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“Without It, You Will Die”

Smartphones and Refugees’ Digital Self-Organization

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Introduction

In European discourse, the year 2015 is referred to as the “summer of migration” (Hess et al. 2017). Starting from the numerous crisis hotspots in Africa and particularly the Middle East, even as far away as Afghanistan, a large number of people came to Europe, fleeing from war, starvation, inhuman systems, and persecution.

The images circulated on the internet and in global media from the various stations of the journey repeatedly showed exhausted people suffering from travel exertion. But looking closely at these images and comparing them to earlier refugee movements, something else was striking: smartphones were often the refugees’ companions and became a media phenomenon that was constantly mentioned. The *New York Times*, for example, called the smartphone a “refugees['] essential”—alongside food and shelter (Brunwasser 2015). There were also countless reports and rising interest in the refugees’ mobile phones in Germany, concluding that the mobile phone was replacing the bank account, the computer, and the landline phone (Meyer 2015).

Today’s modern smartphone needs an essential prerequisite to fulfill this purpose: a connection to the World Wide Web. However, during the first phase of immigration in 2015, only very few refugee shelters had internet in private rooms or in the common room. However, starting from the obser-

vation that “for many, connectivity has become as essential for survival as food, water and shelter” (Accenture and UNHCR 2016: 11), more and more initiatives to further expand digital infrastructure have grown rapidly. In 2016, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) highlighted this “unused potential” of digital infrastructure (Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Entwicklung und Zusammenarbeit [BMZ] 2016). Civil initiatives and even the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) tried to address this digital development with their own strategies. The smartphone is thus increasingly becoming the focus of many integration initiatives.

In this chapter, we aim to illustrate the important role of the smartphone both for the migration and for the integration process in the country of arrival. In this sense, the smartphone is analyzed as a material object that is more than just a mobile phone, a context-sensitive tool for establishing translocal communication and situational community building. Accordingly, the smartphone is understood as a self-empowerment tool.

State of Research

Mobile media: never in the history of the world has a technology expanded faster (Görland 2020). More people now have access to mobile media like smartphones than to freshwater toilets. At the same time, telecommunication has become a major necessity in the context of the global migration movement. In the early 2000s, the emergence of low-cost global telephone and call shops was already described as the “social glue of migrant transnationalism” (Vertovec 2004). People were able to stay in touch at low cost and in real time. Today, this is even reinforced by permanent internet connection and the services associated with it, such as messenger apps, online social networks, and video calls. Dana Diminescu (2008) developed the image of the “connected migrant” as a convergence of social, digital and communicative developments. This concept is not free of criticism due to its common utilitarian interpretation as it assumes a great autonomy and speaks little about discrimination along the lines of gender and ethnicity (Awad and Tossel 2019: 12).

In general, it can be said that research has quickly turned its attention to this phenomenon. Even before the “summer of migration” there was a great amount of research in the international arena on the effects of mobile media during or after forced migration (e.g., Coddington and Mountz 2014; Harney 2013; Wall, Campbell, and Janbek 2015; Witteborn 2015; Accenture and UNHCR 2016; Andrade and Doolin 2016). In their meta-study on forty-three international (i.e., not exclusively European) studies, Mancini et al. (2019) differentiate five dominant topics on refugees’ experiences and

mobile phones (MP) between 2013 and 2018: "(a) media practices in refugees' everyday lives; (b) opportunity and risks of MPs during the migration journey; (c) the role of MPs in maintaining and developing social relations; (d) potential of MPs for refugees' self-assertion and self-empowerment; (e) MPs for refugees' health and education" (Mancini et al. 2019: 1).

Due to the emerging "crisis" in 2015 (as several European media have called it, further studies have been published on the relationship between migration and the smartphone in the European context. Most exhibit a duality of content (Arnold and Görland 2018): first, there is a description of media use during and after the migration process, followed by a comparison of these phases, which usually shows that "journey and integration in a host society represent two different processes" (Krasnova and AbuJarour 2017: 1796). The digital dangers in the migration process were also addressed; with the conclusion of a "dialectical tension" (Gillespie, Osseiran, and Cheesman 2018: 9): On the one hand, mobile media help with navigation and are thus self-empowering. On the other hand, mobile media also create danger: for example, if the German federal government orders smartphones to be read during the asylum application procedure (Chase and Dick 2017).

Most European studies have specific topics such as social integration into the new society (Krasnova and AbuJarour 2017), unaccompanied youth (Kutscher and Kreß 2015), mutual support via social media (Borkert, Fisher, and Yafi 2018), "decision-making" via social networks (Dekker et al. 2018), identity (Karnowski, Springer, and Herzer 2016), expectations regarding the host country (Richter, Kunst, and Emmer, 2016), and self-representation (Risam 2018). The topics and thus the various research interests are therefore manifold.¹

All studies share the same emphasis on the importance of mobile and social media as well as connectivity for migration and diaspora communication, both for self-presentation and for integration into the arrival society. The smartphone, it seems, is an imminently important companion in everyday life.

This chapter wants to go one step further and focus on the self-empowerment character of the mobile phone through an actor-oriented perspective. For this purpose, we apply an approach that has not been used so far: logistics, an increasingly popular approach developed to study migration (Apicella, Arnold, and Bojadžijev 2018: 19; Thrift 2008 126).

Method

The following results are based on an empirical study conducted in Berlin between January and December 2016.² In Berlin alone, ninety thousand refugees arrived in 2015 (Nolan and Graham-Harrison 2015). In total, sev-

enteen qualitative interviews with Syrian refugees were conducted in the project, and ninety-seven questionnaires were filled out in Arabic.

The qualitative interviews, conducted between May and September 2016, were focused on questions about the specific migration history of the interviewees and their media usage patterns—i.e., which media and social networks they used both before and after the migration process—but also included general questions about their life history and their future plans. We also asked how information had been shared and verified during the flight. The respondents were between the ages of sixteen and thirty-six (average age: twenty-eight), and their educational qualifications differed. Seven of them were male, eight female and all of them had arrived in Germany between August and November 2015. Most interviews were conducted in English; five interviews were conducted with the help of an Arabic translator. This fact necessarily resulted in a certain preselection with regard to the educational level of the interviewees.

The quantitative questionnaire was developed on the basis of the qualitative interviews. During this second phase of the project, we interviewed ninety-seven participants (average age: thirty, one-third female, two-thirds male) in November and December of 2016 in two different refugee shelters in Berlin. We worked with an Arabic-speaking research assistant who contacted potential interview partners, assisted them with unclear questions, and handed out shopping vouchers as a small reward. The questionnaires included questions on media use before, during, and after the migration, various (self-)assessments on topics related to (mass) communication, and questions on the use of so-called integration apps.

A reason for a relatively low response rate to the questionnaires that were distributed was “research exhaustion” during the survey period. In 2016, for example, there was a real boom in research on migration in Germany. However, according to the manager of a refugee shelter, many researchers proceeded insensitively, which led to many institutions not allowing any more research to be done there. The following figures are therefore not representative overall but do represent a first quantification.

Results

The phone is the only way to come here ... 99 percent you have to have a phone, and internet. Without it? You're lost, you will die! (M., twenty-two)

All of the refugees who were interviewed qualitatively or quantitatively had an internet-capable mobile phone, which they used both during the flight and in everyday situations in the country of arrival to coordinate essential areas of life. The connected migrants (Diminescu 2008) (i.e., the refugees

who were fully connected via mobile media), were thus a reality in our sample. All interviewees, and this is confirmed by other studies such as those on media coverage, referred to the fact that smartphones are a routine item for refugees in Germany.

Quantitative Results

Even though we have supplemented the qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys in the study, we would like to use the results of the latter to give insight into the material first. The aim is to show to what extent the everyday life of refugees is “mediatized,” because “media do not just add a new dimension to the phenomenon of migration, they transform it altogether” (Madianou 2014: 323).

As table 10.1 shows, the applications used by the refugees interviewed are dispersed and diverse; no major differences to German users can be observed.³

Above all, the social functions of the smartphone dominate: messenger services such as WhatsApp or Viber are used by four-fifths of those surveyed, and Facebook is just as popular. The telephone function was still used by 79 percent, but everyday aids (e.g., the map function), entertainment (e.g., music and games), information gathering, and religious needs are also very important. Of those surveyed, 45 percent said they had a digital version of the Koran on their smartphones, and 38 percent also used religious apps, which for example point out the direction of Mecca. Searching for contacts and relationships through apps such as Tinder or Lovoo is also a feature used by around 17 percent of our sample. In addition, young refugees in particular use media for entertainment—whether by watching films and series (43 percent) or playing games (38 percent)—in an everyday life that is often characterized by monotony and waiting.

Based on previous studies with a triple division into “before, during, and after migration” (e.g., Karnowski et al. 2016; Krasnova and AbuJarour 2017), we also asked for the five most frequently used apps in these different phases. Table 2 shows the results:

Again, individual adaptation to the specific requirements is obvious. Although the social networks WhatsApp and Facebook always rank within the first three places, it is clear that navigation apps became particularly important during the flight. After the migration, the focus shifted to language courses and the visual social network Instagram, a community in which images are exchanged.

Furthermore, we asked whether refugees use so-called integration apps, and if so, which ones. “Integration apps” are small, digital helpers (applications) that are supposed to help refugees to master everyday life in the host country by providing recommendations and small learning tutorials.

Table 10.1. Agreement to the Statement “I Use the Following Functions on My Smartphone” (n = 97).

Application	Agreement in percent
Messengers like WhatsApp	82 percent
Facebook	82 percent
Phone calls	79 percent
Voice messages	70 percent
Maps	69 percent
Reading news	65 percent
Camera	64 percent
Google	64 percent
Language courses	57 percent
Movies / TV shows	57 percent
E-mail	53 percent
Music	52 percent
Koran	45 percent
Games	38 percent
Praying App	38 percent
Instagram	36 percent
Online Shopping	31 percent
Twitter	20 percent
Online Dating	17 percent
Online Banking	14 percent
Snapchat	13 percent

Table made by Sina Arnold and Stephan O. Görland.

Often, they have been designed by government institutions on a federal or municipal level. The result was disillusioning: only eleven of ninety-seven people downloaded the relevant apps. The majority of them (six people) downloaded the app Ankommen (Arrive), which was launched in 2016 with great media attention by the BAMF. Digital dictionaries were used more frequently, as almost 28 percent of our sample (twenty-seven people) had downloaded one of the various apps, and 56 percent used online language courses. Of our respondents, 70 percent agree or fully agree with the statement that the smartphone helps them to learn German. This generally

Table 10.2. Most Frequently Used Apps before, during, and after Migrating to Germany (n = 97).

Ranking	Before migration	During migration	After migration
1	WhatsApp	WhatsApp	WhatsApp
2	Facebook	Maps/GPS	Facebook
3	Viber	Facebook	Different messenger
4	Different messenger	Viber	Language courses and translator
5	Phone calling	Phone calling	Instagram

Table made by Sina Arnold and Stephan O. Görland.

points to its high importance for informal learning: 59 percent of the respondents agree or fully agree that they use the device to learn German.

The respondents generally show a very high level of media competence and use media critically: 63 percent say they “do not” or “rather do not” trust what they read on Facebook, 67 percent do not or rather do not trust Arab media, and 36 percent do not or rather do not trust German media. Overall, trust in German media is the highest at 37 percent. Finally, the quantitative questions reveal the subjective perception of the smartphone as relevant for the migration process: 80 percent of the respondents agree or fully agree that the smartphone was a great help; more than a third think that the flight would not have been possible without the phone.

In summary, the quantitative data illustrates that all phases of migration—prior to, during, and after the flight—are highly mediatized. The smartphone has an enormous value for refugees and combines individual, social, and cultural practices in a new way. Refugees use these with the help of their high media competence. However, “top-down applications” like government-initiated integration apps are rejected.

Qualitative Results

As mentioned above, we want to describe the results using a logistics approach. We have chosen this approach given the idea that logistics is becoming the “central discipline of the contemporary world” (Thrift 2008: 126). Logistics in this sense goes beyond the mobility of goods, people, and information (Arnold, Bojadžijev, and Apicella, 2018 18): it includes networks and relationships and tries to make them material. A logistical perspective at an actor level allows the individual to become the individual logistician

of planning and social organization (Arnold, Bojadžijev, and Apicella 2018: 19). It focuses on strategies regarding the anticipation of situations. A concentration on the actors in these coordination processes also provides a counterweight to current developments in European migration policy: the regulation of migration flows, the gathering of refugees at non-European collection points, and the increased inspection of refugees' smartphones all represent logistics "from above." They are counteracted at the individual level with logistics "from below."

We distinguished four different logistics of mediatized migration: maintenance logistics, coordination logistics, orientation logistics, and verification logistics. Based on these four areas, we will present the collected findings in detail.

Maintenance Logistics

I was afraid, because if it falls in the water, I'm gonna freak out. ... So, I kept it and put it in plastic bags. (M., twenty-nine)

Even though the smartphone plays a central role in migration processes mainly due to its digital functions, it is also a material object that requires maintenance of its functionality. All digital functions are therefore dependent on this materiality. In this context, the most important thing to maintain is the *battery level*. This maintenance had selective effects on the organization of the migration routes. In order to recharge their smartphone batteries, people adapted their routes to intersect with remote charging stations. Three-quarters of the respondents in our qualitative sample used external batteries, as these allowed greater independence from remote charging stations, which were usually multiple-outlet power strips at restaurants or cafés. However, some refugee camps, e.g., Idomeni on the Greek-Macedonian border, also provided charging stations or power strips where batteries could be recharged. Thus, Ahmed (twenty-four) declared: "Yeah, I have—I had alternative battery. Yeah, so every time when I went to the hostel or my place, I charged both with the battery, original one and the alternate one."

In addition to the physical factor of the energy level, it is also necessary to remain digitally *connected*. This is the second major challenge arising from maintenance logistics. For example, SIM (subscriber identity module) cards are helpful in the country of origin, but after crossing the next national border, one usually either has to pay high roaming charges, use the mobile internet, or buy a new SIM card. With one exception in our sample, all refugees bought different SIM cards during the trip in order to be reachable by SMS (Short Message Service) and for phone calls, to have access to the internet, or to navigate using map applications. Access to the internet played the more significant role since messenger services such as WhatsApp were

usually more important than SIM-based services for both messages and calls. Technical convergence is useful in that modern smartphones are software based and most apps are device bound. This means that apps such as Facebook or WhatsApp do not change with a new phone number, so users do not have to provide new contact information with each new service. For example, N. (twenty-two) bought a new card in every country she crossed: "We bought in every country a new SIM card [*sid*]" A. (twenty-three) tried to act more economically and used the prepaid cards in roaming mode: "When I was in Turkey, I would—took a SIM card. It still worked until Greece, not all of it, some Greece. Then from Greece, I bought a Vodafone SIM card to continue until Serbia. From there, I also bought another SIM card from Vodafone until I reached Germany." Some of the interviewees even bought a phone that could hold two SIM cards before departure. This enabled them to keep their original number, which made it easier to contact their country of origin—especially in view of the often-interrupted internet connection there. In addition, depending on the country of transit, they were able to use another SIM card at the best local rates.

Protection is the third maintenance logistic. Because even if the smartphone is charged and the SIM card promises connectivity, there are still considerable dangers: robbery, blackmail, and damage to the phone represent very serious threats during the migration process. In our interviews, the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea was often mentioned, where capsizing and being in the water for any length of time were potential dangers. M. (twenty-two) reacted to this with the use of plastic bags: "So I kept it and put it in plastic bags. ... Others ... they were putting it in special plastic. Plastic bags or some kind of bag." Other refugees told us that they simply wrapped the smartphone in several layers of plastic foil. These three exemplary areas illustrate the challenges involved in maintaining a survival device, which functions as a necessary travel instrument in the migration process.

Coordination Logistics

The second type of logistics resulting from the challenges of the migration process are coordination logistics. These are first of all *navigation* practices, as refugees navigate through unknown terrain and often also unknown language regions. The smartphone has become subjectively indispensable for them: "Without it, I wouldn't move an inch," as A. concludes. M. shares a similar feeling: "The phone is the only way to come here. ... 99 percent you have to [have] a phone, and internet and everything. Without it? You're lost, you die." It is certainly not surprising that for all of the refugees in our sample, apps like Google Maps, Here Maps, or Maps.me were the most used apps. "Yeah, Google Maps, absolutely Google Maps I used most," D. (twenty-seven) confirms. The use of these apps allows greater autonomy in the migration process, e.g., from traffickers or fraudsters. For example, a

young refugee from Aleppo told us how she recognized maps on her phone and that a taxi driver in Greece wanted to drive her in the opposite direction from her destination, the Macedonian border. She was able to call him out and intervene, exemplifying how the use of navigation apps enables a form of self-empowerment even in unknown territories. Smartphones and apps thus have an effect on the users' well-being, making them feel less helpless. R. told us the following about his smartphone: "It has helped me to be more independent [in my journey] because you can't all the time ask the people, sometimes I need to know by myself to what should I do there."

However, coordination is not only achieved through map apps; *interpersonal exchange* and the use of mass media or Facebook groups are also important factors in coordinating the flight. A. (twenty-five) added: "My cousin communicated with a lot of other people how to go on ... WhatsApp and using the Global Positioning System (GPS). And this is the most important thing, of course, and all—and also, we said which city, which area we have to go. So, we wrote it in WhatsApp and sent it to the others and keep on." His statement illustrates the intertwining of interpersonal communication and spatiality. Repeatedly, our interview partners emphasized that they sent each other their locations in order to estimate distances on the one hand, but also to mark secure paths. One interviewee remembered how WhatsApp's "location" function enabled him to find his cousin in a chaotic situation on the Greek-Macedonian border, and the two of them were able to reunite in the middle of a large crowd of people, police, and a rapidly changing situation. Interpersonal exchange aided by the smartphone thus represents a mediatized in situ logistics with different levels of complexity and characteristics.

Orientation Logistics

The penultimate logistics are relevant mostly for the processes and challenges that refugees face in the country of arrival. We refer to these as orientation logistics, since orientation and guidance are central here. "Without it, I'm gonna be lost," says one interview partner (M.) about the role of his smartphone in Berlin. Another describes his concrete strategies: "I prefer my app. It is better connected. Its name is 'Here Maps,' and this connects everything. Maps, trains, navigator, everything is connected, better than Google maps. And it is international. And it shows you the numbers of the streets and houses. You can even download it and open it again when you have no internet" (O., thirty-two). O. illustrates the various challenges that occur in the country of arrival as well as the (digital) management of these difficulties. In his preferred app, several services converge, each of which would otherwise create its own challenges. For example, many refugees told us that they first had to come to terms with German street names and the public transport system (i.e., quite banal coordination of everyday life).

Here, digital services which can provide a *framework for orientation* can be helpful. Due to the use of the (same) Latin alphabet, it was much easier for English speakers to navigate in everyday urban life.

In addition to digital apps, the *camera* function was also frequently used. For example, interview partners described how they photographed and exchanged each other's location in order to be able to visually communicate their physical position. Combined with the WhatsApp "location" function, this was far more likely to be successful than simply mentioning street names. The camera also allowed a greater degree of control in a situation characterized by legal insecurity. For example, a Syrian woman reported how she photographed her own waiting number on the display at the former Berlin State Office for Health and Social Affairs (LAGeSo) so she had proof in case she would not be called in: something that had happened to other refugees previously.

In addition, mobile media are used for informal learning, demonstrating a global trend especially among children and young people (Hamm et al. 2014). For example, many refugees reported using language apps or digital language courses: "I have an app in Turkey I downloaded for learning languages" (P., twenty-seven). However, these language courses are usually so-called "freemium models," i.e., the basic functions are free, but in order to learn more vocabulary, one must subscribe or pay extra. This is difficult for many refugees, as they do not have a credit card, which is a requirement in most app stores. One way to avoid such models are YouTube tutorials. In this context, D. (twenty-three) explained to us: "I watch lessons on YouTube." In fact, there are several YouTube language courses that give aspiring learners a better understanding of the German language. These offers are mostly designed by amateurs or semiprofessionals, but they have a large following because of their appealing presentation and audiovisual character (figure 10.1).

Due to the lack of alternative media, the smartphone is not only used for communication or learning. It also provides spiritual support, for example via an app (Islamic Compass), that shows Muslims the direction of Mecca and prayer times using the GPS position, thus providing orientation. During the coordination phase, Facebook groups are also a great help when it comes to orientation needs: People exchange information about current developments and seek mutual assistance. For example, in the largest and best-known Syrian-German Facebook group "Syrian House" (البيت السوري) refugees and other Arabic-speaking Syrians support each other regarding their problems, whether they are issues with their residence status or finding accommodation. Communication with other refugees was equally as important as communication with families and friends in the home countries, and with those who had migrated and arrived in countries offering similar services (in our case, with one exception where relatives had located to Sweden, this was exclusively Germany).



Figure 10.1. YouTube Language Tutorial. Source: YouTube.

Verification Logistics

The study focused in particular on the question of how information is exchanged between actors. From a logistics point of view, there is the central question of anticipating and acting appropriately in different situations. For this purpose, the verification of information is essential. During the migration process, smartphones enable users to search for information about the journey and the countries of arrival; to navigate certain routes and avoid perceived dangers such as police, border patrols and robbers; to facilitate staying in contact with friends, family, and other migrants, and thus, smartphones become “digital travel companions.” The emergency call functions give users a life-saving character, and at the same time this helps to reduce a dependency on traffickers. But where do migrants get this information from, and how does the verification process work? How exactly does this digital self-organization work? We were able to identify three different strategies:

The Chaotic Model

In example 1 (figure 10.2), dispersed communication practices were used for the groups: everyone gathered information and then decided how to proceed in joint discussions.

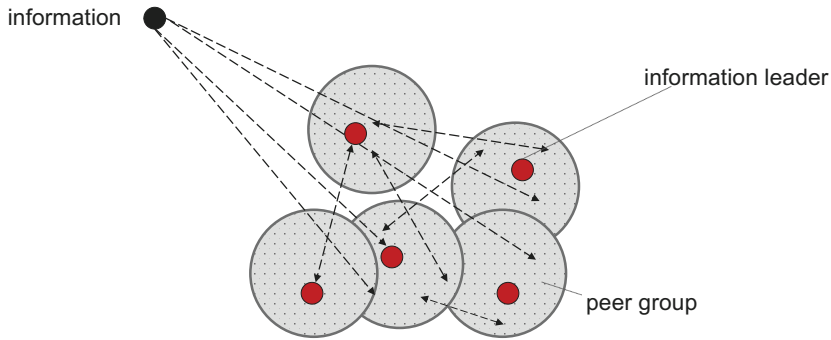


Figure 10.2. Verification of Information within the Chaotic Model. © Sina Arnold and Stephan O. Görland.

However, this grassroots model of verification turned out to be somewhat chaotic for many migrants. The fact that many people were gathering information at the same time resulted in a veritable information overload. Nevertheless, in this model, there were usually “information leaders” who decided how to proceed.

But there’s a leader. He leads the group. And those people, when they communicate, they have a lot of, yeah, connections everywhere. So any new information, they go to their leader. ... We informed us, and we should take this way or the other way. And [if] there are multiple confirmations or disinformation, then the leader in the group take[s] this way [MR1] (A., twenty-one)

The Hierarchical Model

Figure 10.3 shows a different strategy. In the summer and autumn of 2015, many refugees had to react flexibly to the insecure and constantly changing situations at European internal borders. Specifically, in these unreliable circumstances, digital media was a big help. One interviewee reported a change in the group size according to the changing circumstances. While a group of seventy people offered protection from predatory gangs in the border region of Macedonia/Greece, the subsequent division in Serbia was decided upon to avoid attracting attention from the police and state authorities. The group was divided so as not to appear suspicious: “But every group had someone [the group leader] who could use the internet and communicate with other groups” (H., twenty-two). Figure 10.3 also shows that the other

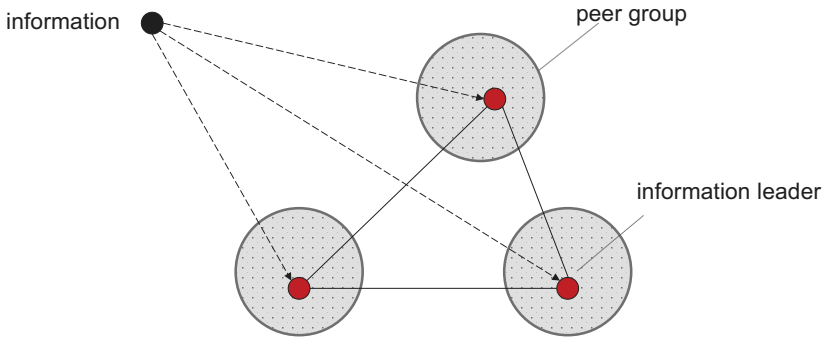


Figure 10.3. Verification of Information within the Hierarchical Model. © Sina Arnold and Stephan O. Görland.

group members switched off their phones to achieve an intended reduction in complexity. This reduction was based on the idea of possible monitoring by government agencies, e.g., by locating the devices. The groups wanted to ensure that they did not attract local attention. Group leaders were usually the people with the best language skills or the best mobile phone. These leaders continuously did their best to stay in touch, reporting back to their group members frequently.

The Gatekeeper Model

A third method of verification was the so-called gatekeeper model (figure 10.4). This describes a completely different approach to verification. Here, information is transmitted by a superordinate authority (i.e., the gatekeeper). This person constantly checks information on the migration route, the weather, and the latest news about the situation at the borders by obtaining it mainly from the destination country. This is partly done by acquaintances along the route, as well as by social media monitoring of known Facebook groups. A young refugee from Syria reported: “I called my father. My father and the whole family always look for everything in the news.” Another interviewee agreed that his parents in the home country had done the same. The advantage of this method is obvious: by outsourcing the information search, it was possible to concentrate on the actual migration process. In addition, emotional support could also be given. For example, a young Syrian woman reported how she reached her family in the Berlin ref-

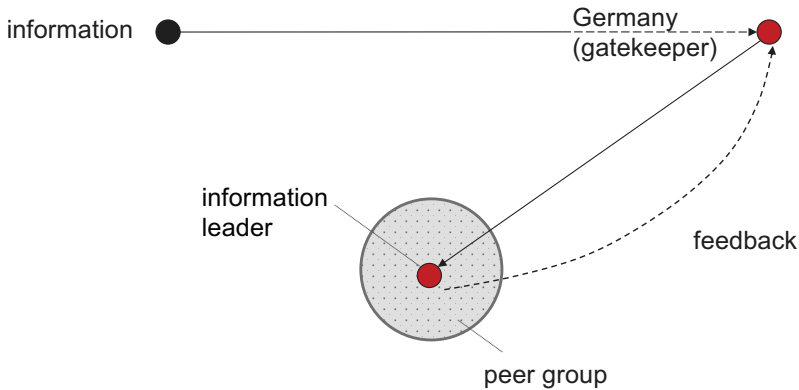


Figure 10.4. Verification of Information within the Gatekeeper Model. © Sina Arnold and Stephan O. Görland.

ugee shelter via Turkish roaming with her Syrian SIM card at the moment the engines of her boat stopped on the Mediterranean Sea. They engaged in a real-time connection and thus were able to provide emotional support in this situation.

On the basis of the logistics of verification, we see on the one hand individual patterns, which of course are also dependent on external circumstances and group size. On the other hand, all three models had a fixed peer group and chosen information leaders during the migration. One group offered protection and mutual support. The media always acted as an antenna to the rest of the group’s converging world.

Discussion

Self-Empowerment via Smartphone: More Than a Feeling

All of the results, whether from quantitative surveys or qualitative interviews, show the great importance of the smartphone for refugees. The smartphone is their “window into the world,” as one interview partner put it. The division in three different stages, before, during, and after the migration process (Karnowski et al. 2016; Krasnova and AbuJarour 2017), as has been practiced in many other studies, underestimates the importance of the smartphone in the everyday life of refugees. The general picture resulting from the different usage situations shows it as an object of self-empowerment,

regardless of the situation in which the refugees find themselves. Often, the different stages are connected with each other: the refugees are planning their journey and downloading maps beforehand, so they can navigate off-line while crossing different countries. One refugee told us how he prefers the label “traveler” instead of “refugee” because of the negative connotation of the latter. There are many interactions with crowds of “travelers” during the migration, the groups established in this way often maintaining contact for a long time after parting ways. After the arrival in the host country, the smartphone is still used to interact with family members and friends spread throughout different countries.

In summary, it can be said that the self-empowering character of the smartphone goes beyond the possibly directly intended character of the applications. Facebook, for example, was an important help in the migration. There were several different groups discussing the best path of migration, with names like “Travel to Greece from Izmir.” Some of them had thousands or more members, often these discussions were short-lived. Some of them were run by traffickers, who sometimes presented themselves like a travel agency, with photos of happy “customers” arriving safely in the sunset. However, this online advertising also creates systems for comparing and monitoring prices and services; refugees were able to comment upon positive or negative experiences with certain traffickers. In addition, there are Facebook groups with names such as “Smuggle Yourself to Europe without a Trafficker,” which help the “travelers” in navigating parts of the journey, especially overland routes, on their own.

Another example illustrates the self-empowerment character of the mobile phone. In September 2015, Hungarian police officers neglected to inform refugees traveling on a train headed to Austria and Germany that the Hungarian government intended for this train to return them to a refugee camp. Instead, the police gave wrong information (Nolan and Graham-Harrison 2015). The travelers still on the platform learned of the planned destination and were able to contact those on the already departing train, so that they could get off the train before the last stop and continue their journey to Austria on foot (Brunwasser 2015). Similarly, in the case of assaults, smartphones can assist in organizing help. One interviewee reported that after a robbery in Hungary, he was able to receive money from his uncle via Western Union’s mobile money transfer service.

After their arrival in Germany, many refugees were surprised by the long time the German bureaucracy took to process their papers: the anticipated language courses had long waiting lists, and the allocation of private apartments instead of group accommodations took weeks, often months. Due to these circumstances, the smartphone became an “everyday companion,” regardless of the gratification sought. For navigating in the new country, many refugees did “informal learning” via dictionaries, YouTube tutorials (figure

10.1), or other selected strategies; they tried to learn the German language as well as culture.

Based on the idea that digital networks are also a form of social practice that fits into real geographies (Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou, and Tsianos 2015), refugees use digital technologies and social networks to participate in urban spaces. Digital platforms, for example, enable newcomers who are not yet part of an established civil society to access numerous services to communicate and interact within their new communities. As we were able to show, digital means can help in strengthening refugee organization vis-à-vis the state and bureaucracy. They can also assist in initiating meetings, finding self-help groups, or staging demonstrations for refugee rights. These platforms, put in use on the smartphone, thus help to instigate bottom-up processes of participation. If participation is power (Carpentier 2012), digital platforms help people without citizenship to assert their rights and become “digital citizens” (Isin and Ruppert 2015).

Our findings show that self-empowerment is definitely a bottom-up process. It is constituted through experiences and impressions but also through the specific logistical knowledge of the people concerned. As described, there are several so-called integration apps in Germany, initiated by state agencies. These are intended to help refugees acclimatize to the country. Out of ninety-seven respondents to the media consumption study, only eleven said that they had used such an app before, yet it lacked crucial services such as language translations, contact addresses, or assistance with healthcare. Instead, a young man noted that the apps have a strong focus on “cultural education.” He criticized this focus, pointing to the fact that culture is something that is learned through everyday practice:

I was like—they give you the information about integration in here. So it’s like mostly talking about the cultures, how there are people living here. And when you are in the situation after ten months, nine months, you will see how people, they are living. And you would get used to these kind of groups. And maybe you can call that limitations or limit something like that. But you would get used to this, and you will understand that. It’s something normal that happened to everybody. (M., twenty-nine)

Instead, as Gillespie et al. (2016: 14) have discovered, good practice proposals for designing digital resources for refugees need to be (1) user-centric, (2) secure and private, (3) accessible, (4) sustainable, (5) trusted, and (6) regularly updated. This undertaking is made easier if refugees themselves are participants in the design process as software developers and experts. Several initiatives, such as techfugees.com, have put these realizations into practice.

In summary, smartphone use among refugees highlights the high degree of (collective) self-empowerment that these devices enable, leading to

greater independence from actors such as smugglers, state authorities, or border guards in different situations. In referring to an approach from critical migration studies that focuses on actor's agency (Mezzadra 2011), one could say that smartphones contribute to a certain "autonomy of migration."

Risks and Dangers

The increasing use of information technology during migration also brings "digital dangers," which point to systematic restrictions on participation attempts or even autonomy. The enforcement of European borders is partly aided by digital infrastructure. In an attempt to digitally control refugees, institutions like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have been using biometric data to identify populations on the move for well over a decade (Jacobsen 2015). In Europe, refugees have been registered in European Dactyloscopy (EURODAC), the European fingerprint database, since 2003. European expenditure on technological border control (drones, heat detectors, border protection robots, etc.) has increased in recent years (Proctor 2015). Gillespie et al. (2016: 29) report that soldiers asked refugees on the Syrian border for their Facebook passwords to find out if they were "regime friendly." In Austria, refugees are forced to hand in their mobile phones when applying for asylum; the mobile phone log files are then used to verify the applicant's identity (Young-Powell 2017). In Germany, mobile phones are increasingly playing a central role in these procedures as well, by means of new technologies that enable the Federal Ministry for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) to read out geodata (e.g., locations). In 2018, the mobile phones of 11,400 refugees were inspected for identity verification. The BAMF was able to find false information in only 2 percent of the cases (Lückoff 2019). In this context, Vassilis Tsianos and Brigitta Kuster (2010) spoke about "digital deportability," as the vulnerability and dangers that result from an increasing use of digital databases to monitor migrant movements become greater. Thus, the smartphone is a "double-edged sword" (Wall et al. 2017): it can be a potential source of danger if the data that enabled the migration process is subsequently read out and used against the asylum seeker.

Conclusion: Post-migrant Media Patterns

It is important to note that the use of media by new immigrants is hardly distinguishable from the media use of the majority society. Of course, there is a partial devotion to so-called "ethnomedia" that comes from the home country and deals with culturally related topics (Hepp and Düvel 2010).

However, this use is not exclusive but, rather, embedded in a broad media repertoire. Media culture is a global culture. Young people from Syria or Iraq are above all young people who are, in times of mediatized lifestyles, just as interested as their German peers in their stars on Instagram, the long-awaited update of a video game, or the latest action film with Jason Statham, all of which were reported to us during the qualitative interviews with young refugees. This puts into question notions on alleged homogenous "cultures of origin." On the contrary, young refugees' lifestyles are shaped by many different local and global factors, thanks to the digital world. This results in a cultural and identitarian mosaic that can be described as "post-migrant" (Foroutan 2016). The similarities of this global world—from Samsung through selfies to Skype—make it clear that the term "integration" is becoming increasingly fuzzy.

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Notes

1. A good overview of the dynamic research in Europe since 2015 is illustrated, for example, by the *Sage Handbook of Media and Migration* (Smets et al. 2019).
2. The study was conducted as part of the research project "Solidarität im Wandel" (Changing solidarity) at the Berlin Institute for Migration and Integration Research (BIM) at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, funded by the Federal Commissioner for Migration, Refugees, and Integration of Germany.
3. For general mobile media usage data in Germany, see, e.g., Koch and Frees (2016).

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