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Is the smartphone always a smart choice? Against the utilitarian view of the 'connected migrant'

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ABSTRACT

This article challenges the widespread view of mobile connectivity as a purely utilitarian resource that refugees use at their individual discretion to resolve problems and cover needs. It explains that while this approach fits into well-intended humanitarian efforts, it carries important empirical and political costs. Both sets of costs are examined. Cues from existing research and an exploratory study among Syrian refugees in the Netherlands reveal the empirical costs: They point to various ways in which mobile connectivity can be both a desired toolkit *and* an uncomfortable imposition. Although these are novel findings in relation to migration, they resonate with the broader literature on non-utilitarian as well as paradoxical uses of mobile phones. We interpret this gap – between the generalized conceptualizations of the 'connected refugee' and people's experiences of 'perpetual contact' more generally – not just as empirically, but also as politically problematic. When refugees' experiences with mobile phones are simplified, refugees themselves are *othered*. Critical debates about humanitarianism underscore the dehumanizing politics of this approach and the need to replace the underlying logic of compassion with the defense of refugees' rights.

Introduction

Rejections of the notion of mobile phones as luxury goods have become prominent in Western mainstream media since 2015, particularly in relation to people fleeing from the Syrian civil war. In the *New York Times,* mobile phones have been described as 'A 21st century migrant essential' (Brunwasser, 2015). 'Refugees need phone credit almost as much as food and water,' argued a journalist in the *Independent* (Lindt, 2018). In *Zeit Online*, Habekuß and Schmitt (2015) explained: 'When used as a compass and a map, smart phones point the way to freedom.' The evidence offered to justify these views includes compelling accounts of mobile phones enabling migrants to stay in contact with their loved ones; access vital information about where to go, how to get there, where to stay; and, in general, how to

make the journey safer. Cost–benefit calculations further justify these claims: smart phones have become relatively cheap in relation to the benefits they offer.

Like liberal mainstream media, communication research on refugees[1] and mobile phones – which pre-dates but has expanded considerably since 2015 – has strongly endorsed this narrative. Because they are so central to migration networks and information provision, mobile phones are said to enhance mobility itself (Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017). They make the stay in refugee camps more livable (Khoury, 2015; Smets, 2018; Wall, Campbell, & Janbek, 2017) and are crucial to address the challenges refugees encounter when they settle in a foreign country (Kaufmann, 2018). The mobile phone is thus characterized as a tool that refugees use free and willingly to address specific practical and social needs, even if structural factors limit mobile phone use. Since refugees face particularly pressing and diverse needs – something the literature commonly describes in terms of precarity – a resourceful, well-equipped refugee is assumed to substantially benefit from being as much and as freely connected as possible. There seems to be no question that 'irregular immigration journeys' become 'smart' when smart phones are involved (Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017; see also Dekker, Engbersen, Klaver, & Vonk, 2018), in the same way that it is not questioned whether and how refugees' experiences go beyond precarity.

The rise of this utilitarian narrative, both in media and academic discussions, concurs with what Georgiou (2018) describes as a broad shift in public opinion, after the deaths of hundreds of refugees trying to reach Europe in the mid-2015. Specifically, in reaction to the tragic shipwreck that killed some 800 migrants in the Mediterranean in April 13, 2015, 'media called for Europe's ethico-political response to refugees' plight, while security and humanitarian acts at the border attracted significant public attention' (Georgiou, 2018, p. 46). In this context, it became apparent that representations of refugees with their mobile phones – conspicuous at the time – risked disqualifying them from humanitarian help. As explained by Leurs and Ponzanesi (2018, p. 6), '[t]he appearance of digitally connected refugees was perceived as incongruent with Eurocentric ideas of sad and poor refugees fleeing from war and atrocities.' Thus, discrediting the view of the mobile phone as luxury and conceptualizing it, instead, as a survival tool appears as a strategic move to secure the 'connected refugee's' (Smets, 2018) eligibility for humanitarian help.

However, too little consideration has been given to the potential costs of this strategy. Specifically, this paper examines two sets of costs. The first are empirical: We show that utilitarian accounts obscure important aspects of mobile phone use in relation to forced migration and thus limit our knowledge and understanding of the issue. This leads us to the second and even more pressing danger, one linked to the politics of this kind of research. We argue that utilitarian accounts fall into what Georgiou (2018, p. 46) calls, 'symbolic bordering,' and which she describes as 'the hierarchical ordering of Europeans' and migrants' humanity that subjects migrants to danger, controlled mobility, and conditional recognition.' We ground our first set of claims on existing research where we find initial cues of non-utilitarian uses of the mobile phone, as well as on original data from interviews with Syrian refugees living in the Netherlands. Our political claims, in turn, are based on scholarly discussions about media and (forced) migration, as well as broader debates about migration and humanitarianism. We start, however, with a more detailed overview of how the utilitarian narrative is articulated in research on refugees and mobile phones.

Refugees, mobile phones, and precarity

Already in 2004, Vertovec referred to mobile phones as 'the social glue of migrant trans-nationalism,' mainly because of the way in which they enhanced communication with distant loved ones (pp. 219–220). More recent research suggests that as mobile phones have become smarter and started to offer more than 'cheap calls'– the focus of Verovec's analysis – their importance in migrants' lives has grown. Studies confirm smart phones' key role in the communication with distant kin (e.g., Gillespie, Osseiran, & Cheesman, 2018; Madianou, 2014; Madianou & Miller, 2012), but also point to an incresingly diverse functionality. In relation to contemporary experiences of people fleeing from Syria to different parts of the world, phones are considerd a 'lifeline, facilitating route planning, safety, navigation, family reunification, translation, banking, language learning, and finding housing and work' (Benton & Glennie, cited in Risam, 2018, p. 60; see also Alencar, Kondova, & Ribbens, 2018; Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017).

Refugees' uses of mobile phones are commonly linked to the precarity of their condition. Precarity, in this literature, refers to a 'lack of security and instability in how people experience their lives in diverse fields, such as citizenship, employment, housing, education, health, mobility, social protection, and social rights' (Baban, Ilcan, & Rygiel, 2017, p. 45). Authors refer to specific, though necessarily related, forms of refugee precarity. These include 'precarity of place,' that is, the 'vulnerability to removal or deportation from one's physical location' (Banki, 2015, p. 69) and 'information precarity,' namely 'the condition of instability that refugees experience in accessing news and personal information, potentially leaving them vulnerable to misinformation, stereotyping, and rumors that can affect their economic and social capital' (Wall et al., 2017, p. 240; see also Dekker et al., 2018). Mobile phones, in this context, are commonly conceptualized as fundamental tools, which refugees use strategically to alleviate precarity.

Based on their research among Syrian refugees in a camp in Jordan, Wall et al. (2017) argue that mobile phones reduce information precarity, by, for example, giving access to trusted sources (largely through one-to-one communication) in an environment where information can be particularly limited, biased, and dangerous, and where social networks have been disrupted; as well as by offering valuable opportunities for self-representation. As part of information precarity, the authors also consider the need to witness the realities back home. The Syrians among whom they conducted fieldwork in a refugee camp in Jordan would commonly use the phone to inquire whether family and friends in Syria had access to basic services and food. 'The phone calls seem to serve not so much as a solution – what after all could the refugees do to help – but as the personal witnessing of a loved one's plight' (Wall et al., 2017, p. 251).

Even if the literature does not explicitly refer to emotional precarity, one can observe something like that in Wall et al.'s (2017) account as well as in other studies dealing with how mobile phones are used to address affective and social needs. Cellphones are described as 'lifelines' not just because of how they help with 'everyday problems of survival' (Harney, 2013, p. 548), but also because they can mitigate emotional anxieties and boredom (Alencar et al., 2018; Khoury, 2015; Smets, 2018) and facilitate or simply enable communication with distant kin. Among irregular migrants and asylum seekers in Naples, Italy, for example, Harney (2013, p. 543) found that 'technologically mediated relationships are central to problem-solving sociality.' His informants used phones for everyday

practical tasks – such as receiving warnings about police raids and processing asylum request applications – as well as to fight 'the isolation of their migratory conditions' (p. 548). One of them explained, 'I can hear my father's voice on the telephone, see children through on-line video, and chat with a distant friend. It shortens the distances and makes me feel less lonely' (Harney, 2013, p. 553; see also Gillespie et al., 2018; Madianou, 2014).

Thus, while the literature discusses a variety of functions for mobile phones in the life of refugees, it seldom questions the premise that migrants strategically and freely decide to be always as connected as possible. This is not to say that research does not acknowledge risks of mobile phone communication due to the efforts of powerful actors (such as private corporations, governments and human traffickers) to exploit refugee connectivity, track and manipulate their movements (e.g., Gillespie et al., 2018; Harney, 2013; Wall et al., 2017). However, attention to these risks does not challenge utilitarian perspectives on mobile phone use. On the contrary, the desirability of unlimited and free mobile connectivity for refugees – where 'free' also involves independence from governments, corporations and smugglers – remains unquestioned (Latonero & Kift, 2018).

The empirical costs of the utilitarian approach: evidence from the literature

We question the empirical validity on the utilitarian narrative, first, by looking in existing research for evidence pointing to a more complex relationship between refugees and digital communication technologies. In doing this, we distinguish between studies that deal with refugees and communication technologies in general and those that focus specifically on their use of mobile phones.

In the first category, Twigt's (2018) ethnographic account of the lives of Iraqi refugees in Jordan addresses some of the shortcomings of simplifying and idealizing the notion of the 'connected migrant.' Twigt (2018, p. 6) observed that 'many Iraqi refugees struggle with the tensions attachments to Iraq bring' and which become particularly visible in their mediated communication. In two specific cases, interviewees would rather minimize suffering by avoiding Facebook and 24/7 news (and thus the permanent flow of tragic news). Nonetheless, these interviewees keep going back to those channels, underscoring how to (dis)connect is not a (purely) rational choice. Twigt concludes by stressing that '[d]igital connectivity enables acts of not giving in to the situation, but it is by no means the solution for prolonged legal and social insecurity' (2018, p. 9).

Further compelling evidence of the complexities of 'technologically mediated sociality' (Willson, 2012) for refugees can be found in Witteborn's research among people seeking asylum in Germany. According to Witteborn (2015, p. 351), digital technologies offered 'an opportunity for transnational family intimacy but also a challenge, as people were held accountable for meeting family expectations in virtual interactions.' She specifically refers to the 'stress' and 'burden' associated with the kind of co-presence allowed by Skype, and to communicative strategies – like turning off the camera arguing a too weak connection – to hide emotions that could distress or disappoint distant loved ones.

Witteborn identifies novel and arguably non practical reasons for refugees to connect – including possibilities to 'become (im)perceptible,' gaining freedom to 'position themselves legally, socioculturally, and politically' (2015, p. 355) – while also underscoring

key roles of emotions and gender in their digital practices. Specifically, she observed that shame of being connected affected refugee women in shared computer rooms and fear influenced both refugee men and women more broadly (Witteborn, 2014). Witteborn's discussion on 'the gendered aspects of migration and technology' (2018, p. 29; see also 2014) and on the centrality of emotions in refugees' uses of communication technologies do not fit well into utilitarian narratives. Reducing these aspects to (emotional and gender-specific) needs, which mobile phone use would respond to, is as problematic as reducing refugees' experiences themselves to 'lack and deficiency' (Witteborn, 2015, p. 356).

Within the second category – research specifically focused on refugees and mobile phones – Leurs' (2014) fieldwork among Somali youth stranded in Ethiopia offers valuable insights. Leurs (2014) did not purposely limit the study to mobile phones. However, 'all informants owned shiny smartphones' and conducted most of their online communication through them. Thus, his findings on the limitations of online technologies to 'fully compensate for the emotional landscape of … offline everyday lives' (p. 101) refer largely to smartphone use. Leurs found that mobile phones expanded interviewees' autonomy, but at the same time subjected them to the control of adults, most commonly, their parents, who used this technology for surveillance from afar. In fact, these adults had sent them the smart phones in the first place. To the extent that Leurs' interviewees are compelled into these relationships by powerful agents on whose remittances they depend (also for mobile communication), this phenomenon is akin to the surveillance by powerful institutional actors and smugglers. A notable difference, however, is that in the online communication with distant (adult) relatives, Somali youth also found affective compensation. Thus, full independence from these agents was not as desirable as independence from the state, smugglers, and corporate actors.

A different, yet valuable, example can be found in Harney's (2013) study among irregular migrants and asylum seekers in Naples in the mid-2000s. Harney tells the story of Ahmed, a Bangladeshi whose family was (still) in Bangladesh. Ahmed's 'spare, but strategic use of the mobile phone' (p. 548) implied never using it to call his wife. Instead, he would schedule appointments with her and call from a call-center. Harney thought Ahmed wanted to save money at a time when mobile communication was significantly more expensive than now, 'but that turned out to be just part of the assorted reasons' (p. 549). Another key reason was that his wife would cry on the phone and ask him to go back home. Ahmed explained: 'I can't be doing that while I am working. It's too distracting and I couldn't hang up so then I would also be stressed about the cost of a call on the mobile' (p. 549).

Exploratory study among Syrian refugees in the Netherlands

Experiences like those of Ahmed, the refugees Twigt met in Jordan, Witteborn in Germany, and Leurs in Ethiopia are rare in the literature and their implications for our understanding of mobile communication and forced migration remain under-theorized. Refugees' – sometimes frustrated – desire to disconnect or to limit communication, as well as their mixed feelings about being connected undermine the empirical validity of the utilitarian narrative. They underscore the need for a more nuanced approach, one that can better account for the actual relations of migrants and mobile phones and

what Leurs (2014, p. 87) calls the 'ambivalent workings of affects' in these relations. More-over, based on Witteborn's (2014, 2018) research, it is also important to attend to gender in developing such an approach.

Following the cues we found in existing research and in order to gather additional evidence on the limitations of the utilitarian narrative and suggest further directions for research, we conducted an exploratory study. We wanted to know, for example, what happens with people like Ahmed in the mid-2010s, when calling through mobile phones is cheaper (free, if relying on Wi-Fi), making appointments to talk from a call-center seems less (or even un-) reasonable, and phones offer multiple other ways to be continuously connected. We do not question the fact that '[b]eing online becomes the default position' of migrants who have left their families *back home* (Madianou, 2014, p. 674), but rather whether this position is always necessarily the result of strategic and intentional decisions with which migrants address specific needs.

We rely on in-depth, qualitative interviews with ten Syrian refugee men (aged 25–38), conducted in May and June 2016 (9 in person; one through Skype). All ten undertook their journey alone, but those who were parents or married had since been reunited in the Netherlands. The majority left Syria between 2013 and 2015 and arrived in the Netherlands in 2014 and 2015 (see Table 1).

That all interviewees were adult, English-proficient, computer literate, and with a willing social media presence was related to the recruiting process.[2] Together with the fact that interviewees' had already acquired refugee status, these factors reduced their vulnerability and made them more open to participate, especially given that the recruiter/interviewer (second author) was a 29-year old male British national living in the Netherlands.[3] Given its small size, we opted for a relatively homogeneous sample. Aware that men's experiences are gendered experiences (Allsopp, 2017; Nawyn, 2010), we have considered, for example, associations between 'manhood and strength' (Allsopp, 2017, p. 14) and the relatively lower expectation for men to maintain close family relations (Nawyn, 2010). In this context, a focus on male interviewees' perceptions and uses of mobile connectivity in relation to their life histories, family relations, memories, emotional ties, and responsibilities seemed relevant.

Table 1. Overview of study participants.

Name	Arrival year	Home town	Occupation/previous occupation in Syria	Education level	Family status
P1	2014	Damascus	Journalist/journalist	Advanced university degree	Married with children
P2	2016	Damascus	Event manager/journalist	Advanced university degree	Single
P3	2014	Latakia	Artist/manual labour	High school	Single
P4	2014	Hama	Freelancer/English teacher	Undergraduate degree	Married, no children
P5	2014	Raqqa	Supervisor/teacher	Advanced university degree	Single
P6	2017	Damascus	Unemployed/English teacher	High school	Single
P7	2015	Damascus	Student/student	Undergraduate degree	Single
P8	2015	Damascus	Not stated/manager	Undergraduate degree	Single
P9	2015	Idlib	Student/not applicable	High school	Single
P10	2014	Aleppo	Unemployed/telecommunications	Advanced university degree	Married with children

Both in communicating with family and friends outside the Netherlands and in their life and social relationships in the new environment, participants in our study described a relation with mobile phones significantly more complex than the utilitarian narrative suggests. We elaborate on these two sets of tensions below. We keep in mind that while our findings provide valuable insights into the co-existence of emancipatory and burdensome elements of mobile connectivity for refugees, the specific modes of co-existence experienced by our interviewees should be read in relation to their specific gendered, cultural, and individual circumstances as well as to the specific context of their displacement and relocation in the Netherlands.

Social glue and/or psychological distress?

Being a connected migrant, capable of instant communication with friends and family thousands of miles away, is experienced by participants in complex ways. For several of them, watching and listening to their loved ones' plight in Syria from afar is associated with a sense of powerlessness. P3 recounted talking to friends and family through his mobile phone and observed that 'somehow it's very painful to communicate with them because you have the same story, the same story of despair.' He suggested that mobile technology could not bridge this damaging emotional distance because 'despair is very harmful' no matter how smooth the connection or sophisticated the communication software. P8 expressed a similarly distressing narrative: 'I talk to my family and the news there is always like eh … this person got killed, this person got kidnapped.' What is interesting here is not just that participants serve as routinely accessible outlets through which Syrian-based friends and family can air their ordeal, but also their limited choice as to whether to fulfill this role, regardless of its psychological burden. As P8 recounted: 'They just want to talk to somebody, they cannot keep it in all the time. You want to … to spit it out. For me it's really difficult to get all that information … especially I'm here and they are there. But I have no option, I have to listen.' Having no option, but to listen, also implies being unable to do more than that, an arguably particularly frustrating position for men, given the traditional masculine role of protecting loved ones.

Participants not only had little choice about listening to the traumas of their loved ones back in Syria; they also reported having no choice about when these conversations would take place. As mentioned in previous research, 'for those left behind without permanent Internet access, the online status of their relatives in Europe was taken as a default state' (Kaufmann, 2018, p. 893). Indeed, participants felt required to be constantly 'on-call,' especially given the excellent coverage and stability of mobile connectivity in the Netherlands. This had a draining effect for several of them: their connectivity obligations consumed sizable portions of their everyday lives. P3, for example, estimated that he spent three hours a day in contact with friends and family in Syria through his mobile phone. P9 recounted his struggles to switch off from the constant news cycle and updates from Syria and revealed that when he was finally able to put down his phone, 'it's like escapism. Yeah, you just want to, yeah, create your own world in your head and sleep.'

The drawbacks of being perpetually connected and contactable at a distance are also visible in several communicative strategies developed by participants. The example of P10, when visiting Germany, is revealing in this sense. P10's parents regularly contacted him via Viber or WhatsApp, but in Germany he did not answer or return their call

right away, to avoid roaming charges.[4] Knowing that any indication that he was outside the Netherlands – soon after being granted refugee status – could alarm his parents, P10 connected his phone to the mobile hotspot of a friend (who lives in Germany) and used a VoIP (Voice over the internet) app to call back to their landline. This app lets him avoid the costs of regular calls, as well as the problems with the (bad) Wi-Fi connection in Aleppo, he explained. Moreover, 'when you call someone [through VoIP], he will see your number. For him, you are calling from your mobile, not, not from the internet.' In this way, P10 concealed the fact that he was abroad, giving the impression that 'everything's OK' and 'we are walking in the street' in Rotterdam.

Other communicative strategies used by our interviewees, like those described by Witteborn (2015), aimed at giving a positive light of their lives in the Netherlands, to avoid distressing or alarming those in Syria. This sometimes implied actively tailoring or even censoring their digital communication. P6, for example, explained that he prefers communicating via instant messaging apps at times when he feels upset or negative, because it is easier to conceal his feelings through text. This sentiment is echoed by P8, who has agreed with his family to cease video calls as both find the experience too distressing.

Thus, while participants in this study unanimously appreciate the ability to communicate regularly with friends and family through the mobile phone, they also recognize shortcomings in being permanently connected and thus the desire to sometimes disconnect or somehow limit connectivity. The associated anguish of prolonged distant communication and constraints in freedom – to sleep, to be sad, to travel, to 'switch off' from a cycle of traumatic news, as well as the specific ways in which being a (Syrian) man influence these experiences, deserve further scholarly attention. Whether female refugees feel (even) more compelled to sustain relations with distant loved ones (as suggested by Nawyn, 2010) and/or deal with these expectations differently, for example, remains a question. Likewise, as suggested by P8 and his family's decision to cease video calls, it is important to extend the research focus beyond those physically displaced. As Malkki (1995b) explains, in contexts of war, violence and persecution, some people flee and others remain, not necessarily because they are not or less vulnerable. Thus, studying (only) those who flee limits our understanding of the larger issues at hand.

The limits and divides of online socialization

'The Netherlands continues to be the European leader in connectivity with a high-quality, ubiquitous digital infrastructure' and 94% of the population using the internet extensively (European Commission, 2018, p. 2). In this context, participants experience connectivity as sometimes exacerbating feelings of isolation and loneliness.

A recurrent theme in the interviews was the extent to which participants take advantage of mobile communication, like other people in the Netherlands, but not without costs. P4 expressed a commonly held attitude: 'I think here in Netherlands, you have to have a mobile phone … everything here is related to computers.' Likewise, P5 observed that 'everything here depends on internet and technology.' This perception places the mobile phone as a central component of refugees lives as they seek to resettle in the Netherlands. Participants gave several examples of Dutch-specific mobile applications that they consider integral. For example, P10 joked: 'you cannot walk in the Netherlands without 9292,' referring to the popular public transport information app. Both P5 and P9 reported

using the online marketplace Marktplatz through their phones to source inexpensive furniture for their new accommodation. P4 and P8 described their negative experiences with the DigiID app, an identity and authorization tool used to access government services. P8 expressed particular frustration in navigating the app in order to register for healthcare.

Coupled with this view of a technology-centric society is participants' perception that the Dutch (and, in some case, Western Europeans in general) allocate comparatively less time to face-to-face contact and family interaction. According to P5, in the Netherlands 'they prefer to talk with each other through mobile phones and not meet.' P1 found this to be in stark contrast to his life in Syria: 'relationships between people are not the same here in the Netherlands or in Europe.' P3 also agreed, asserting that people in Western Europe allocate more time in general to spend on their phones, or on the internet, because 'they are more independent or separated from their family.' Participants typically made such observations to explain and contextualize their disillusionment with certain aspects of mobile technology, particularly what they perceive to be its usurpation and replacement of face-to-face contact in the Netherlands.

A second source of disillusionment in relation to mobile technologies in the Netherlands has to do with the reinforcement of social divides. Particularly interesting is the role of the mobile phone when refugees are awaiting resettlement in temporary accommodation. Upon arrival to the Netherlands, every participant spent some period of time in at least one refugee camp, ranging from a few days to several months. Here they were typically expected to share a room with three to four others (Although, exceptionally, P9's initial accommodation in Zwolle was a basketball court with 400 beds). Their experience, like that of so many other refugees, was characterized by a lack of privacy and a sense of boredom. In the short term, the mobile phone was key in providing refugees with a connection with the outside world and their loved ones and affording them a sense of privacy and security in a busy and unfamiliar environment. Yet, participants also suggested that over time the mobile phone could reinforce some of these problems, by pigeonholing them into particular usage patterns and communities. For example, one participant – who traveled to Northern Europe using a fake passport[5] – believes that the experience of irregular migration made him more insular, which was then compounded by greater reliance on his mobile phone: 'I suddenly came to a different country … doing something illegal. So, eh … I was almost careful with talking to anybody [in the camp]; I was almost always away [sic] of anybody, so I have my mobile with me all the time.' A related example refers to the Lyca mobile network. As P2 put it: 'Everybody knows that you should get a Lyca simcard when you get here because it is free calls between Lyca.' P2 works at a refugee camp near Amsterdam and remarked that camp denizens will consider 'is he Lyca or not?' before phoning or texting acquaintances, aware of the need to manage mobile data and costs. The long-term effect of this is arguably the creation of a self-perpetuating micro community within these conditions, with refugees only or primarily communicating among those on their Lyca network. Already differentiated from mainstream Dutch society because they lack the necessary status to work, obtain housing or pursue education, newly arrived refugees are further segregated through their digital communication in this way.

In the accounts of at least some participants, a similar phenomenon occurs beyond the camps, when refugees attempt to integrate into their new communities through mobile-based social media groups. P9 felt initiatives such as WhatsApp and Facebook groups

designed to put migrant newcomers and local residents in contact often prove patronizing. He observed:

> Most of them who want to meet you, it's like their, their view for you, they are just really sorry about your situation and they look at you like a poor guy, you know? For me I don't like it at all.

P10 detailed his frustrations with similar digital groups – on Facebook and LinkedIn – intended to help refugee communities find employment in the Netherlands, and complained that the majority were superficial endeavors, leading to few opportunities. He explained: 'Well, the problem is you need someone really willing to help you. It's not about "OK, show me your CV and blah, blah, blah," you need someone seriously willing to help you. Otherwise … it is a waste of time.' Several participants expressed similar sentiments about the extent and pervasiveness of digital communities in the Netherlands, and, in that sense, of how mobile phones encourage, facilitate, and perpetuate online socialization, which is often perceived to yield superficial results. As P6 put it: 'You cannot just be … like a slave of technology, you need to do something outside, something real, get a life.'

Paradoxically, then, connectivity helps participants partially overcome information and emotional needs, while it simultaneously generates new demands to be connected and frustrates hopes for 'real,' face-to face connections. Assumed and real differences in culture and connectivity between the Netherlands and Syria may play an important role here and deserve consideration in future research. Moreover, while resettling in the highly connected Dutch context may be more challenging for other refugees, our interviewees – all of them quite technologically savvy – may be particularly well-equipped to take a critical stance.

The political costs of the utilitarian view and the harms of humanitarianism

The discussion until now has focused on the limitations of the utilitarian narrative to account for refugees' actual experiences with mobile phones. Notably, our observations among Syrian refugees in the Netherlands and additional cues we found in existing research resonate with a growing body of scholarship – outside media and migration studies – underscoring the ironies or paradoxes of technology, and mobile phones in particular (e.g., Arnold, 2003; Jarvenpaa & Lang, 2005; Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Willson, 2012). To a large extent, these paradoxes have to do with 'the imperative to be connected' (Ling, 2016) due to the social expectations associated with mobile connectivity. Thus, authors talk about mobile phones enhancing *and* limiting freedom (Arnold, 2003) or empowering *and* enslaving users (Jarvenpaa & Lang, 2005). Likewise, mobile phones are recognized as making people more *and* less dependent on others; reducing part of the distance with those far away, while simultaneously enhancing the distance with many physically close, engaging *and* disengaging people in communication with others, etc. (Arnold, 2003; Jarvenpaa & Lang, 2005).

In this section we argue that the gap between most research on refugees and mobile phones – which keeps insisting on the idea of 'empowerment through technology' (Ponzanezi & Leurs, 2014, p. 10) – and scholarship on the paradoxes of technological connectivity is not only empirically problematic, but also politically dangerous. We explain how it

contributes to a simplistic portrayal of forced migrants and discuss the implications of this process of *othering*.

The problem is neither new nor limited to discussions about mobile phones. In her influential book on *Purity and exile*, Malkki (1995a, p. 9) placed simplistic and essentialist definitions of 'the refugee experience' within a larger 'tendency to universalize "the refugee" as a special "kind" of person.' This special kind of person, Malkki (1995a, p. 11) explained, is assumed to have 'lost connection with his or her culture and identity' and is thus reduced to 'bare humanity.'

Significantly, Diminescu (2008) developed the notion of the 'connected migrant' – prominently cited in discussions about refugees and mobile phones – as a way to counter this essentialist tendency, an aim sometimes ignored in academic uses of the term. For Diminescu, new information and communication technologies could help uncover the prevailing and problematic dichotomy between being migrant and being rooted. 'Defined with respect and by contrast with the sedentary, the concept of migrant immediately excludes anything to do with the figure of someone with roots,' Diminescu (2008, p. 566) explained. In her view, new technologies of connectivity rendered this definition obsolete:

> The portability of the networks of belonging is a feature of all our lives. Migrant or non-migrant, practically everyone finds themselves subject to a logic of access: to circulate, to take money out of the bank, to get medical care, to enter one's home, to call, etc. (p. 573)

Understood in this way, to call migrants 'connected' is to underscore the overlapping – even if distinct – experiences of migrants and non-migrants. Yet, the effort to undo clear-cut divides fails when migrant connectivity is deprived of the complexity of non-migrant connectivity, as in the utilitarian approach. In other words, those defending refugees' eligibility for humanitarian help by describing mobile phones as survival tools arguably run against their own good intentions.

At the core, the problem lies in humanitarianism itself, even if a humanitarian position 'seems the only subject position available to those who are not trying to build fences or walls' (Ticktin, 2016, p. 255). Two interrelated aspects of humanitarianism that are clearly visible in the utilitarian narrative about mobile phones are its dichotomy between 'innocence and guilt, leaving no space for the experiences of life' (Ticktin, 2016, p. 257) and its reliance on compassion (p. 264). They both deserve attention below.

Compassion with innocent refugees vs. the defense of political rights

The well-documented prevalence of representations of children and women in humanitarian discourses has been linked to their presumed helplessness; the fact that 'they do not tend to look as if they could be "dangerous aliens"' (Malkki, 1995a, p. 11). Thus, in endorsing a dichotomy between innocence and guilt, humanitarianism translates victimhood – encapsulated in images of women and children – into eligibility for help, at the same time as, 'the identities of refugee men … are usually linked to narratives surrounding the "dangerous" refugee that may be a threat to economic and political stability in Europe' (Allsopp, 2017, p. 156; see also Turner, 2000). Interestingly, in the photos included in the stories from the *New York Times*, the *Independent*, and *Zeit Online*, mentioned at the beginning of this article, one sees 'connected' adult male refugees.[6] Opting for these

images may be interpreted as a simply realistic decision, given that in 2015 men significantly outnumbered women, among those fleeing to Europe ('Over 1 million arrivals … ', 2015). However – placed in relation to growing calls for Europe's ethical responsibilities toward refugees at the time (Georgiou, 2018) – these images seem to suggest readers that the 'connected refugees' they portray deserve help not only despite their mobile phones, but also despite their gender.

Pictures aside, gender – like culture and identity – plays a limited role in the utilitarian narrative. As suggested above, in accounts where refugees' experiences of connectivity are simplified and translated into responses to vital needs, the focus is on their *elementary* or *bare* humanity. In contrast, in more complex accounts, specific gender and family roles, as well as cultural norms and expectations play a relevant role (e.g., Leurs, 2014; Witteborn, 2014, 2015, 2018). Accordingly, our own study tried to avoid simplifying refugees' experiences and to situate 'technology, gender, and forced migration … in their sociopolitical, legal, and historical contexts' (Witteborn, 2018, p. 28).

Importantly, there is a clear hierarchy between the innocent victims who are worthy of help and those who help them. Witteborn (2018, p. 22) sees 'traces of the colonial discourse of the European savior' in the 'celebratory discourse on the affordances of technology for refugees [that] has been tangible since 2015' inside and outside academia. A similar display of colonial power is observed by Georgiou (2018) in online representations of refugees produced by some 'benevolent-looking' (p. 47) institutions in Europe: 'As these [refugees'] voices are contained within humanitarian narratives of need and demand of care alone, refugees' and migrants' rights become limited to humanitarian aid, not to the acquisition of political or legal rights' (p. 52).

The opposition between humanitarian aid and political rights is crucial here. Indeed, the 'bare humanity' refugees are reduced to in humanitarian discourses is also one deprived from political rights (Parekh, 2017). Thus, instead of accepting humanitarianism as the only refugee-friendly position, critical views advance the more humane alternative of switching from appeals to compassion to the defense of refugees' rights (e.g., Parekh, 2017; Ticktin, 2016). This means switching from calls to be compassionate with 'connected refugees' because all they do with their phones is try to survive, to calls to defend their rights to safe and dignified lives, like 'us,' whatever their connectivity and the sophistication of their mobile phones.

Conclusion

This paper has offered an empirical and political critique of the view of mobile connectivity as a purely utilitarian resource that refugees use at their individual discretion to resolve problems and cover needs. The basis for our empirical critique is two-fold: We draw from evidence we found in existing research and that, we argue, deserves further attention in discussions about mobile phones and forced migration; as well as on our own data. While our own study is based on a relatively small sample – ten Syrian men living in the Netherlands with a refugee status – it adds to what we found in existing research in important ways. We show novel ways in which mobile connectivity is more of an uncomfortable imposition than (or in addition to) a desired toolkit. Moreover, we suggest valuable directions for future research to develop a better understanding of refugees' complex relation with mobile connectivity.

Significantly, what may be novel aspects of the relationship between mobile phones and refugees are of little novelty in the larger field of mobile phone use within and outside communication studies. As Hall and Baym (2012, p. 317) explain, the 'tension between remaining closer through [mobile communication] technology and feeling entrapped by technology has been identified in diverse contexts,' by diverse authors. Thus, we agree with Gillespie et al. (2018, p. 9) in that research on mobile phones and refugees should 'offer a more nuanced conceptualization of smart phones, moving beyond the sterile debates of techno-optimism versus techno-pessimism to demonstrate the granular, ambivalent, contradictory ways in which they are at once a lifeline and can pose many risks,' even if the risks we have in mind go beyond refugees' surveillance and exploitation by powerful actors. Even more importantly, in our view, is for research to offer a nuanced conceptualization of migrants themselves, one that avoids simplistic definitions of some people – most notably, those labeled as refugees – in relation to particular sets of needs.

The call for a more complex conceptualization of refugees themselves is at the core of our political critique of the utilitarian approach and its *othering* of refugees. As Witteborn (2011, pp. 1154–1155), warns us '[t]he topos of difference is a topos of distrust and pity but hardly acceptance.' It is the topos underlying EU bordering practices (Georgiou, 2018), and more generally, the logic that restricts the refugee condition to the struggle for survival, while treating efforts to 'create a life' with suspicion (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018, p. 58).

We finish by echoing Leurs and Smets (2018, p. 10) view on the 'particular urgency to assert more firmly our social justice orientation' as researchers dealing with questions of migration. If an essentialist understanding of refugees was central to the systematization of 'refuge studies into a distinct field of scholarly *specialization*' in the twentieth century (Malkki, 1995a, p. 9), a critique of this essentialist understanding is particularly valuable for communication and media research at a time when refugees are becoming a growing object of sub-specialization, most notably through 'digital migration studies' (Leurs & Smets, 2018).

Notes

1. Aware that the category of 'refugee' is particularly problematic (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018), we use the term for its 'analytical usefulness not as a label for a special, generalizable "kind" or "type" of person or situation, but only as a broad legal or descriptive rubric' (Malkki, 1995b, p. 496).
2. Our snowball sampling stemmed from calls disseminated through Fanack, a Middle Eastern media and education NGO based in The Hague, and the West Netherlands Facebook page of the Refugee Start Force, an online community of refugees, local citizens, organizations, and businesses aiming to 'enable refugees to integrate more quickly into the Dutch society and labour market' (https://refugeestartforce.eu).
3. Retrospective ethical approval was granted by the Review Board of the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication of Erasmus University Rotterdam, in May 2019. To anonymize the data, we identify interviewees with simple monikers (e.g., Participant 1 = P1) and removed biographical details that could potentially disclose their identity.
4. EU roaming charges had not been abolished yet.
5. Given its sensitivity, we do not to link these data with the (already pseudonymized) participant.
6. For the *New York Times* story, we infer – based on the body parts made visible – that there is a group of men and eventually one child. In the other cases, only adult men (one or more) are portrayed.

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