On any given day, she remarks seeing girls gathered in the drop-in center’s basement, all on hour-long video calls with friends and family that could last hours. Access to digital spaces at the center, along with encouraging young people to interact at the center and online groups together, has been an integral part of their outlook towards communication with beneficiaries.

*Refugee Reintegration*

While internet messaging and social media enabled civil society organizations to better communicate with refugee populations, there were still common pitfalls in how they utilized them. In examining how this manifested itself in refugee services, Anisa brings up higher education integration in Norway based on two universities in Oslo. They invited asylum seekers for a day event on higher education – going over the specifics of how to apply to a Norwegian university, what level of language skills were necessary, and how much of their prior education could be transferred. Anisa remarks:

They leveraged social media very heavily in trying to get people to come. They didn't have the turnout that they wanted to. The other thing too is that even though that they are online, they still prefer in person meetings -- people inviting them to come. But it’s not always feasible.

This is consistent with the literature – most reporting from UNHCR confirms that in-person interactions from humanitarian organization are still much more preferred over messaging or online communications. Anisa describes “Refugee Welcome” social media pages on the national and municipal as emerging in response to surge of Syrian refugees in Scandinavia. Civil society organizations turned to these pages to inform refugees of services that could assist them with local integration.

When utilizing social media, refugee service organizations accessed community-led solutions to issues refugees were facing. On a more grass-roots level, refugee service organizations that utilized social media were better able generate successful social integration and better connect with clients. Anisa describes how social media helped refugees in Asgard, Norway lead successful initiatives for language education.

It was a private group…and then it started to expand of Syrians who made their own group, a “Syrian-Norwegian Association of Asgard. They would make events and host gatherings and information sessions for locals...they would send out across Norway and help other Syrians fill out asylum paperwork – whatever they needed to adjust. A lot of people were still in reception centers – they might not speak English, they might not speak Norwegian, but they spoke Arabic. So, this organization created their own civil society to help themselves.

However, in detailing these stories, Anisa comments that these successes were not the norm. Their ability to facilitate social inclusion depended heavily on how they were able to directly involve refugees in the planning and creation of these efforts.

Other organizations found varying degrees of success in utilizing social media to attract refugee beneficiaries to their services. For instance, Wesley’s organization found no inherent value in messaging refugees through internet messaging services – due to the time-consuming nature of individually messaging anyone using their cash card helping and the simple fact that strategic communication to community leaders was a more effective strategy. Piper, a refugee aid worker in Brazil, remarks that civil society organizations concentrated their efforts on connecting with community leaders over digital platforms because her organization believed they could better connect with new clients and understand their needs.

However, better establishing these relationships over ICTs can have great value for organizations intending on developing long-term engagements with refugees. Aisha’s organization’s mentorship program is primarily an in-person one, where mentors typically spend time with their mentees at their homes or mutually agreed upon locations for about two hours each week. In Aisha’s experience, facilitating smaller touchpoints of interaction outside of had great value for helping young refugees adjust.

We really encourage our mentors and mentees to use those sort of messaging tools as a way to deepen their relationship…it makes it can make a huge world of difference for a young girl who's really stressed about taking her exam to hear her mentor right before she takes it.

These touchpoints served to foster deeper relationships and connectedness, allowing mentors to work through problems with them. Because internet messaging was often more accessible for young refugees than traditional SMS texting, mentors used WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger primarily in strengthening their relationships outside traditional meetings – even while not directly asked to by the organization.

The information access provided by ICTs proved integral to refuge integration. While working for a domestic resettlement agency in the mid-west, Valeria, a refugee services worker, was explicitly discouraged from utilizing ICTs with clients because of the price barriers. In her interview, she comments on the negative impacts of lack of informational access.

When you think of the negative impacts of the lack of information access…because of their lack of access to information, their family ended up losing their food stamps and jobs because they couldn’t find the bus schedule, and on top of that too, a whole slew of thing began to fall apart. The lack of access to technology just didn’t help.

Ultimately, internet technology access has profound effects on how refugees’ function in a new place. When organizations can accommodate for this, they offer greater opportunities for refugees to adapt and build community in integration.

### Information Anxiety, Information Overload

*Recreating Censorship Apparatuses*

Even long after immigration to another country, existing fears of surveillance followed refugee populations. Over online platforms, these fears are amplified because of their immediate digital connections to home. In speaking with Anisa, she was initially drawn to how Syrian refugees’ social media practices changed after migrating to Europe. She explains:

The thousands of friends that I had who moved to Europe from Syria, there was a really marked change in how they were using social media….even though most Syrians are very young and supposed to be very internet-savvy, they decided to not cultivate a persona on social media and instead opted for these private and secret groups.

In fleeing from Syria, many refugees relied heavily on private, secret messaging groups over the internet and social media, but these private information practices continued into well into permanently setting in other countries. The main reason for doing this was largely based on residual fears of social media monitoring from the Syrian government even after reaching safety:

A lot of them emphasize the fear that they felt…the fear that they felt that if they posted something, it could be misconstrued, and their friends or family could be picked up, or arrested, or tortured, or killed. And they still had these fears, even though they were very far from Syria in its physical location. They still mentally were very much still in Syria.

Because they had experienced so much censorship prior to coming to Europe, these fears remained with refugees in their personal communications. Most popular internet messaging applications have incorporating encryption for online messaging – from WhatsApp to Viber, Telegram, Line, and Facebook Messenger through an opt-in option – in hope of protecting conversations from monitoring by the phone user’s wireless carrier, the government, or any outside parties. Anisa remarks that Syrian refugees were aware of the end-to-end encryption on messaging app; for many, it was the immediate drawing factor of using them. Regardless of this, refugees still carried intense fears of communicating sensitive information through them.

Our baptism into technology is really how we think of it, interact with it, experience it. Syrians are still very afraid of social media because of what happened back in Syria…You had this rise of Syrian journalists, of citizen journalists, and they believed that if they could just get this information out to the world, the world would move. You had people curating groups for activists, but then Syrian government hackers…they would hack into these groups, and they would be able to find the names of everybody on this group and just by seeing somebody’s name, you know who their entire families are.

While working with two emergency services organizations in Lesbos, Anya never had lengthy communications with refugees making the dangerous journey over water from Turkey to Greece. Frequently, she would receive a WhatsApp message at night from people helping refugees on the Turkish side, letting them know when their boats departed and from where:

There was the airport in Lesbos, this was usually pretty visible because it's right on the beach, [so] they would tell the refugees as they were getting on a boat [to] look for that light and head towards it…they would say “we think about in about an hour and a half they should be hitting that beach.” We would run or drive to a particular area with binoculars –like, 2:00 AM, 3:00 AM – and watch out for these boats, trying to anticipate where boats would be coming and getting them off really quickly.

Sometimes, Anya would receive distress calls with location markers in the middle of the sea from refugees who had been given their phone numbers before crossing. Any exchanges would always be brief – only locations, times, and if it was safe to arrive. She remarks that having more information about refugee arrivals could have helped them plan faster responses to refugees as they attempted dangerous sea journeys from Turkey to Greece. As helpful as better communication channels could have been, Anya explains why it could not have been possible:

There was also a lot of fear on the part of the refugees. They didn't want to communicate much before you were coming over because it was illegal. And so anything that could possibly interfere with a potential voyage across the sea was not desirable…Part of the frustration is sort of anticipating, you know, not having a lot of information, anticipating the numbers, the location, the state, the emotional and or physical wellbeing of the people that were coming. They also were being fed so much misinformation – they did not know when their boat was crossing, they did not know if they were going to be received at all. If they would be turned back, if they would be arrested – they had no idea.

Current country conditions can also a great impact on the personal communications of refugees after migration. In Greece, Samiya remarked seeing refugees feel relatively enabled to criticize their living conditions in the detention facility in Samos, as well as their home governments over social media. Piper, in working with refugees in Brazil, remarks that conversations on data privacy are not common, so securing communications between refugees and refugee assistance organizations was not seen as a necessity. These countries maintain similar protections towards data privacy and protection – with European Union regulations enacting the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Brazilian General Law for the Protection of Personal Data (LGPD) being heavily modeled off it. However, it is important to recognize that this treatment of data privacy among refugees varies in practice. While working in Calais, France for a refugee youth organization, Jill remarks that it was common for French police to search through refugees’ cell phones, causing them to be more careful about what details they were communicating through messaging and social media:

If the police caught them or things like that, that would give them an opportunity to search the phone. That could be worrying. It wasn’t so much, it was more like they needed the phone, so they were willing to communicate through it. Once they learned more about the law, that they should be seeking asylum in their first country of entry – they’d be advised against posting pictures and checking into places.

Amara is a community outreach worker with a legal services agency operating in Egypt. In our conversations, she talks extensively about the level of scrutiny refugees face from Egyptian security services and how this impacts the privacy of communication with refugees. Her organization works primarily with East African refugees, who continuously face heightened attention from Egyptian police and are at a higher risk of being stopped and searched or having their cell phone checked. Here, she explains many of the practical fears her organization took into account in shaping how they communicated with refugees:

If you communicate private information over a cell phone and the [Egyptian] security services have access to it, it poses a risk to that refugee and then also to the people within that refugee’s network…the government of Egypt has that person's information, they can easily just get it back to [their] country's government, like their embassy here, and say, “ we know where this person is, please feel free to go find them.”

This situation has occurred multiple times during her organization’s operation. For refugees fleeing political persecution, this presents a frightening prospect. To avoid these invasive searches, her organization is adamant that refugees carry their UNHCR identity card to provide proof of their refugee status. They have also taken on measures of heightened security around their communications with refugees as a result. All staff members are issued a work phone for directly communicating with clients, the contents of which can be remotely erased if the staff member is ever in direct custody of Egyptian security forces. In private communications between refugees, Amara saw more people prefer to use encrypted messaging applications for practical reasons, but they carried the same fears in communicating.

While the complexities of these refugee situations make it difficult to draw wide reaching generalizations, many underlying commonalities remains. The stronger the ability of the refugee’s home country to monitor the internet communications of those who fled the country, the more this fear manifested in refugee’s lives even if this surveillance no longer could affect them. In addition, the more political a refugee’s reason for asylum was, the stronger their concerns were over data safety and privacy – regardless of their current circumstances.

*Communication Difficulties & Best Standards*

The strategic integration of online modes of communication into services has presented unique challenges and concerns for refugee assistance workers. Interviewees involved in refugee assistance work cite that their organizations created certain standards for communicating with refugees over internet messaging technologies. When examining them closer, however, these guidelines varied wildly. To say that there is some sort of recognized standard for how refugee assistance workers communicate with beneficiaries is ultimately impossible although similar trends can be identified through their responses.

While working in Athens, Wesley notes that his team did not created WhatsApp groups to disseminate information about services or mass-messaged people like is common through text messaging services because they could not do so without ensuring anonymity for the recipients. Wesley explains, “we deliberately did not put people in a group. I don’t think there was a way to do that anonymously.” His organization’s emergency response was set up rather quickly, and because of this, Wesley remarked that, like many other non-profits, they were unable to consider questions of data protection or data privacy in the long-term.

It was an emergency response, so things were set up quickly, but then one month became ten. Maybe we weren’t as strong on issues of data protection and privacy, especially with WhatsApp because you have a database with all this personal information. We thought about getting a dispatch machine with call centers to anonymize calls, but we were also on a time crunch. Everyone uses [WhatsApp], so we didn’t want to force beneficiaries to use a phone line.

In the case of Wesley’s work, maintaining ongoing connection with beneficiaries was valued over maintaining protections to data privacy. In addition, Wesley cited other limitations that impacted their response through internet messaging technologies.

“We could spam every number we had, but that’d take a lot of time and other means were more efficient. We would sometimes get in contact with a community leader and that more useful.”

For Samiya, while internet messaging technologies were frequently utilized to communicate directly with beneficiaries, she commented that the amount of information people were receiving could frustrate them at times.

“One of the problems with [Facebook Messenger] is that it can be overwhelming, but it’s free with an asterisk. Aside from the initial cost of getting a smartphone, it’s relatively inexpensive. For official communication from the camp to people we’re helping, it’d be nice if there was something like email, but using [Facebook] Messenger was just easiest.”

Guidelines for communicating with refugees over ICTs were often not set in stone. While Muira utilized internet messaging technologies to communicate with clients about casework, no written manual or guidelines existed regarding how she was expected to communicate with them. She describes some of the measures they took to maintain privacy:

If it was on our personal phone, then we would forward that to our office server or company server where all the client's information is saved and secured. And then we would delete it from our personal phone. That would be done literally within the same day or would we just forward [it] via email to our manager.”

Because of the heightened attention on refugees and refugee assistance organizations in Egypt, Amara’s organization had the most defined standards on communication strategies. Lawyers and case workers were open to speaking over the phone with clients, but they would refrain from sending sensitive information over a text message. In addition, refugee assistance organizations in Egypt specifically mandate for their employees to not be politically active over internet messaging or social media in written handbooks and trainings.

They try to be pretty explicit that you are welcome to have and hold your political opinions, but please remember that you are in a country that is not friendly to political opinions, that are not directly in line with what the government wants. If you want to have politically based discussions, do so at your own risk to do so in places that are not in any way affiliated with this organization. When they do trainings, they say, “don't have these conversations over text message or Facebook Messenger.” They don't say like, use WhatsApp because they [if] they gave you the direction to WhatsApp and something happens, they're worried about a liability, [so] they say don't do it here.

*Misinformation & Disinformation*

While working with Syrian and Congolese refugees in Brazil, Piper saw many people relying on different WhatsApp channels – for help with documentation, what benefits refugees were entitled to, and Portuguese language lessons. Civil society organizations took to digital forums for providing accurate, up-to-date information. But with the recent coronavirus outbreak, Piper describes a frightening level of misinformation spreading through private messaging groups used by refugees in Brazil:

Most of them, they say that they get information through social media…some of them they have fake information, things like, “Oh, if you take this medicine, you'd be cured.” Or “I'm not worried because the virus is not dangerous. It's just something that China has created to create chaos. It’s one of the problems in Brazil in general, but especially for the refugee community.

As refugee populations became more dependent on internet messaging for decision-making, they were more exposed to misinformation that could spread quickly. In addition, Piper observed that the reliance of refugees on internet messaging and social media left many susceptible to potential scams:

They’ll say, “the Brazilian government has released some money that you can apply if you're in need due to the coronavirus, to the total lockdown”…but those are fake, this just your data and some refugees, they are putting their data there and being victims of those scams through WhatsApp well.

In Egypt, where Amara was working, the nature of the relationship between refugees and the Egyptian government created large gaps in the amount of information refugees had. With gaps in communication from UNHCR and the Egyptian government, refugees were left more susceptible to misinformation:

There's a lot of things that happen through word of mouth because there's not good official ways of finding information, and so, the likelihood of turning to social media then increases. It just gets even worse. Or people hear a lot of rumors and tend to run on those rumors and then turn to social media to find out more about those rumors. It just keeps on going until you have no clear way to get accurate information to people.

Lastly, while working in Greece, Samiya found that trauma of migration encourages refugees turn towards information they could receive quickly over internet messaging technologies. In teaching language classes to incoming refugees, she observed its effect on people’s ability to process new information:

It’s one of the reasons why we tend to have shorter classes; when people go through a lot of trauma, it really damages their ability to focus. It’s hard to imagine it. People probably wouldn’t read their rights on a website or a know-your-rights toolkit. They see social media and messaging as a tool you use when you need them.

As refugee services organizations bring ICTs into their long-term communications strategies, they must stay aware of the general media literacy of the populations they are working with. Combatting misinformation, as well as providing accurate and easily comprehendible information, must be high priorities in doing so.

### Constant Contact & Visibility in the Wake of Ongoing Trauma

*Blended Boundaries in Social Work*

For many refugee assistance workers, internet messaging technologies enabled longer periods of contact between them and refugees during migration. Oftentimes, they led to situations where refugees are in prolonged periods of online and offline contact with refugee assistance workers. The murkiness of personal and professional relationships between NGOs workers and refugees caused refugee assistance workers to negotiate different identities of friend, translator, aid provider, trauma counsel, and at time, an abettor of illicit activity as refugees attempted to travel further into Europe.

While working with two refugee service organizations in Lesbos, Anya remained in touch with some refugees after responding to emergency calls from refugee boats in the Mediterranean. Anya talks at length about her communications with an unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan, who she has been in contact with for over two years:

I met him years ago, when I was working in Lesbos, Greece. He stumbled off one of the rubber dinghies and was put in the primary processing camp called Moria… after eighteen months, he was plucked and taken into the town and put with other unaccompanied minors in housing.

Moria is the refugee camp central to Lesbos, which houses asylum seekers arriving from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and over sixty-one other countries. Built originally to house 3,000 people, Moria is currently home to over 19,000 migrants waiting for their asylum applications to be reviewed. Due to the backlog of asylum applications, and the inability for the Greek government to keep up, this has become a process that can last over a year – leaving many trapped in limbo. While non-profit agencies provide basic services, overcrowding has created harsh conditions, and many refugees lack basic shelter, electricity, or opportunities for formal education. As living conditions in Moria continue to deteriorate, many asylum seekers choose to migrate further into Northern Europe to claim asylum. Unaccompanied minors make up approximately forty percent of the camp’s population. Anya continued to work with him at a temporary school for unaccompanied minors run by her organization. A few months ago, he made the decision to leave and travel to Brussels because of the camp’s deteriorating conditions. While no longer working in Lesbos, Anya has stayed in contact with him during his travel to Belgium:

But again, and even like as I'm talking to you, I am with what's happening with [him]. and it's breaking my heart because he is alone. I don't think he's seen his parents since – it's been two and a half years at least. And he is in Brussels, at a detention facility for unaccompanied minors. He is safe. He is positive, but I'm trying to talk to him about helping him navigate getting an education.

Similar to Anya, Samiya was still in contact with many of refugees she had met at Samos, through Facebook Messenger and social media. The non-profit she worked with prohibited internet communication with refugees outside of professional matters through a formal contract signed by all volunteers at Samos; however, she remarks that volunteers “broke boundaries all the time.” There were no guidelines in this contract about if or how contact should continue -- letting volunteers be responsible for if these relationships continued. In the months since volunteering at Samos in 2019, Samiya has kept in contact with many of the people she taught:

Don't forget me,’ some people tell me. I still keep in touch over Messenger and voice messages – it helps them feel seen.

At the same time, unforeseen problems can emerge with prolonged contact between refugees and refugee service organization. While working with refugees in Canada, Muira would often give out her personal number over WhatsApp – which she remarks was preferred by refugees because of its accessibility, low-cost, and the ability to send voice messages in their native language:

If the refugee is starting to get into your private number, they start calling you after-hour times as well, even for the smallest things and then they give your number to somewhere else. I kept doing the same mistake over and over and over and over again, instead of just sticking to the office or to the organization's lines and giving out those numbers.

For Muira, this became something of a recurring problem, causing her to change her phone number three times over the course of volunteering to avoid constantly being contacted by strangers:

I kept giving out my own private numbers to some few people because there was a lady who couldn't go to her court hearings, or couldn't finish her paperwork, or get to that office on time. I would help her out and give her my number. I just said, “okay, if you have any papers or any assignments, let me know.” I would give it to this elderly person and then all of a sudden, I’d have a hundred new contacts on my phone. It was where I could have no free time.

She explains that because refugees preferred to communicate through WhatsApp because of the accessibility it provided, she always felt inclined to do so. But this was not a standard for the organization – not every translator chose to do this, and the organization had little to say about it. Even while she no longer gives her personal phone number to clients, she believes that allowing refugees to communicate with translators and workers at the non-profit would have been incredibly valuable. She believes that having the non-profit run business lines over WhatsApp would have helped translators such as her maintain a more professional relationship with clients while still being able to stay in contact with clients.

Aisha’s staff members all use professional accounts in their communications with young people. They do not limit mentors from engaging with refugee girls over internet messaging and social media. In the past, however, they had much stricter guidelines on how their volunteers engaged with mentees – prohibiting all internet messaging or social media contact between them and requiring regular non-VoIP interactions. This created a significant barrier between volunteers and refugee youth, many of whom relied on internet messaging from mobile devices but did not have a cell phone plan because of its cost. The organization later changed its policy, letting volunteers and their mentees choose what medium of communication worked best for them.

We really had to bring ourselves into the twenty-first century a little bit more and challenge these like concepts and ideas that all social media is like a dangerous place, which is a concept that's baked into program delivery and nonprofits in some ways and embrace it.

In addition, many of the workers I spoke with lacked formal training in social work, as well as clear and defined guidelines from governmental or large-scale non-profit organizations – especially regarding the utilization of ICTs in refugee services

This lack of communication from larger NGOs fostered a growing sense of resentment from smaller NGOs towards larger ones and UNHCR that Anya describes:

The nonprofits that are accessible to refugees in terms of communicating casually via WhatsApp or other apps – they're not like the big nonprofits…they're communicating with these random, little, wonderful nonprofits that no one's ever heard of and that are, I think mostly founded by Europeans and run by Europeans or groups. Those are the people, at least, in Lesbos who were like making things happen for refugees, young Europeans, not the big NGOs. The NGOs are full of bureaucratic-red tape. They're slow to get much done.

*The Psycho-Social Value of Home*

All refugee assistance workers commented extensively on the emotional value of being able to remain in contact with friends and family as they fled war and persecution. While first researching information practices, Anisa was surprised at how connected Syrian refugees were with their loved ones and community even after immigration. She dubs these as “hyper-transnational connections” in her research. She characterizes these so tangible that communities back in refugee home countries often had more influence on their lives than the host communities in which they were integrating:

Refugees – they're not immigrants. They don't choose to leave. One man I spoke with, he said, ‘my body is here in Norway, but my heart, my mind is back home…when you add to their constant communication with people back home, it's like it amplifies this nostalgia and raises to a toxic level because you can't ever be in the physical space you're in.

All interview subjects highlighted how “hyper-transnational connections” held incredible psycho-social value for refugees. From her experience working with refugee youth in France, Jill describes how central this constant contact was to the emotional states of unaccompanied minors traveling through Western Europe:

I think their biggest coping skill was “I talk to my family daily, that’s what’s helping me survive”…a lot of them talked about when their phone credit would end or when they couldn’t access their phone, they’d really feel more depressed, more alone.

For Anisa, the immediacy of these distant connections could become a harmful influence in the lives of refugees. Increased digital presence in refugees’ lives could bring in harmful community influences and make them more tangible. She describes this story that came up while speaking with refugees.

A lot of people are coming from very religiously conservative backgrounds, so it also served as a form of morality police. One case in Sweden that I was told about was this Syrian man and woman – someone saw them holding hands, and he took a picture of them and posted it on these groups. They were totally ostracized by the groups, by their fellow Syrians because it was haram (impermissible). They were holding hands.

For Aisha, the primary role of internet communication for refugee youth is the ability to still communicate and build relationships with communities back home. The constant contact it provided worked to strengthen their relationships to home and keep them centered long into resettlement:

We have one girl in our program who talks a lot about how getting to talk to her grandmother, like who is back in Syria still and being like forced to use her Arabic in a different way than here. She feels like she's losing her Arabic here even though she speaks Arabic with her parents all the time at her home, but she's been in here since she was fourteen, so her language hasn't evolved in the same way…even just to hear a different tone of Arabic or someone who speaks only Arabic all the time changed her connection to her language and really cemented that it's more important for her to like continue to remember it.

In her organization’s programming, they strive to create spaces for refugee youth to explore cultural identity that they no longer have access to after migration. Aisha constantly hears young girls talk about learning about cultural heritage on their own as a means of coping with separation.

If you leave your home country when you're ten or eleven and you come to the United States, there's a lot about your home country's culture that you might not have access to understanding and learning. You only learn the things about the culture that ten-year-olds got to learn. Keeping in touch with relatives helps them, so their concept of their home country can evolve right with them as they grow.

Just as ICTs facilitated access for refugees to the emotional value of home, refugees found great social value in remaining in contact with people in migration. Muira describes many of the conversations occurring in private internet messaging groups outside of concerns related to asylum and local integration:

They send around lots of prayers, positive pictures and stuff like that as well…just to be nice and uplifting spirits each other. Some of the women even exchange cooking recipes from different nationalities and countries and say, “Oh, this is from my country.” Like reminiscing and saying, “Oh, you cannot get it here. Oh, back home was way better,” but the other one would start typing, “Yeah, but there was bombing outside the door as well. So, I'll get my stuff from here better.” Like joking in a kind of sarcastic way, laughing over their own pain.

In Lesbos, Anya found that social media served as a means of daily distraction for refugee youth, as well as to stay connected with family and friends. When he eventually left the camp in Greece, she found that the social networks he made there followed him after leaving.

I can't imagine this psychological impact of the journey without the ability to communicate with others. [He] had a life and he called them his family at Lesbos, and it was comprised of the other unaccompanied minors that he became friendly with and was in school with as well as the teachers, workers, volunteers. They were his family. And he has these posts on Facebook that are so sweet before he left Lesbos for Brussels of, you know, “I'm going to miss my family.” So, he's constantly on WhatsApp, Instagram, and I think that's really essential to his mental health.

As we have seen ICTs play integral roles in shaping access to resources for refugee populations. What may be most important, however, is that refugees themselves see constant communication as necessitates because they still connect them to home.

# Policy Recommendations

In the years following the 2015 influx of refugees into the European Union, internet messaging is a vital means of accessing information and resources for refugee populations. However, as refugee assistance organizations navigate this emerging landscape, fundamental changes must be made to systems of migration management and how refugee aid organizations operate. These policy recommendations are directed at a range of organizations – from international organization, to governing agencies, to refugee assistance organizations. Because widespread attention on the relationship between forced migration and internet messaging became prominent during the European migrant crisis, my recommendations are largely geared towards those operating in Europe; however, the spirit of some these interventions can hopefully be implemented through other forms.

With the growing presence of smartphones in navigating forced migration, border management officials are becoming more inclined to limit migration through the same means. In 2016, Frontex and other agencies requested proposals from several tech companies on ways to manage the flow of refugees into the EU – some of which suggested the creation of smartphone applications for refugees that would track their locations.[[52]](#footnote-52) These tech-oriented solutions to migration management will merely transform smartphone devices from valuable tools into methods of surveillance. This is an impulse that policymakers must resist at all costs. Lastly, innovative solutions surrounding internet access cannot replace a lack of political. These are interventions that must be implemented in tandem with increased support to incoming asylum seekers and refugees and better burden-sharing amongst host communities in Europe.

Based on my findings, I ultimately recommend strategies that will work to increasing internet and wireless data access for refugee populations in urban areas and camp settlements. In addition, I recommend that for international agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to better define the standards for communication between organizations and migrant beneficiaries via internet messaging applications and urge for country-level legislation safeguarding against the use of information obtained via smartphones to delegitimize asylum claims. Smartphone usage has become near-ubiquitous among refugee populations, but without a proper assessment of best practices among refugee assistance organizations, we limit the ways to help refugees on their own terms.

### Increasing Wireless Internet Access for Refugee Populations

Wireless internet access should not be perceived as a luxury in refugee contexts. Internet access is becoming critical to refugees’ safety and security and should be viewed as a necessity when considering financial assistance. They open up new education and livelihood opportunities that refugees can utilize in departure, transit, and arrival to a new country. As implementing agencies rely more on digital technologies to communicate with refugees, they offer greater opportunities for accessibility and greater spread throughout refugee populations. In addition, there is an incredible psycho-social value of being able to contact home, one that the refugee assistance organizations should be interested in facilitating access to.

UNHCR provides significant amounts of cash assistance to eligible refugees and asylum seekers for the purchase of food and other necessities. Between 2016 and 2019, UNHCR distributed around $2.4 billion in cash assistance.[[53]](#footnote-53) As it stands, refugees and asylum-seekers typically receive ninety euros or less while living in Europe as a provisional sum delivered each month. Multi-purpose cash grants are intended to cover food, transportation, communication, school materials and medicine, as well as clothing and hygiene products. This serves a three-fold purpose – to fund essential services for refugees, support the economies of host communities, and provide refugees with some degree of choice in their purchasing decisions.

As UNHCR attempts to scale up cash assistance for livelihood needs, provisions for data access must be understood as an essential part of programming. Because of this, I recommend that UNHCR consider broadening their cash assistance programming to include allowances for wireless data purchases as a separate category of necessities. In addition to providing allowances for data purchases, government agencies and non-profit organizations should make a concerted effort to increase internet and mobile connectivity in refugee camps, permanent settlements, and community centers in urban areas. My research findings demonstrate that refugee welfare is inherently tied to digital interconnectedness; however, without affordable access, refugees are forced to ration data and oftentimes go without this valuable network.

As indicated in interviews with Muira, Jill, and Aisha, wireless internet access played an integral role in shaping physical space for refugees. For Jill, her refugee services agency often centered their outreach around when other organizations made charging stations accessible in temporary refugee living situations. For Aisha, easy technology and internet access drew refugees to spending more time in at her organization, giving them greater access to staff members and services. Increasing internet access in these areas fulfill essential needs while also bringing more potential beneficiaries into organizational services.

Initiatives such as the Smart Communities Coalition, a public-private partnership aimed at improving refugee services in camp, has made great strides in increasing and internet connectivity at settlements in Uganda and Kenya. Other organizations have created temporary measures, such as The Civil Society and Technology Project in Budapest, which places temporary Wi-Fi stations at places inhabited by asylum-seekers. Public-private partnerships are essential to reducing initial costs and barriers in settlements and gathering together key stakeholders on these projects would do much to improve digital connectivity for refugees.

### Ensuring Data Privacy for Asylum Seekers Through Legislation

With the nature of internet messaging as a means of bridging social capital, it naturally follows that asylum seekers communicate sensitive information, which has consequences for the perceived legitimacy of their asylum cases. Refugees routinely utilize internet messaging technologies to communicate about modes of migration and communicate with close contacts. Without proper protection, immigration officials can be allowed to go through messages and extract metadata that shows the asylum seeker’s location history, in order to determine if this is the asylum seekers first country of entry. Smartphones offer more information access to asylum seekers, but they come with the potential to delegitimize their asylum claims in the eyes of immigration courts even though they still have well-founded fears of persecution that necessitate protection from the international community. Existing anxieties about surveillance from past persecution may cause refugees to avoid humanitarian apparatuses, undermining the ability of refugee services agencies to help.[[54]](#footnote-54)As a result, it is imperative for the European Union and governments at the country level must pass legislation ensuring data privacy for refugees and asylum-seekers.

As European governments face increasing pressure to lower immigration, the digital privacy of refugees is placed under threat. Germany, among other countries, has expanded laws to allow immigration officials to extract data from asylum seeker’s cellphones. This allows the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) to inspect mobile phones and other electronic devices in the event that refugees are unable to present a valid passport or proof of identity. While BAMF considers phone inspections as voluntary and conducted with free consent, refugees are legally obligated to cooperate in establishing their identity.[[55]](#footnote-55) BAMF is enabled to extract and analyze smartphone data, which can compile a range of personal information from the country codes of their past incoming and outgoing calls, messages, contact information, and website the cellphone owner has visited. A report based on this analysis can be used within the owner’s asylum procedures, creating situations where potential refugees can be deported based solely on the data authorities find on their smartphones.[[56]](#footnote-56) These mobile phone inspections constitute invasive searches for asylum seekers, especially since BAMF cannot ensure that access to sensitive and private data is blocked. In addition, research conducted by the Society for Civil Rights and the Digital Freedom Fund found that the mobile readouts used by BAMF were often faulty and difficult to rely on if the mobile phone had been used by multiple people. In addition, when examining their use from January to October 2018, the results of these reports were consulted only 30 percent of the time and deviated from the information provided by asylum seekers in only two percent of cases.

BAMF estimates that the law would have affected 50-60 percent of asylum apps received last year by Germany, approximately 150,000 people.[[57]](#footnote-57) Yet rarely did the results of collected smartphone metadata from asylum seekers contradict their asylum cases; only in around 100 cases did the data actually contradict the details of their case.[[58]](#footnote-58) The search and analysis of metadata carries the risk of misuse that could create undue doubt or suspicion within asylum procedures. In addition, asylum seekers do not have the ability to refuse consent for this procedure if they are without identifying documents – due to their obligation to comply with identification and the great power imbalance between asylum seekers and the BAMF.

While invasive and unnecessary, similar legislation has been enacted in the United Kingdom and Norway.[[59]](#footnote-59)

Given the inherent value of internet messaging technologies in navigating forced migration and asylum, refugee data privacy rights must be considered if smartphones are to remain useful.[[60]](#footnote-60) Refugees, particularly in the context of the European Union, must be allotted the right to refuse this data collection without fear of legal repercussions. The most expedient step for the European Union to issue guidance to country governments and ensure the protections designated within apply to migrants in the EU even in scenarios where the state cannot establish that migrant’s identity through documentation. Under the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), data processing may be allowed with voluntary and informed consent, but in practice, this has not been the case for asylum seekers.[[61]](#footnote-61) The GDPR simply refers to “natural persons” and “data subjects,” rather than EU citizens in outlining rights to data privacy– meaning that these privacy regulations must be enforced for asylum seekers within the EU as well.

Countries outside of the EU should be encouraged to implement their own forms of privacy regulation. A blanket solution simply cannot accommodate this; however, country governments must ensure the personal data of these vulnerable populations is protected through explicit legislation.

### Better Defining Standards for Communication

Government agencies, international organizations, and non-profits utilize internet messaging technologies in a variety of ways while communicating with refugee beneficiaries. I spoke to a wide variety of humanitarian organizations that frequently utilize these technologies. While these organizations had some guidelines concerning how and when to communicate with internet messaging technologies with refugees, interviewees acknowledged that they were ultimately limited. Because of the hectic nature of the humanitarian response and the limited capacity of refugee services organizations, many were unable to fully process questions of accessibility or data protection. However, as internet-based communication and social media become more valid methods of communicating with refugee beneficiaries and bringing them into relevant organizational services, more practical guidelines must be established.

Within the organizational field, there is an urgent need for more defined standards of communication between refugee service organizations and their beneficiaries over ICTs. I encourage UNHCR, the IOM, and a coalition of other United Nations agencies which collaborate on issues of irregular migration to create a working group. In the ideal scenario, this working group would serve as an avenue of further research, where different agencies can pool information about their best practices for communicating with beneficiaries and processing large amounts of sensitive information over them. Better knowledge sharing within the organizational field will allow refugee services agencies to share successful stories social media utilization in refugee integration and others to learn by example.

In addition, I encourage the United Nations to develop tangible outcomes based on this working group. On a grassroots level, many small-scale organizations grapple with these same issues of communications standards but lack the guidance or training to address them. Many organizations struggle with combating misinformation over these channels at the local level. Informal, webinar-style, types of communications training could make local actors more sensitive to these issues and develop the working knowledge for solutions on the ground.

# Conclusion

The most common observation I heard from interviewees was two-fold: the sheer presence of ICTs for migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees and their importance. The most valuable tool people could bring with them is a smartphone, and people would prioritize accessing them over food and shelter. In integration and resettlement, they remained as valuable tools of adjusting to life in a new country, coping with trauma and separation, and maintaining the same cultural and community structures in a distant place.

These sociological implications are immediately relevant to the world of migration policy. The 2015 European migrant crisis exposed fatal shortcomings in migration management and asylum, and without proper reflection, we stand to see them repeated. ICTs cannot only be viewed within a paradigm of push and pull factors. Too often, ICTs are treated by policymakers as a means of broadcasting success stories over social media after immigrating and drawing more people to make a dangerous journey to Europe. Rather, they must be viewed as tools which give people the ability to make critical decisions in migration, asylum, and integration. They must be understood as connections which structure the lives of refugees even outside of the digital space. As refugee services agencies adapted to the crisis, they were forced to immediately grapple with questions of how to incorporate ICTs into emergency operations and grassroots initiatives. They conduct lifesaving and vital protection work, and because of this, a critical examination of their online communication strategies must always be encouraged.

By their very nature, ICTs center refugees and their own accessibility in the violent and life-changing events of migration. Without interventions that account for this, we limit our toolbox for helping refugee on their own terms.

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# Appendix A: Interview Guide for Refugee Assistance Workers

Hi, my name is Reema Saleh. I am conducting a study on the role of internet communication technologies in decision making for refugee populations and refugee service organizations. I really appreciate your time and involvement here. Please feel free to let me know if you have questions as we go along, or if you would like me to clarify anything. We can skip any questions that you don’t feel comfortable answering.

1. Could you describe what your organization does?
   1. What is your position and role?
   2. What does your day-to-day look like? What are your typical activities/duties/responsibilities?
   3. What capacity is your organization working in? Where are they currently providing humanitarian assistance?
2. What motivated you to join this organization?
   1. How long have you been working on refugee issues?
   2. What level of interactions do you have with refugee populations?
3. Do you think ICTs are becoming increasingly used in situations of forced migration?
   1. Why or why not? How common are they?
   2. When were you first made aware of this?
4. How do you think refugee populations are utilizing ICTs?
   1. How has your organization reacted to increased ICT use?
   2. How have other organizations within your field reacted?
5. What kinds of ICTs are most commonly-used by refugee populations? Are some ICTs more/less popular among some populations of refugees?
6. Does your organization utilize any ICTs in communicating with refugee beneficiaries or have they in the past?
   1. What kinds of ICTs? Why did your organization choose to incorporate them?
   2. How did your organization use them? To individually communicate with beneficiaries? To disseminate information? To operate a helpline/hotline?
   3. Were there any attempts to make information about your organization’s resources more publicly available through ICTs?
7. From your perspective, how accessible were ICTs for refugee beneficiaries?
   1. What indicators made ICTs more/less accessible for some?
8. In your experience, how important did ICT communication appear to refugee beneficiaries?
   1. How did they utilize ICTs in their personal communication?
   2. What kinds of information were they able to access through ICTs?
9. Were there any privacy concerns about communicating with beneficiaries through ICTs or messaging applications?
   1. Did refugees ever express fears or concerns about communicating through ICTs?
   2. Were there any attempts to safeguard or anonymize personally identifiable information potentially collected through ICTs?
   3. Are there any “best practices” or standards that your organization adheres to in handling this information? Do other similar organizations have any?
10. How do beneficiaries interact with your organization over ICTs?
    1. Do people interact with your organization differently over them, compared to in-person interactions?
    2. Do beneficiaries trust using ICTs to communicate with your organization?
    3. How do should organizations be utilizing ICTs in humanitarian contexts?
11. How did internet messaging change their relationships to their communities?

# Appendix B: Interview Guide for Participants on ICTs in Migration

1. How did you use ICTs while migrating? Why?
2. What kind of information did you access through ICTs?
3. How do you think refugee populations are utilizing ICTs?
4. Do you think ICTs are becoming increasingly used in situations of forced migration?
   1. Why or why not? How common are they?
5. What places online did you obtain information from?
   1. Did you consult any public or private social media groups?
   2. Did you rely on ICTs to establish contacts before leaving or in your place of arrival? Were you able to stay in contact with family and friends?
6. What kinds of ICTs did you use? Were there any you relied on most?
7. How important was ICT communication for you?
8. Who were you staying in contact with?
9. How much did you trust information obtained through ICTs?
10. Did you ever communicate with a non-profit or refugee services organization through ICTs?
11. How were other people around utilizing ICTs?

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