



# Technology's Refuge

The use of technology by  
asylum seekers & refugees

**Linda Leung**

UTS  


Centre for Social  
Justice and Inclusion

**TECHNOLOGY'S REFUGE**  
THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY BY ASYLUM  
SEEKERS AND REFUGEES

Linda Leung, Cath Finney Lamb and Liz Emrys

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Linda Leung

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# INTRODUCTION

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When asylum seekers and refugees are displaced, how do they use communication technologies to maintain links with friends and family during flight and forced migration? When they are detained, what role does technology play in the ways asylum seekers communicate with the 'outside'? How do asylum seekers and refugees appropriate and use new communication technologies whilst establishing themselves in a new country?

This monograph presents the findings of a qualitative pilot research study that sought to answer these questions. It provides an insight into how asylum seekers use communication technologies during conflict, flight, detention and resettlement, to maintain links with their families and friends back home, with diaspora from their country of origin and with communities in the country where they are seeking asylum. It is also one of the first studies to examine how communication with the outside world occurs in immigration detention centres and to document asylum seeker perspectives on the communication restrictions encountered there.

## Background

This monograph is the product of a University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Shopfront Research Fellowship. A key aim of the fellowship was to disseminate the findings of an 18-month pilot study, undertaken between 2007 and 2008, investigating how asylum seekers and refugees use technology to sustain connections with their virtual communities in situations of displacement. The study was funded by an Early Career Researcher Grant, awarded by UTS, and further supported through the Centre for Human-Centred Technology Design.

The research questions asked by the pilot study included: How are communication technologies used in the countries of origin, during forced migration and in the settlement process? How are their benefits and limitations perceived? How are relationships of power surrounding these technologies negotiated? What, if any, virtual communities surround these technologies? How does technology assist refugees in sustaining connections with their virtual communities?

More specifically, the pilot study examined the impact of Australia's official policy of mandatory detention on how asylum seekers maintain links to diasporas. The study emerged from Linda Leung's personal involvement with refugee advocacy groups and in visitor programs to immigration detention centres. As a sociologist of technology, her interest was in how differences in technology-mediated communication occurred in the restrictive environment of immigration detention, compared with other contexts of forced migration, flight and displacement. Therefore, the study was expanded to investigate technology use by refugees and asylum seekers, from countries of origin, through flight and displacement to countries of settlement.

Given the increase in forced migration of people due to circumstances such as political instability, war, natural disaster and famine, it is necessary to better understand the role of technology in enabling refugees to mobilise and organise in situations of displacement. As new technologies encourage the capacity for borderlessness, such advantages have to be examined in relation to issues of access and survival during forced migration.

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## Literature review

Although the study of refugees is a discipline in its own right, there has been minimal examination of the role of technology in maintaining connections with family and diaspora in situations of displacement. Instead, the literature within Refugee Studies is generally in the areas of:

- systems of immigration administration, such as comparison of different methods of managing refugees, particularly between Australia and the UK, Canada and the USA (see Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC] 2003)
- how such systems inform public attitudes towards refugees (see Kushner & Knox 1999; MacCallum 2002; Mares 2002, McMaster 2002) and
- refugee health and education – the provision of basic services to refugees – (see Preston 1991; Hodes 2002; Mares & Jureidini 2003); this includes the psychological effects of family displacement and separation (see Nickerson 2008; Johnson & Stoll 2008; Luster et al. 2009; Senyurekli & Detzner 2008).

The few studies that have been undertaken concentrate on the use of technology by refugees (not asylum seekers) living in the wider community in resettlement countries, rather than in the contexts of detention or refugee camps. Luster et al. (2009) acknowledged the critical importance of the telephone in reconnecting Sudanese refugees in the US with their lost families in Africa. Glazebrook (2004) examined mobile phone use amongst refugees on Temporary Protection Visas in Australia; McIver Jr and Prokosch (2002) explored how various technologies are used for information-seeking by immigrants and refugees in the US; and Howard and Owens (2002) looked at the internet as a medium for communicating health information to refugee groups. Such studies explore how technologies are used where access to those technologies is assumed to be unproblematic and does not fundamentally affect communication practices. This is unlike the flight and displacement contexts where access and communication is highly dependent on the technologies available. In some cases, the technological and communication practices are very rudimentary, such as ‘sending letters to their villages via the Red Cross’ (Luster et al. 2009, p. 450).

Media and Cultural Studies is a discipline that has investigated the importance of technology to minority groups and diasporas. Technology is considered the tool by which marginalised communities negotiate their social, economic and cultural conditions (see Halleck 1991; Hall 1998; Cunningham 2001). Examples include Paul Gilroy’s (1993) work on the black Atlantic, which notes that books and records have been vital in carrying oppositional ideologies and philosophies across the black diaspora. Likewise, black independent film is often regarded as appealing to and mobilising a black diaspora through the rejection of commercial cinema, which does not serve black communities (Diawara 1993, p. 6; Reid 1993, p. 5). Urban black youth have also been studied extensively in terms of their appropriation of dance and music technologies to overcome their socio-economic disadvantage through the transformation of objects of consumption (such as the turntable) into new modes of production (Baker Jr 1991; Gilroy 1993; Williams 2001). Within Asian diasporas, the use of cable and satellite, the exchange of video letters and taped Bollywood movies have been interpreted as forms of localised challenges to the centralised power of the broadcast media industries (Gillespie 1995; Ang 1996). The use of newer technologies by transnational migrants has

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also been studied, including the internet (Graham & Khosravi 2002; Karim 2003; Parham 2004; Bernal 2006), phone cards (Vertovec 2004; Wilding 2006) and mobile phones (Horst 2006). Such investigations have concentrated on the intersection of class, gender and ethnicity and how they inscribe meanings to specific technologies, which in turn, become intrinsic to the identities of the groups and communities concerned. However, there has been minimal consideration of the specific importance of technology to asylum seekers and refugees, who are similarly affected by issues of migration and marginalisation. Exceptions include de Leeuw and Rydin's (2007) research on the ways refugee children represent their cultural identities in the creation of their own media productions, and Riak Akuei's (2005) study of how kinship rights of Dinka refugees are enacted through the telephone.

Likewise, the discipline of Internet Studies has analysed online diasporic networks, although this has also neglected asylum seekers and refugees and been confined to a narrow socio-economic demographic within any ethnic minority group. It is often restricted to those who are advantaged in their capacity to become members of a diaspora through economic migration: those who study overseas and remain in the countries in which they were educated, working in the professions for which they have been highly trained (see Mitra 1997; Gajjala 1999; Mallapragada 2000; Melkote & Liu 2000). Such studies have demonstrated the ways in which feelings of trust, intimacy and community are facilitated online (Preece 1998; Abdul-Rahman & Hailes 2000; Kadende-Kaiser 2000; Henderson & Gilding 2004). Unlike the circumstances of asylum seekers and refugees, these are situations where there are choices in relation to available technologies, access is not a critical issue and, subsequently, the communication technologies used are necessarily different. A more recent study by Kabbar and Crump (2006) focused on adoption of the internet by refugees, but this was in the context of settlement rather than displacement or detention.

Overall, the study of communities and communication practices that surround particular technologies has concentrated on groups other than refugees and asylum seekers. A review of literature across Refugee Studies, Media and Cultural Studies and Internet Studies has shown the study of:

- technology use by asylum seekers and refugees has had minimal investigation
- diasporas has infrequently included asylum seekers and refugees and
- communities and communication practices that surround particular technologies has concentrated on groups other than asylum seekers and refugees.

Thus, the research disseminated in this monograph about the uses of communication technologies by asylum seekers and refugees has the potential to expand the aforementioned disciplines. Furthermore, the monograph presents a study that can contribute to debates about technology rights as human rights, and policies on technology access in immigration detention.

## **Definition of terms and policy context**

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has classified some 31 million people to be 'of concern' (UNHCR 2009). This includes refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs), stateless persons and others of concern to the UNHCR. However, the actual number



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of refugees and internally displaced people requiring assistance is estimated to be much higher, at around 67 million (Refugee Council of Australia n.d.).

Asylum seekers are people who seek protection through Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program. Australia's international obligations to refugees are administered by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) Humanitarian Program (Kneebone & Allotey 2003). The offshore Humanitarian Program has two categories. The first is the Refugee category for people subject to persecution in their home country. The second, the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP), category for people who, while not being refugees, are subject to substantial discrimination amounting to a gross violation of their human rights in their home country (Department of Immigration and Citizenship n.d.). The onshore component of the program offers protection to non-citizens who arrived on Australia's shores, with or without a valid visa, and claim asylum. To qualify for protection, these asylum seekers need to meet the high standard of the definition of a 'refugee' in the 1951 Refugee Convention (Kneebone & Allotey 2003). Article 1A of the refugee convention (UNHCR 1951) defines a refugee as a person who has:

[a] well founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside of the country of his former habitual residence, is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

Generally, in assessing whether there is a 'well founded fear of persecution', the courts distinguish between persecution, which affects the basic human right to life or physical freedom, and mere hardship or discrimination of a social or economic nature (Kneebone & Allotey 2003).

In Australia, official and widespread misperception of refugees as 'queue jumpers' (MacCallum 2002) has been instrumental in enabling the legislative changes requiring mandatory detention of persons arriving in Australia without a visa. Between 1992 and 1994, Australian law moved from permitting (but not enforcing) limited detention of asylum seekers, to a blanket policy of mandatory detention (HREOC 2004), which, at one point, had up to 12,000 individuals in detention (Castan Centre for Human Rights Law 2003, para 4). Anyone who enters Australian territories purporting to be a refugee escaping from persecution, political instability, war, natural disaster and famine in their home country is immediately detained in an immigration detention centre (IDC) until their claims are verified. Australia's Migration Act 1958 section 189 states anyone who does not have a valid visa must be detained until that person either obtains a visa or leaves Australia.

While mandatory detention has been part of an explicit strategy aimed at deterring asylum seekers from entering Australian shores, policies relating to asylum seekers' rights while detained have been far less transparent. Close monitoring of the conditions of detention centres (as seen in the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's 2002 report) and the impact of detention on asylum seekers (as seen in the 'National inquiry into children in immigration detention', HREOC 2004), together with campaigning by human rights and refugee advocacy groups, put public pressure on the government to soften their mandatory detention policy where children were concerned. As a result, the Migration Amendment (Detention Arrangements) Bill in 2005 allowed

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detained families with children to live in community detention: residential accommodation outside of an immigration detention centre.

Both residential and community housing for detainees exists outside of detention centres and within the community. Residential Housing Projects (RHPs) were established in the Australian community, close to major immigration detention centres. They provide a place for women and children to live while remaining in detention. Although not sited within IDC complexes, RHPs are under 24-hour surveillance and offer little freedom of movement. Men are not permitted to live with their families in RHPs. In contrast to those housed in RHPs, asylum seekers released into community detention on residence determinations are permitted to move about in the community without needing to be accompanied or restrained by an immigration officer, or designated person. They have some restrictions on their movement and the right to work, but have all their needs, including housing, fully paid for by the government (Refugee Council of Australia n.d.).

In IDCs and RHPs, there are restrictions on communication in relation to particular technologies that are available and content that can be accessed. These restrictions arguably contravene Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) 1997), which states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression: this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Reference to communication as a universal basic human right is also made in Article 27, which points to the role of technologies and 'scientific advancements' in facilitating the right to communication (McIver et al. 2003):

Everyone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

The findings presented in this monograph provide a platform for discussion and debate about the human, communication and technology rights of asylum seekers in immigration detention.

## **Methodology**

This monograph reports on an 18-month qualitative descriptive study that analysed stories collected from 30 refugees and asylum seekers about their experiences and perspectives of using communication technologies during displacement, flight, detention and resettlement.

Study participants were selected to illustrate the broad range of refugee and asylum seeker experiences and perspectives of communication technologies, before, during and after displacement from their home country. Selection processes ensured participants who met the following criteria were included in the study: male and female refugees or asylum seekers; participants from different regions of the world, including Africa, the Balkans, Asia and the Middle East; refugees resettled in the Australian community and former asylum seekers who had been detained within IDCs, community detention and residential housing; adults as well as those who arrived as child refugees.

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Participants were recruited from asylum seeker support networks and refugee communities in Sydney, using a snowballing sampling strategy. These affiliations were important for gaining access to and the trust of asylum seekers and refugees willing to participate in the research. Snowballing techniques were also used within refugee communities to identify refugees and asylum seekers who met the study criteria and were invited to participate in the research. In addition, a flyer inviting women to be involved in the study was also distributed through a refugee support group.

An interview schedule was used to conduct the interviews, which contained close-ended and open-ended questions. In addition to this structured interview, unstructured interviewing techniques were used to elicit participant perspectives and stories about their use of communication technologies during displacement from their home country, flight to Australia or an intermediate country, detention and resettlement. All interviews were either extensively noted, or recorded and transcribed. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face; in some instances they took place over the telephone.

Transcripts contained a mixture of stories about the use of communication technologies and participants' perspectives on their use. Reflective field notes were added to the data to aid interpretation. The analysis was conducted in two stages. Initially, the Linda Leung summarised each interview in terms of significant events, experiences and stories before passing it onto Cath Finney Lamb for coding and analysis. A coding framework for emergent themes was developed by the authors, followed by final analysis and write up of results.

Twenty-seven interviews were conducted, of which two were in mixed group settings with men and women. In total, 15 females and 15 males were interviewed. Interviewees originated from the Middle East (13), Asia (10), Africa (6) and the Balkans (1). All male interviewees had experience of immigration detention, compared with six of the 15 female interviewees. Nine of the 15 women interviewed entered Australia on humanitarian grounds, having spent time in intermediate countries. Male participants who had been detained spent up to five years in immigration detention, while female respondents who had been detained spent up to three years in immigration detention.

## Chapter outline

Four main themes emerged from the research:

- technology use and communication practices during conflict and displacement
- technology use and communication practices in detention
- technology use and communication practices during settlement and
- relationships, technology and emotional well-being.

The themes have been organised accordingly into the following chapters, which attempt to document the voices of the refugees and asylum seekers who participated in the study.

Chapter one describes the obstacles to accessing technologies in situations of conflict and dislocation that shaped the participants' communication practices. These included limited or

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unreliable communication services, the prohibitive cost and affordability of these services, and the need to use personal and professional contacts to negotiate technology access. As a result of these barriers to access, participants had to ‘make do’ with the technology options available to them. This not only entailed living within the constraints imposed by these obstacles, but employing work-around strategies for communicating with family and friends. Participants relied on favours and brokers to access communication technologies they did not own. They also used messengers or couriers to work around the communication obstacles they encountered. When all else failed, participants travelled to see family or friends, or relied on news bearers and rumours to obtain information about them.

Chapter two details participant accounts of communication practices in immigration detention. It provides descriptions of the technologies available and conditions of access. The types of technologies available and restrictions to access are shown to constrain communication practices. This was further exacerbated by poor literacy and English language skills, which affected participants’ capacity to learn the limited technologies on offer. Other constraints, such as personal finance, the amount of talk time that could be purchased, rationing of communication resources, practical barriers to ‘phoning in’ and inequitable access to technologies, are also illustrated. Nonetheless, creative ways of negotiating institutional barriers to technology access and restricted communication with loved ones are highlighted.

Chapter three examines communication practices during the settlement process in Australia, focusing on experiences of learning and embracing new technologies. Participants’ stories suggest that there is greater freedom of choice and use of technologies available to them compared with displacement or detention contexts, but that this brought with it the onus of financial responsibility to sustain connection with relatives overseas. Simply having access to technology does not resolve the problems of communicating with displaced family members.

Chapter four looks more closely at the implications of technology access on emotional distress, well-being, and sustaining family relationships: displacement, detention and settlement. Participant stories show connections between family members became vulnerable during displacement, especially when one member of the family was dislocated and had no fixed address or means of contact. In particular, connections between family members become tenuous if a family member is no longer contactable by phone, has difficulties accessing a phone in detention or fears surveillance from authorities in their home country if they make contact. A key finding is the vital role of the telephone – a comparatively old and low level technology – for staying in contact with family and informing the family of the participant’s whereabouts and safety during displacement and flight.

The Conclusion discusses the possible applications of the findings of the pilot study in:

- identifying future research directions about the use of communication technologies by asylum seekers and refugees
- obtaining humanitarian assistance in conflict and displacement settings
- policy-making pertaining to immigration detention centres (IDCs) in Australia and
- obtaining settlement support for refugees.

## 'MAKING DO' DURING CONFLICT AND DISLOCATION

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Participant accounts of communication in situations of conflict and dislocation emphasised the obstacles they encountered in staying in touch with family and friends and the strategies they employed to work around these problems. Communication practices were often contingent upon limited or unreliable telephone and postal services. Whilst in flight or in refugee camps, use of such compromised telecommunications or mail services required money, which participants stated they generally did not have. Unable to meet the costs of technology use, participants would have to ask favours of personal and professional contacts to broker access to technologies to enable them to contact family and friends.

Stories demonstrated that limited or unreliable communication infrastructures within countries of origin and transit can restrict the options available for communication. War and violence can disrupt communication by damaging existing communication infrastructures and disconnecting telephone lines. During conflict in Sudan, government sanctions on telecommunications in Khartoum contributed to the difficulties Ms O had contacting her siblings there.

Ms M was originally from Bosnia, a country with a good telecommunications infrastructure, but the telephone lines were disconnected during the war. When her parents sent her away to live with extended family in another country, she communicated sporadically with her parents over a number of years by satellite phone and letters:

It was very hard. Mostly it was just phone. I don't know, it's very hard to describe because during the war, they had to go to a special place to call us, and it wasn't like a normal telephone line, because all the lines were disconnected. My home town was in siege for ... two or three years. So it was a bit hard and we didn't communicate often. It was just from time-to-time that we would talk to them. We would write them letters. (Ms M)

Ms Q, who left Iraq in 1999, recounted that national economic hardship in Iraq had led to limited telecommunication services. The landline phone services were unreliable and could be unavailable for several days at a time:

Everybody needed this way of communication ... at that time we were struggling because the line was not good enough, and the landline most of the time was busy or would get connected with other lines. So it wasn't a quite good service. We really depend on it to talk. We have no other options, no mobile, no internet, no nothing ... because it was a bad time – the economy of Iraq was very bad. So that all affected everything in life and also the communication service. So sometimes we have no line at all. It stops for one or two days, and that stops also any communications for no reason. (Ms Q)

In addition, she did not use the postal service because in Iraq it was unreliable:

Even the post was bad. Myself, I didn't write letters because the postal service is not as good and the letter will either go or not. So why would we bother writing the letter. But I think some people do if they are in such a place with no landline service at all. There is no option, only the letter. But also the letter is delayed and maybe it's risky. It will get there or not. (Ms Q)

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In refugee camps, participants' communication with the outside world was restricted by limited access to phones and postal services. Ms H told of her experience in a refugee camp in Guinea:

I was in Guinea in a refugee camp and I had family members back home in Liberia and if I was talking to them, they – I mean, there's no mobile, they got no phones ... The only means of communicating with them was writing a letter and it's not the system here where I have to drop it in a mailbox and it just went. (Ms H)

For the entire eight years she spent in the refugee camp in Kenya, Ms I did not have contact with her family. There was a telephone at her refugee camp in Kenya, but the cost was prohibitive.

Several participants explained that, in the refugee camp where they had been, mobile phones were the only means of communication, but only a few refugees owned phones. Mobile network coverage in Ms O's refugee camp made receiving incoming calls difficult. She would have people call her friend's place because there was known network coverage there. If she wanted to call someone, she would have to stand on top of the hill.

In situations of displacement, personal access to money can restrict communication. Some participants, while in refugee camps, were unable to buy mobile phones or stamps because of limited access to money; it was only those who were wealthy or who owned businesses in the camp who managed to purchase mobile phones. Ms I commented that mobile phones were generally only available to those who had money sent to them: 'But if you don't have somebody out there who can get you money to buy a mobile, you can't get that money to buy the mobile.'

During flight to another country, access to money was particularly limited. This influenced communication choices. Like others, Ms Y was able to stay in contact with her family during flight by using public telephones. However, in the 60 days she spent in Indonesia, she could afford only two phone calls. The expense of mobile phones was also raised by Ms Q, who explained that, although mobile phones were available in Jordan (intermediate country), they were not a priority; landlines were a cheaper alternative:

But I myself I didn't buy one there because I was just busy for the looking to find a way. Because there is nothing in my mind at that time but to come to Australia. I have to look for ways that I'm coming. Me and my family. So we don't want to spend anything. We talk using landline because there was a landline in my flat that I rented. So I can't remember that I used mobiles. (Ms Q)

Cultural norms of access and use of communication technologies further constrained communication. In the refugee camp in Khartoum, Ms O had privileged access to communication technologies because she worked for a non-government organisation (NGO) there. However, her new skills in using email and the computer did not help her in communicating with family and friends:

I got training in 2003. I can't send emails to those people, they can't read it. They don't know how to use computers. And the computer, I don't have it at home – unless you go to cafe. Like you pay \$100 and then use it for specific periods of time. (Ms Q)

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As a result of these obstacles, participants had to ‘make do’ with the communication options available to them. This not only entailed living within the constraints imposed by these obstacles, but employing work-around strategies for communicating with family and friends, such as favours and brokers to access communication technologies they did not own, and using messengers or couriers to negotiate the communication obstacles encountered. When all else failed, participants travelled to see family or friends or relied on news bearers and rumours to obtain information about them.

Participants who did not own communication technologies relied on brokers who could provide access to phones or provide them with internet access. Agencies and non-government organisations (NGOs) acted as brokers by allowing employees and voluntary workers to access their communication technologies for personal use. Ms O observed employment agencies gave employees access to communication resources and this provided a critical communication link between people in Khartoum, Sudan, and Nairobi, Kenya:

It takes long for them to get the information unless some people are working in an organisation in Nairobi. And then when they had the information they used a telegraph, sent it to one of those who work in the offices in Khartoum. Then they get the information of those people – their parents passed away and all that. At that time life was very hard. No communication. (Ms O)

Similarly, Mr C could only contact his wife back at home at her workplace because she did not have a home phone. However, this meant that they sometimes had a limited time to talk:

Phones quite expensive and sometimes because in my home we don't have a phone. That's only for her office, and the office times I ring and sometimes they busy and it's very hard to ring from the office. Something, there's only a few minute to talk and they stop then because boss got angry because they had the business, business call coming and we can't talk much. (Mr C)

For Ms O, voluntary work resulted in ‘privileged access’ to communication technologies. An NGO, for whom she did voluntary work in the refugee camp in which she lived, funded her studies; this gave her some access to a library and computers. The NGO also allowed her to use their two-way radio, which she found to be preferable to using a mobile phone in the refugee camp:

Radio better because if you are there you will get the information faster and better. But mobile phone, the problem is network. You have to go to certain places and get up where there is network and start talking. But with radio we had an office like this so you could communicate. Also free, without any card. It is free. Because this organisation offers that for like half an hour you can talk to people. There is a restriction – provided that there is no politics in what you are talking about. Because it should be accessed anywhere. So you can't talk anything about the government or whatever. You're asking your people in Sudan and Uganda, how their health is only... And when mobile comes in the use of radio is going down. The rate of radio users has gone down. Another thing with radio, you can't talk – like somebody saying I love you, and all of us in the office will hear. With mobile it's only in your ear and that's that. (Ms O)



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Humanitarian agencies also had a role in hand-delivering letters in situations of conflict. Ms M recounted that the Red Cross hand-delivered letters with emergency supplies. Luster et al. (2009) noted this was the only formal avenue available to asylum seekers and refugees, amongst numerous informal strategies for sustaining connection with family members.

Private phones were also rented out for public use. Several participants reported this to be common in refugee camps where they had stayed. Ms O explained the introduction of the mobile phone into refugee camps heralded schemes for those who owned a mobile phone to make money by charging those who did not own a mobile phone to use them:

So you go to them who have a mobile, you buy the card, you put it in, and then if you have a brother or a sister outside here then you ring and make an appointment with the person who has got the phone. Tomorrow or whatever time, come here. At that time I will call. Then at that time you will ring and you won't talk long. Because you don't have money you buy in (the year) 2000, one minute or two minutes. (Ms O)

Resource sharing could also occur. Ms F was separated from her husband for six years after he first came to Australia. During this time, he phoned monthly, sometimes more frequently. The family did not have a phone in their own home; they relied on the owner of the building in which they lived for access to a phone to receive her husband's calls.

Participants relied on intermediaries to act as messengers and couriers for them. In some cases this was done as a favour; in others, people were paid to act as couriers or messengers. Ms H paid for the hand-delivery of letters and emails to be sent from her refugee camp. Both were expensive in relation to the cost of living:

I can remember once I decided to send an email to Liberia, back home to my brother and I asked someone who had email address, can you please send this email for me and I just wrote it, gave it to them and they use their email address to send it because I didn't have one ... and I have to pay the price. (Ms H)

In contrast, Ms I had to ask someone to courier a letter for her, but she did not know whether or not it would reach the recipient:

If you have no money to buy the stamp, you just wait and give someone who is going there [but] ... with that person, you don't know that letter will reach the person or not. (Ms I)

Ms O described a system by which letters were sent between Sudan and Nairobi in Kenya with a community member who travelled between cities for their work with NGOs, in this case, the World Food Program: 'When he's coming you will see him with heaps of letters, when he's going, heaps of letters. That's the only way.'

When there was no means of contacting their family, participants travelled to see them, or relied on news bearers travelling from the same region in which their family lived to glean news of them. Ms L escaped her home country as a child, and went to live in a refugee camp on her own in another African country. She only heard where members of her family had fled through word of mouth. While she heard rumours about the fate of her family, she had no means to visit or contact them.



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Ms O recounted having difficulty remaining in touch with her parents in Nairobi, Kenya and whilst in Khartoum, Sudan, because roads had been blocked by the war. She was unable to communicate with or travel to see her family. As a result, she had to rely on those who had come from the same region as her family to glean any news about her relatives:

Because of the war, the roads are blocked, no communication. So it's very hard to reach our family. If someone comes from your area, comes visiting to Khartoum, we all come to ask whether our parents are alive. You ask, they are dead – you don't even know. (Ms O)

In summary, some participants referred to and utilised formal Red Cross services in their attempts to keep in contact with family members. However, overwhelmingly the strategies used were informal. Accessibility to technologies was hampered by war and damaged or diminished telecommunications infrastructures. Access to the most basic of technologies, such as phone and postal services, was also compromised by the cost to use them. The demand to use these communication technologies led to the formation of micro-economies, in which use and access was possible only through personal or professional contacts, and/or payment.

## RESTRICTED COMMUNICATION IN DETENTION

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Participant accounts of communication in immigration detention provided descriptions of: the available technologies; their experiences of learning new communication technologies in detention; their communication practices; constraints on their communication; their perspectives on communication restrictions and adaptations made to communication practices.

Participants reported policies that restricted access to communication technologies were stringent, but being constantly changed. For part of her time in detention during 2000, Ms Q, was not allowed to communicate at all with the outside world. When participants were permitted such communications, the technologies available to them varied according to their detainee status. Those detained in closed detention (where participants were held whilst their cases were initially processed), open detention (or IDC), residential and community detention settings had different resources available to them. Across all settings and time, participants described their use of hand-written and printed letters, public pay telephones, fax machines, mobile telephones, text messaging, non-networked computers and computers with internet. Internet use included access to email and broadband video conferencing.

Mr V was a detainee at the Villawood IDC for five years. His description of the communication technologies in detention illustrates the many changes in access to technology participants experienced over time.

When Mr V arrived in 2002, three payphones were available. However, there were many more people in detention than today, so everyone experienced long queues and waiting times to use them. Four extension phones were available for detainees to receive calls. There was no library or access to books. There was no communal television (unless detainees already had or bought their own through relatives or friends to use in their own rooms). There were two non-networked computers. Faxing was permitted, but only in relation to detainees' cases.

In 2006, communal TV and a gym were provided. At the end of that year, mobile phones without cameras were permitted. At the time of the interview in 2007, there were nine payphones throughout the compound, with two extension phones. There are also six computers in total, of which four have internet access.

Communication technologies in detention, as described by Mr V

When restrictive policies were in place, a few participants had communication devices, such as mobile phones or computers, confiscated and locked away. Ms D described having her mobile telephone confiscated when first detained. This was returned to her after restrictions had been lifted.

Arriving in detention, some detainees did not know how to use a phone or phone card and had never used a computer. Several participants commented that there were no formal lessons on how to use 'new' communication technologies in detention. Rather participants were taught how to use unfamiliar technologies by fellow detainees, particularly those who spoke their language.

Participant stories also illustrated poor literacy skills and the lack of English made it difficult to learn the technologies available to them. Ms Y had to be taught how to use a phone card by a friend in detention. The simple act of using a phone card for the first time in a detention centre was fraught with problems:

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First you must ring the company then they say a PIN number in English. In English I couldn't understand. After this, when you press the hash key, you just start dialling your phone number. That time I knew how to use the phone card. Before, I didn't know the phone card. In Iran I didn't know the phone card, but I used public phone, I used phone. I had to listen very carefully because I couldn't understand English at that time. (Ms Y)

Some detainees did not use computers because they lacked the necessary English. A couple of participants commented that, when they were in the IDC, computers only allowed for English. On the other hand, Ms D learnt English in order to learn to use the computer. She acquired both literacies simultaneously and necessarily as she prepared her case for asylum.

Participants used communication technologies in detention to communicate with family members overseas and in Australia, gain skills for resettlement, keep up with current affairs and correspond with lawyers, police and government bodies.

When they first arrived in detention, participants had expressed an urgent need to contact family members to reassure them they were alive and unharmed. Those successful in making this connection sought to remain in regular contact with family and other loved ones. A couple of participants also kept in contact with family members living in Australia. After phones were introduced into the centre in 2000, Ms Q was better able to stay connected with her younger sister who was released before her. The phone was prominent in interviews as a key technology for contacting family members (firstly the payphone with phone cards and later the mobile, after restrictions on its use were lifted). Letters were also used and later email.

Changes in the policies that regulated the availability and use of communication technology in detention shaped what was possible in communicating with family members overseas. For example, Ms Q spent time in an IDC in 2000. She was not able to contact her family overseas at all during this time because there was no phone. However, during 2007, Mr C was able to call his family four to five times per week by payphone or mobile, using \$25 of phone cards per week.

While detained, participants used written and electronic media, such as newspapers, television and computers, to learn English, orientate themselves towards Australian society and access information about domestic and international current affairs. Computer facilities were also used for personal entertainment, such as computer games, and to become computer literate.

Communication technologies were also used in detention to correspond with lawyers, police and government bodies. This correspondence related to individual legal cases, general requests for information about migration laws, formal complaints and requests for assistance. Mr U wrote letters to immigration authorities requesting information about case law. Participants used computers, printers and fax machines to generate and send formal letters. Mr U also called the police on his mobile phone, while in detention, to report fights and other offences in the detention centre.

Participants encountered a number of constraints on their attempts to communicate with the outside world. These included constraints in personal finances, the amount of talk time they were able to purchase, rationing of communication resources, practical barriers to 'phoning in' and inequitable access to technologies.

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Personal finances, which were kept in an account after they arrived at detention, mediated access to communication technologies in detention by restricting participant's ability to buy phone cards and Internet access:

We had access to a payphone. I didn't have much money to buy a telephone card and you need to buy a telephone card – if you had money in your account, they could deduct from your account and then pay and you can buy a telephone card. I didn't have that as well. (Mr R)

Once detainees had spent any money they possessed, communication privileges could only be gained by working within the IDC. Detainees worked to earn points (each point worth \$1), which could be exchanged for goods and services, such as cigarettes, telephone cards or internet time. Mr J reported he was able to contact his family with relative ease because he had the means to purchase telephone cards. In contrast, those around him who did not have money had to work for between \$8 and \$10 a day to be able to buy telephone cards. Remuneration for detainee's work was minimal. Several participants reported they worked for a week to be able to purchase just one or two items. Mr T described working for six hours per day, seven days a week, in order to earn 35 to 40 points. These points could purchase between \$35 and \$40, which bought him two packs of cigarettes and two telephones cards. The phone cards would last him up to a week, often less: 'That would last me one week. I was ringing lawyers and everything, trying to get a way out, MPs ... Sometimes two days if I was ringing mobiles and that.' (Mr T)

Mr T objected to the practice of requiring detainees to work for their communication privileges:

The thing is they were making us work to get phone cards to ring ... so that's breaking the law ... I mean we should've been paid cash to work to get these phone cards ... With a cleaners job or something you'd make like 30 points which is like two packs of smokes and a \$10 phone card ... I also used to be the runner for visits from the time visits started [12noon] to six o'clock, six thirty till I stopped ... My job was to go down and call all the inmates who were detained and call them out to visits ... (Mr T)

Several participants observed that it was difficult to earn enough points to purchase everything they wanted. Mr A, for example, did not have enough money to purchase mobile telephone cards as well as everything else that he needed. Participants were constrained in the number of phone cards they could purchase by how much they could earn.

Communication was also restricted by how much talk time participants were able to purchase. The number of phone cards they could afford to purchase and the amount of time available on each card restricted the length of calls and the number of times they were able to make phone contact with their relatives overseas. Participants considered telephone cards in detention to be expensive compared to those that could be obtained in the community: the amount of talk time purchased on each card was much lower. Although this improved over time, detainees did not have the range of choice of phone cards that could be purchased outside detention:

Seven minutes [to Iran] was \$10 – only seven minutes, in detention. They didn't give us another phone call. I missed them so much, I was crying. Just seven minutes. When I came out ... we have a \$10 one for 20 minutes. I was so happy, 20 minutes. Now I buy a \$10 one and that's 150 minutes. That's much better. (Ms Y)

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The frustration participants felt at the minimal talk time available to them was evident. Their desired level of contact with family was much higher than that possible with the talk time available in the IDC.

Several participants reported there were insufficient numbers of public telephones in detention. This led to long queues, fights over telephones and difficulties receiving incoming calls. One participant, Ms X, described IDC officers managing the queues by restricting each detainee's talk time:

with the phone card it was very quick. And it was a long queue. They said oh okay, you're finished, you can't speak too much, that's it, enough ... If I wanted to ring my family, every day they'd say no. Too many people were there, everybody wants to use it and they don't have too much phone. (Ms X)

Mr U described fights between detainees who wanted to make calls when other detainees blocked the payphone for a long time. Long phone calls posed a problem when people were talking on the phone lines that received incoming calls:

Then people had their boyfriends and girlfriends, so in the evening they want to talk to all their family ... they want to make longer phone calls, like one hour, two hours. Then others have to wait and then even those phones' extensions, sometimes you know in the evening people are on the phone for a long time. Someone is saying, but I'm expecting a phone call, my lawyer will call, can you hang up the phone? (Mr U)

Detainees experienced rationing of their computer and internet use. As there were a limited number of computers provided for detainees, they were over-subscribed and this resulted in queuing. Whilst Mr A was in detention, there were four computers available for between 300 and 400 people. Immigration detention centre officers managed computer queues by a formal booking system, restricting the amount of time for each person. Detainees were permitted to use a computer for one hour per day. Mr B described the schedule for internet use at Villawood in 2007 as follows:

8am to 12 noon: open access  
12 noon to 1pm: closed for lunch  
1pm to 2pm: women only  
2pm to 8pm: Stage II detainees  
8pm to 2am: open access

Participants reported hours of queuing were required to take one's turn. For example, if Mr B queued during open access hours (8pm–2am) and was fifth in the queue, he would not be able to take his turn until 1am:

Yeah computers are not enough but when I want to use, so I must waiting sometimes six hours and seven hours ... Because heaps of people, 254 people or so just to use the computer. There is a card queuing system, whereby if you want to use the computer, you put your card in a line behind the last person in the queue. (Mr B)

Ms D did not use the internet facilities in detention at all because the queues were so long. However, a couple of participants told of getting up early in the morning or staying up until after midnight in order to access computers regularly:

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Well what happens is we have to sort of like queue up for them. So the reason why I use it every once a day is because I have to wake up early, by maybe seven to get to a computer by eight to get a chance to use the computer. (Mr A)

People encountered practical barriers when 'phoning in' to contact someone in detention. It was difficult for friends to get through to detainees if the lines were always busy or detention centre officers were unable to locate them in the compound. Callers who do not speak English had particular difficulty telephoning IDCs and asking to speak with someone.

You cannot use that landline as communication. Your name will be announced, you are in the shower and shower is going in full speed, you will not be able to hear anything. You are sleeping maybe or you are listening to television ... You are listening to radio ... You are talking or chatting with some of your fellow detainee friends, you will not be able to listen. So tell me if you're not standing near the phones how you will be able to receive your phone calls? (Mr U)

Similarly, Mr R described the difficulties and frustration he experienced when trying to contact a resident in Curtin detention centre from outside the centre:

I had to contact him every fortnight and sometimes he contacted [me] because it was very difficult to get through to him because either the line was busy or the immigration officer did not call him. It was quite frustrating waiting for a few minutes to get him and mostly I couldn't reach him ... Most of the time, when I contacted Curtin detention centre, I was left on hold for a few minutes and it cost me money, therefore I needed to hang up. (Mr R)

Participant accounts suggest the culmination of IDC's restrictive policies resulted in inequitable access to communication technologies between detainees: across the different sections of the IDC and between men and women.

On initial arrival in Australia participants were put in closed detention. This was the most restrictive setting described by participants. They were not able to use the telephone and had no access to other communication technologies, such as the computer. To a few participants this policy appeared to be applied arbitrarily; no explanation was given for decisions. Ms X reported being unsure why communication access policies differed across the various sections of the IDC in which she was detained or why, after five months, policies seemed to change to allow telephone use:

They didn't talk to us to say okay this is the rule. When we need to talk we just say to an officer can we use the phone. And we don't know if there is a rule or if we need to ask the higher people. And he'd say oh okay maybe, maybe not. (Ms X)

Restrictive policies in closed detention prevented participants from meeting their most pressing, immediate communication need upon arrival was letting their family know they were safe and alive. The main closed detention barrier to contacting family was the policy that prevented detainees from using the phone. Ms Y was kept in closed detention for about three or four months. Phone calls were not permitted. She was offered alternative means of contacting her family, but these were not feasible:

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They told us, we don't let you ring your family. You can fax your family that you are safe. My husband and I said: we don't have a fax in our family home in Iran. In Iran they had fax at that time but only in offices, like in government offices – not all offices. We said no, we have to ring them. They said no ... (Ms Y)

Ms Y was offered a choice to send letters to her parents to tell them she was alive, but did not trust the guards to actually send the letter:

Because I don't believe the people who are working there, to give them a letter to send out. They said, write a letter, give it to us, and we'll send it for you. We didn't believe it; we didn't trust them. (Ms Y)

Similarly, two participants who spent time detained in residential housing described residential housing as having more restrictive communication policies than IDCs: no access to internet or email was provided. Mr C reported detainees who purchased their own computers had the modems confiscated to prevent internet access. Mr A commented on the greater restrictions on telephone use in residential housing:

Actually in residential we had no internet ... So, it was actually difficult to communicate with my friends or any family that I have in Australia ... Yes so like for the phone calls we had a phone in the house but the phone could only make, maybe only to landlines and not to any mobiles. This was in Sydney. So if I have a relation or maybe a friend who's out of Sydney, it was absolutely impossible to call them. (Mr A)

Mr C said in residential housing he was no longer able to access email to send messages to his family, and was not allowed back into mainstream detention to access the computer room there. He explained that, even where detainees purchased their own computers, the modems were stripped out by the guards to prevent internet access. No webcams or tape recorders were allowed.

In contrast, Mr P, who had been released into community detention, described fewer restrictions on his use of communication technologies and a greater sense of independence in technology use: 'Actually I can do everything I want to, but when I was in detention, I cannot do nothing. Everything I want I call my friend to help me, to bring in'. He was able to use a mobile telephone, which had been forbidden in the IDC. He also reported having internet access, including the ability to use broadband video conferencing. The cost-effectiveness of the internet video meant he was able to use the internet daily for an hour or more to speak with his family. This dramatically increased the level of contact he has had with his family, compared with having phone contact in detention: 'I talk with my family and sometimes I just teach my daughter to study a little bit English.'

One participant was concerned policies within the IDC created inequities between women and men with access to communication technologies. Mr U described how women had an earlier curfew than men, because they were housed in a women-only dormitory that was locked down at night. This limited the time available to women to access telephones and the computer centre. Mr U described this policy as a cost-saving measure on the part of the IDC administrators, allowing fewer guards to be rostered to supervise the women's dormitory. In Mr U's view, it denied women equal access to the computer room:



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So women will be staying in a very small place denying their access to the computer centre and other places. Whereas, many detainees have all sorts of privileges, they can hang around 4 o'clock in the morning in their room and have a cigarette, they would have that privilege and women will be locked. (Mr U)

Participants commented on restrictions from a number of perspectives: the deprivation of legal rights, lack of access to technologies that support education, fear of surveillance and suspected obstruction or sabotage. Several participants remarked restricted access to communication technologies deprived them of access to legal information needed to prepare their cases:

I think they should have given everyone the migration book [copies of the *Migration Act*]. The internet in there would have been much easier and having your own private conference room with your lawyers. (Mr T)

Mr U recounted going on a hunger strike in order to obtain a copy of the *Migration Act*.

Several participants felt access to communication technologies that could be used for educational and informational purposes was limited. However, access to such communication technologies changed over time. Mr R actively sought ways to gain skills to prepare him to settle in Australian society, such as improving his levels of English literacy or familiarizing himself with Australian culture. However, in detention in 2001, he found it difficult to access technologies that would allow him to do this: the number of televisions provided was not sufficient for the detainee community and there were no newspapers. At this stage no books or computers were allowed.

Participants commented on the role of the internet in opening up the possibility of education and communication. Mr P advocated access to the internet in detention so detainees can obtain educational material and access current affairs in their own language. He found television and radio alone did not keep him informed, since he could not always fully comprehend English language news reports.

Mr A observed the limits imposed on internet use minimised its capacity to support more sophisticated learning and education. He found many online activities he had participated in prior to coming into detention were censored in the IDC:

[I]t's been very hard because with the internet here, it's blocked, some of the websites they have blocked. Say for instance, they have things like educational websites; websites related to anything to do with foreign nation situations. Anything to do with research or anything is blocked and we only have access to the basics like the newspapers within Australia and the email and the chat. But sometimes the chat when you try to access it's blocked too. (Mr A)

Not only was the internet censored by detention centre management, the restrictive communication environment led participants to censor themselves. Participants were discouraged from using the phone because they feared surveillance in the detention centres. Mr R observed it was a commonly assumed phone calls were monitored by detention centre officers: 'Another problem that we thought we were under surveillance and our phone conversations were recorded, so people were very reluctant to call families and friends.'



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Ms X feared the government in her home country would listen to phone conversations with her family members. When phoning her family from the detention centre, she was very self-conscious about what she could discuss, ensuring she did not reveal her whereabouts:

I wasn't saying where I was because we were scared that on the other line maybe the government was listening. Maybe just imagination, but we were scared to say where we were. We'd just say we are alright, we are here, we are good, our health is good. Mostly I was saying I need this, I need this, make a list, take the pen and paper, write down, send for me. But that was the only thing we were saying. (Ms X)

Several participants suspected that, in addition to the restrictions imposed on their communication in detention, access to communication technologies was deliberately obstructed by detainee officers. They perceived this as a form of control and victimisation of detainees. Participants reported letters and parcels were monitored or policed. For example, Ms Y asked her mother to send Iranian food to the detention centre, but reported this parcel had been intercepted by management and not given to her when it arrived. Ms X suggested letters and parcels, which were a source of joy for detainees, were held up for long periods of time by the detention centre officers:

All the letters and parcels, the officer said they need to check them, to see them, then they give them to us. Maybe that's why it took a long time. Many people, many letters and parcels ... Some of them [officers] don't care that we were very sad and would love to have a letter. They don't care. (Ms X)

Mr U believed IDC management deliberately obstructed detainee correspondence by preventing access to technologies or failing to maintain them, such as printer ink cartridges not being deliberately replaced to prevent detainees from printing letters. Similarly, he believed faxes sent to detainees were deliberately withheld from them, and officers were purposely obstructive if detainees wished to send faxes out. Practical barriers he and other detainees faced using the public phone system were perceived as evidence of purposeful obstruction:

Our phone was disrupted deliberately I would say that it was designed – there is a phone system in detention, what is deliberately designed to deprive the detainees from phone calls or not to get phone calls very easily. What they are doing, they are announcing ... and that is very vague and you might be in the toilet and the time you run from your room, maybe you're living far away from the telephone, the telephone line cuts off ... (Mr U)

I tell you, 200 detainees and all of them trying to make a phone call to their lawyer, family, friends, and there are four phones, two of them broken down. Most of the time, half of those phones are broken down. I was suspecting – although you could call me paranoid, but I was suspecting there is something very sinister going on because always two phones are broken down. I mean, this is very suspicious, that's very suspicious. I have no evidence that it's deliberate, but that looked very suspicious ... (Mr U)

A couple of participants perceived the restrictions imposed by IDC officers as an effort to control, victimise or disempower them. Mr U's experience with the telephone system described above led him to conclude IDC officers deliberately manipulated communication technologies to punitively deprive detainees of a means of communication and make them feel lonely and powerless. Similarly, Mr R

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believed restrictions were designed to control detainees by restricting access to information and news from the outside world and keeping them in ignorance:

So there's this control in detention centres that people are kept in the dark and they are not allowed any technology to use or know what is happening. Because we were curious about what was happening inside Australia, what people think of us ... (Mr R)

Participants employed work-around strategies surrounding technology to protect privacy, respond to fears of surveillance and negotiate obstacles to communication. They used mobile phones as a fallback communication method, adopted one-way communication strategies, engaged intermediaries, broke rules, received help from technology brokers, shared resources and fought for communication rights.

Some participants were able work with the communication technologies on offer to conceal their detention from relatives overseas whom they did not want to worry. Mr and Mrs W, who did not want to let their family abroad know they were in detention, would phone late at night so the background noise would not give away their environment. Similarly, Mr T limited the number of calls he made to his family in Australia, so as to purposefully not burden them with the issues he was facing in detention.

Mr C commented he preferred to use the internet rather than phone his family in detention; that is, he found asynchronous interactions with the recipient more suitable. Since being detained, his mental health had deteriorated. The internet allowed him to plan what he wanted to say before he typed. There were less pressures on time and recall associated with the internet than with real-time phone conversations: 'When we call up when we talk sometime, the mind is not working ... Like the whole thing is can't remember.'

Mobile phones and letters were used as contingent communication methods in detention because of the frustration participants experienced in using the payphone. A couple of participants chose to use letters to pass on personal news to their family instead of phoning them:

[W]ith the phone card it was very quick. And it was a long queue. They said oh okay, you're finished; you can't speak too much, that's it, enough. I was happier with the letter. It was much better than calling them ... (Ms X)

Once permitted in detention, mobiles were used for convenience: it made it much easier for their friends to contact them. For example, Ms D explained she could talk to her friends in her room and there was not the elaborate procedure of having to be called to the phone and found within the compound. Having a mobile phone ensured that her friends could get in touch with her in an emergency.

Several participants commented that, once mobile phones were permitted, almost all detainees had their own. Mr U claimed mobile phones had revolutionized detainees' communication practices:

[A] mobile phone would be so crucial for receiving phone calls from outside world ... Access to the mobile phone actually attach the detainees to the outside world more, I would say a thousand times more ... (Mr U)

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I would say how mobile phone is better than payphone. You don't have money so if you have mobile phone, someone else can call you and they can pay for the call. You will still be receiving phone calls, regardless wherever you are, you will not be missing out now if you're not able to call ... Now, you have seen how many [mobile] phones there are and how many detainees. You will see now all the [pay] phones are free because all the detainees have got their own mobile phone, so no one use payphone anymore. But you know a time there was I had waited two hours to make a phone call because there are queues ... (Mr U)

The adoption of one-way communication methods, in which one party took primary responsibility for initiating and financing communication, enabled participants to navigate the practical barriers to communication in detention. Since it was impractical to get a call through to the detention centre on public payphones, relatives and friends relied on detainees to make contact using their phone card. However, these expectations were reversed for the use of mobile phones. In this case, detainees relied on friends and relatives to contact them on their mobiles, because it was too expensive for them to afford to phone out. Several participants reported the use of mobiles to receive incoming calls had become the main way detainees remained in contact with the outside world.

Both types of one-way communication could be used simultaneously. For example, Mr A could not earn enough points to recharge his mobile phone; he therefore relied on friends to get in contact with him on his mobile. If this did not occur, he would have to use his phone card to contact them on the payphone.

Friend and visitors acted as messengers and couriers on the behalf of participants. Those who were situated in closed detention or residential housing asked other detainees in open detention, where access to communication technologies was less stringent, to act as messengers for them. Mr J acted as a broker on behalf of other detainees whilst in detention. New arrivals, who were put in closed detention without access to a phone, would ask him to call their family for them. Following his release, he also remained in touch with detainees. He gave them his mobile number and passed on messages to their families on their behalf. Similarly, when Mr C was placed in residential housing, he relied on friends who were still detained in the mainstream IDC to send emails to his family on his behalf. He was no longer able to access an email account and was not permitted to visit the IDC to use the computer centre.

Friends from outside of the detention centre could also act as messengers. Mr R explained that, whilst he had access to a payphone in detention, he did not have any money in his account to purchase a phone card. He had to rely on intermediaries to establish contact with a friend outside of detention whom he knew in Australia. He asked this friend to pass on a message to his family:

It was common. Everybody did it. Despite the concern that they were put in a detention centre, people were very clever and knew how to communicate and how to get by, how to get their message passed through to people in Australia, to families. I had a friend who was in Australia and I told him – if he could call my family, let them know that I am in here; I have arrived in Australia in detention, so they shouldn't worry. So he contacted my family. (Mr R)

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Family members did not always believe the intermediaries who were deployed to pass on these messages. While in closed detention, Ms Y asked a fellow detainee who was to go into open detention to phone her mother. However, her family members could not believe she would be unable to access a phone and were suspicious at the motives of the person calling on her behalf: 'I gave him a number but my mum didn't believe it. She said: 'Why doesn't she ring me? What happened to her? She is in Australia – everybody has phones.'

Visitors were also used as couriers. Mr and Mrs W asked former detainees to pass a letter onto friends, who in turn could send it to their family. It was not possible to write a return address on the envelope without the family finding out they were in a detention centre.

Several stories indicated participants chose to break the detention centre rules to access communication technologies. A pregnant woman (Ms Y) secretly sneaked under the fence from closed to open detention during the night to use the telephone to call her mother overseas. Mr C resorted to underhand means by which to access legal information that was denied to him, then used the photocopier; he 'pinched' a copy of the 1958 *Migration Act* and photocopied it in the IDC library:

Before they don't allow us to read that book, they don't give us. But I work in the library. Somebody gave me then I pinch. Then I try make a copy then I give all the people, all the detainee. (Mr C)

Prior to mobiles being permitted, Mr U smuggled one into the detention centre:

So what we did, we were lucky enough to smuggle some mobile phones inside detention ... then I stopped working actually when I got a mobile phone and I got some visitors who were kind enough to pay for my prepaid credit sometimes ... All I had to do, always hide my mobile, I keep it in vibrator mode. (Mr U)

Some participants claimed not all of these activities went completely unnoticed by guards. They reported detention officers either turned a 'blind eye', or were complicit with detainee requests to bend the rules. Mr C claimed mobile phones were used in detention before they were officially allowed and detention officers would turn a blind eye: 'Some officer they know we had a mobile. They are very cooperate, they don't say anything ... Most officer they ignore, they know, they say oh you have mobile.'

Mr R related one incident in which a guard bent the rules and acted as a broker in providing him with access to a forbidden newspaper:

There was another guard in the detention centre and he was reading the Western Australian newspaper, and I questioned if he could lend me his newspaper to me when he finished it. He said, 'No I can't give you my newspaper', so I said 'Why?' And he said, 'Well this is another rule here'. I was quite sad. I think that I was visible in some way, that I feel sad and frustrated about his rejection. He came to me after about an hour and gave it to me and said in a quiet voice that you need to bring it back to me. And that was it. (Mr R)

Personal friends or visitors to detention acted as brokers by helping detainees to access technology they had no means of purchasing themselves. This included mobile phones, computers, books, payphone cards and prepaid credit for mobile phones.

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Brokers also filled a gap by providing detainees with communication devices. Ms D was given a laptop by a friend, but was unsure how many other detainees had their own laptops which they were able to use in their room. Mr R was also able to obtain books with which to learn English from a woman who set up a business selling things to detainees:

There was a woman who brought stuff and sold it inside to the detention centre, and I asked my friend to buy me a dictionary, and he bought me a dictionary, and then I asked this woman if she could bring some books for me ... She brought a few books for me, second hand books, and one was *Gone with the Wind* and it kept me busy sometimes, reading that. (Mr R)

Detainees shared resources. When mobiles were contraband in detention, the few that had been smuggled into the detention centre were in demand. Mr C described how these new owners were obligated to share their mobile with others:

Before, some people need it, we can't say no, we give them to everyone and the phone become idle ... Because some people tell me oh he's a good friend, how can you say no, and how can you ask money from them? (Mr C)

Brokers also bought detainees telephone cards and prepaid credit for their mobile phones. Visitors gave detainees phone cards during a visit or passed on the PIN number over the phone. This enabled detainees who had no other means to purchase phone cards access to the phone. It provided additional talk time for detainees who were constrained by how much they could earn in detention. It also released one participant from needing to do the menial work required to earn these communication privileges.

Participants agitated for change to the communication restrictions, by requesting personal concessions – for example, being granted the privilege of having a computer in their room – or by advocating for the lifting of broader restrictions to communication. A couple of participants claimed the changes made to detention centre communication policies could be attributed to advocacy action. Mr A believed the educative potential of the internet rendered its access a communication right of detainees. He argued internet access was eventually introduced as a result of pressure from detainees as well as external organisations:

cos it's a right to have – it's a right to community to be able, you know, to have access to the outside world. But before the introduction of the internet and mobiles, we had very limited, no contact with Australian community ... We should be given more access to normal life. More access to and links to the community. Because, look at it this way – we have hopes of living in the community. So to be able to integrate into society that you don't even know is very hard. So I think more links with the society sooner that would help in a way that if who go or leave would be able to adapt better. (Mr A)

Mr U was actively involved in fighting for detainee rights. This involved making requests for legal information, hunger strikes and threatening legal action against detention centre management. He claimed a large responsibility for the fight to have access to mobile phones; he wrote a letter to the detention centre manager, threatening court action: 'First I wrote a letter to the DIMIA manager

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asking him some explanation ... If you have any case law, could you please refer to me those case laws or legislations please?'. Mr U firmly believes that only the court system is effective in upholding detainees' communication rights:

I was encouraging the detainees to document their incidents more because the ombudsman doesn't want to accept any complaint if it is not well documented. They did not explain to us how a detainee will be having these skills of documentation ... Most of the detainees I discovered, including me, do not have any experience of administrative work. (Mr U)

Mr U feels the next step is to fight for detainees to be able to have cameras, recorders, and their own personal computers with in-built modems, and he coaches others in making complaints.

In summary, participants' experiences of immigration detention indicate policies concerning communication privileges and technology access were inconsistent and variable across time and detention settings. Participant accounts of detention date from 1999 to 2008, and from detention practices which allowed no communication whatsoever with the outside world, then limited contact through public payphones, through to permitting personal mobile phones with stringent conditions. It is clear that the phone, whether public or personal, has been the key in keeping detainees connected with family and friends outside of detention. Nonetheless, restricted access and use of communication technologies in detention resulted in all being over-subscribed and constantly in demand. This is despite no formal tuition being provided in the use of these technologies, women having less access than the men, and access being biased towards those who had personal finances and did not need to earn their access by working under the points system. While these constraints were seen by participants as institutional victimisation, conversely the provision of technology access and communication rights was regarded as vital to emotional well-being.

## COMMUNICATION PRACTICES DURING SETTLEMENT

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All participants were able to comment on their technology use during the settlement process in Australia. For those who had been detained, settlement refers to their experiences after detention and once their claims for asylum had been processed and refugee status acknowledged. Participant descriptions of communication practices during settlement focused on the learning and uptake of new technologies, domestic communication practices and their use of technology to communicate with relatives and friends overseas.

The participants acquired new technologies immediately after their release from detention and/or later in the settlement process. Their accounts of learning and taking up new communication technologies indicate these experiences can be influenced by prior exposure to technologies, motivations for use, the ability to purchase resources, literacy levels, norms of technology use in the community, gender roles and whether or not they received adequate help. Refugee youth experiences recounted by some participants highlighted particular support needs.

Refugees, who had had little prior exposure to modern communication technologies, first encountered and learnt new technologies after arriving Australia. Some participants had had very limited exposure to communication technologies, including the phone, mobile, SMS, fax, computers and internet prior to their arrival. Others were already literate in the use of modern communication technologies when they arrived in Australia.

Participant accounts demonstrated the opportunities for learning modern technologies in Africa could be particularly limited. For example, several participants from African countries only became phone-literate after arriving in Australia. Ms G explained that, although she knew as a child telephones and mobiles phones existed, 'I never used the telephone. I never used it.' She was taught computers at school in South Africa (an intermediate country) in 2002 but this was very basic with no internet access. When asked if she ever went to an internet cafe in South Africa, Ms G said:

I used it once. I used once, internet cafe, but only [with] my sister, but I wasn't really interested. Who would I communicate with? Even my friends did not have them. Why should I have them? ... So I wasn't interested [in] technology or anything because I knew there wasn't any access to it. Even though you have access to a technology it is very hard, like we had to pay money. (Ms G)

Stories of uptake highlighted a variety of motivations for acquiring and learning new technologies. Participants learnt technologies to support them with settling into Australia, because these skills were required by an employer or to support their children who wanted to learn these technologies. Mr R purchased a mobile upon his release from detention to help him find employment:

I didn't know how to use the internet and I didn't know how to use a mobile ... I bought a mobile, because a mobile was very important for me. It was good that I could keep in touch with my friends who were in Australia and through that, I could find a job, I had a number for people to call, so it was something that I needed. (Mr R)

A couple of participants were prompted to embrace and learn new technologies, such as using a mobile or computer, by the possibilities these presented to them. Ms X described her excitement of taking up the mobile phone and learning to use a computer:



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When I came here I saw everybody had a mobile phone. I said oh I want a mobile phone too. I was very excited. My husband has a mobile phone, I got a mobile phone. Then I thought about using the internet. Everybody wants to learn to use the computer. And my husband said it's good for us to have a computer too, to know how to use it. I started to go to the course, just for a few weeks. I learned the basic things. How to turn it on/off, how to send emails. Very basic things. I learned to use a computer. It's all very good. (Ms X)

Whether participants readily took up new technologies was influenced by their ability to buy these new technologies. Mr and Mrs W were unable to buy technologies, such as a mobile or internet access, because they had no money or formal identification when they were released from detention. When she first arrived in Australia, Ms M felt uncomfortable using the technological resources of relatives with whom she was living. Her immediate family were also reticent and restricted their use of these resources:

We don't really like when we depend on other people providing us with personal needs and stuff. It was a bit tricky with the usage of internet. We were trying to restrict ourselves ... And with the phones, because they didn't want us to pay anything. They were paying for everything, and we really weren't comfortable with that. We tried not to use it as much. (Ms M)

Soon after settling into their own home, Ms M's family became technologically self-sufficient: they were able to have their own landline, mobiles and internet access.

Illiteracy in English or the participant's own language made it difficult to learn communication technologies, particularly those requiring written skills. On the other hand, a couple of participants used email and SMS to improve their ability to read and write:

I learn to SMS last few months, and I'm enjoying doing that. It's good for my English, to write and see which word is right and which word is not right. I'm getting proficient. (Ms X)

Difficulties with communicating in and learning the English language led to preferences for oral forms of communication technology, such as the phone. Ms O found writing difficult and so preferred to talk on the mobile phone rather than use text messaging. Language difficulties could also result in the use of audio or visual forms of media on the internet, or language-specific sites. Ms X described her husband's use of the internet:

[A]t first he doesn't know how to use it at all, because of his English it was hard. But now he just goes to the Iranian site and watches TV or listens to the news. That's all he's doing. (Ms X)

Ms O reflected on community patterns of learning and uptake of new technologies and how these influenced communication practices within a community. Different norms in technology use occurred between 'mainstream Australian' communities and Sudanese refugee communities. She observed the Sudanese community, as a whole, has not taken up the more modern communication technologies and members have had difficulties in learning to use them.



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Ms O explained her perception of communication etiquette between the two communities informed her communication practices with each one. She had acquired new technological literacies while in Australia, including SMS texting and email, but this did not always suit her community where there was still a preference for face-to-face contact:

[I]t is not like the Australian way. People feel that coming together and talking, they understand better, because there may be literacy issues. Here there are two different way[s]. With [the Sudanese] community I have to use another way ... You go to them and talk to them, meet and discuss the issues. But in the Australian way they feel you can do communication by email faster. When you talk on the phone it's also easier. Because Australians, you can send a message through text and email and maybe last by phone. But with my community background ... sometimes it's best to go and meet and talk to them to describe the issue. And then you come up with solutions. That is the difference. (Ms O)

A couple of women referred to their newfound freedom to learn and use communication technologies in Australia. This had been previously constrained by gender expectations and roles. Ms F escaped with her in-laws from Afghanistan to Iran and later Pakistan. All communication was mediated by members of the extended family; letters were written by her in-laws on her behalf and sent to her own mother or her side of the family. Similarly, the men travelled into the city to use a satellite payphone, as it was not culturally appropriate for women to do this. Ms F said Australia has given her equality of opportunity when it comes to using and learning technologies she now has the right to drive a car, to write a letter, and to seek information as part of her studies.

Participants were helped in learning new technologies by settlement workers and refugee support organisations, by friends or children who had become adept in using them, or by the participants themselves attending formal courses. Some participants were able to teach themselves. In a couple of instances, participants did not get the help that they needed to take up a new technology. As a result they ended up resorting to using basic communication methods, such as letter writing or public payphones. Once they were introduced to newer and more efficient technologies, these former methods were relinquished. Ms H received no formal tuition in communication technologies when she arrived in Australia. At one stage, she was making overseas phone calls on a public payphone, putting in change as she was talking. After a process of trial and error, her settlement worker introduced her to phone cards.

When Mr B arrived in Australia, he wrote letters to his family. However, since he discovered phone cards in 2000, he has not written. He now phones his family twice a month using phone cards or his mobile phone: 'Because at that time, I was new in Australia so I don't know how to buy the mobile, you know, how buy the overseas phone card ... For that reason I'm send the letters.'

Participants who had become proficient in modern computer technologies facilitated other people's learning and use. Mr W had upgraded the RAM on his own computer himself, and helped other refugees who had moved into the community set up their computers and internet connections. Several of the refugee youth in this study who became confident in using technology began to be the correspondents for other members of their family:

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I do it for my mum and dad. I do all the emails for mum and dad. Dad has his own email address but I have access to it ... I have the password to his email address, I check his email address once I'm finished using mine, because he is just not interested ... He doesn't want to, it is too complicated. (Ms G)

Some study participants were concerned refugee youth from some communities may be disadvantaged in learning modern communication technologies, such as the computer. Ms O felt refugee youth from the Sudanese community are disadvantaged at school in picking up technological skills, because of the low level of technological literacy in their community. They had come from a country with poorly developed communications infrastructure and were a part of a culture which had low uptake of communication technologies in Australia:

The skills. No skills, and we don't know how to use it. That's the difficult part, even for not only me but even our kids. At school it becomes a problem for them ... Among the Africans, few of them are coping well. Unless they started here, then they are quite good at using the technology here. Even myself, still I have problems with some other things in the mobile phone. (Ms O)

However, the stories collected demonstrate that refugee youth, who arrive with little or no exposure to communication technologies, can gain technological literacy quickly. Learning can be aided by access to communication devices, an ability to find help and support from family and friends.

Mr Z's story demonstrates disadvantage does not need to prescribe one's future. He came to Australia as a child and spent his formative years here. His perspectives and interaction with technology seemed to typify Generation Y in the ease with which he has adopted new technologies. Both he and his brother, Master Z, first saw a computer in detention. Mr Z recalled that it was 'really really old' and used DOS. These were computers used by detention centre staff. Mr Z's schooling had been disrupted whilst in detention, and he had limited access to computers:

At the beginning I was really disadvantaged. Every then and now in school, I think it was Year 10 ... we had to use a PC to print out work done on every type of our assignments. I had actually no clue what I was doing and I had my hand up all the time, 'Miss I need help, Miss I need help'. She said, 'Don't you have a computer at home?' 'No really, I don't have computer at home.' That is when I got a computer. After that, I pushed myself to overcompensate for that disadvantage. And that is when I did information technology and subscribed for PC magazine. I read a lot about computers, hardware and software ... We had to catch up for everything you know. (Mr Z)

It was this deprivation that inspired Mr Z and Master Z to become technologically literate. Mr Z convinced his father to buy him a computer, which he describes as 'primitive', and to get internet access even though this was dialup. His parents are supportive of his interest in technology:

as long as I don't waste my study time ... They actually encourage us to keep up with the technology. They actually take pride for their kids because they know how they use computers. (Mr Z)

In addition to his family, this thirst for technological learning was inspired by friends, one in particular who was also a refugee:

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Me and him, we are both refugees. We both came by boat. We lived in detention centre quite a while ... We met there and we had a lot in common. Both refugees. No educational background. We both found this extreme interest in technology. (Mr Z)

Ms G found learning new technologies easy. This was aided by easy access to communication technologies in Australia and help from friends. Before arriving in Australia, older siblings and her parents had been responsible for necessary communication and use of technologies. In coming to Australia, this changed completely:

[Now] like everybody in the house own their own mobiles. And also choice, so you had access to money, you had telephones, telephones everywhere, the internet, so big, wide range of options to communicate. And it was very easy. When you come here when you are young you learn so much from friends. (Ms G)

Not everyone arrived in Australia with minimal technological literacy. Ms M came from a country with a good telecommunications infrastructure. She had a home phone, although due to the war the telephone lines were disconnected. Ms M was sent away by her parents to live with extended family in another country. She communicated with her parents sporadically by phone and letters. When she returned as a teenager (around 2000), mobile phones were becoming popular and the internet was available. She had a computer with internet access at home from about 1998. Email was used to communicate with extended family members she lived with in an intermediate country. At the time of the interview, Ms M is typical of Generation Y, being technologically literate and a daily user of internet and email.

Communication technologies were employed by participants in Australia to stay in touch with family and friends, find information, access entertainment, gain general and cultural education – for example, accessing current affairs in their native language or cultural material on the web – do personal business and employment-related tasks.

Descriptions of everyday communication highlighted the importance of the mobile and home phone for interpersonal communication. This included keeping in touch with family movements during the day, staying in touch with close family and friends, establishing new friendships, and maintaining connections with friends made whilst in detention, now scattered throughout Australia. Several interviewees highlighted the importance of the mobile phone in maintaining contact with the network of friends formed in detention, for emotional and practical support:

Once I find the mobile I was really surprised with the facilities this phone offered because this is the first time I can keep my phone in my pocket all the time and I can take calls and contact at any time. ... we used it to contact our friends we knew them in the detention centre. So we – and there was an offer from Optus actually, 20 minutes for free after 8:00pm. From 8:00pm to midnight. So we get use of this facility, we keep in contact with our friends ... I've got friends in Adelaide, I've got friends in Melbourne, from the detentions centre. But we keep in contact with them and know what they are doing. It's good. (Ms Q)

Mr R said the mobile phone enabled him to keep in touch with people who had also been released from detention and who would act as referees and contacts in finding employment:

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I bought a mobile, because a mobile was very important for me. It was good that I could keep in touch with my friends who were in Australia and through that, I could find a job, I had a number for people to call, so it was something that I needed. (Mr R)

Several participants viewed mobiles as a convenient technology, because it allowed people to be available immediately, and enabled a quick response. Several participants indicated they used their mobile phone in a situation of 'urgency':

If it's a serious thing, I use mobile – like I need some help, I forgot something, or I'm lost somewhere, I'll ring my husband or my friends ... But usually, not really use mobile phone – when I need it. (Ms Y)

One participant, Ms X, used the mobile TV function on her mobile phone to entertain her children.

The internet was used to find information and support adult learning and youth education. It also provided access to current affairs and entertainment in the participant's native language, news from their home country and cultural material, such as Persian music. Participants used email and the internet to conduct formal correspondence, to send off job applications, book holidays or renting cars and for work-related correspondence required during employment.

Participant accounts of their internet use demonstrated different levels of proficiency and use. Mr S was a new user of the internet, having used it for two months at the time of the interview. He used the internet to look up news in his native language and learn grammar. In contrast, other participants had become highly proficient users of the internet, using internet web networking sites, such as blogs, to connect with broad networks of friends or political activists. One participant, Ms Q, had attained a level of proficiency in the use of communication technology to establish a business and used the internet extensively as a research tool:

At the moment I couldn't stand without the internet because any object, anything, any problem, I go to the internet do a search, find out about it. Anything I need I just straight away go to the internet, do my research, I find about it. Anything, like health, jobs even when I want to find a place to go to, I just do a search and find everything. It really makes life easier. (Ms Q)

Some participants designated a particular technology to a specific use, for example, landline phone cards used only for communication with family overseas, mobile phone only for urgent communication or email reserved for business transactions or formal correspondence. Ms Q delineated between business transactions and interpersonal communication when using email:

With friends I don't use email. I don't know why, I just like to hear their voice and spend a few minutes with them. But in the business I mainly talk on email. I like email to do business. I contact the customer by email. But with my friends I like to talk to them direct either by phone or by mobile. (Ms Q)

Participant stories about communicating with relatives overseas revealed the following themes: the purpose of contact; patterns of contact; family roles and expectations; the types of communication methods used; and influences on practices and communication adaptations.

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The use of communication technology to stay in touch with family and friends overseas was a dominant theme in participant interviews. Participants emphasised different goals and needs in this communication. Some participants emphasised their desire to maintain a close relationship with their family through regular contact on the phone or internet. Ms X acknowledged the heavy reliance on the phone as a communication lifeline: 'I need my family. I want to speak to them. It's very nice, very good. I'm very close to them, I'm not very far away. If the phone wasn't there, oh gosh, very bad.'

Others highlighted their need to contact family to assure them of their own well-being and to be reassured about their safety and health. Mr R used a mobile phone to phone his family overseas to let them know that he was okay and to briefly give them news. Ms Q expressed her need for news and reassurance about the safety and health of relatives in Iraq:

So my sister in Iraq I contact her to find out if she is safe or not because of all of this trouble in Iraq. I've got relatives in my country ... I've got aunties. I contact them from time-to-time, especially these days because my uncle has got – I've heard he's got cancer. So that's why I keep contacting from now and then to find out how he is. (Ms Q)

Participants described regularly contacting members of their immediate family (such as a partner, children or parents) who were living overseas – on a daily basis, several times a week, weekly or fortnightly. Others reported contacting their family less frequently. In some cases, participants regularly contacted more than one immediate family member in different parts of the world. The regularity of contact may be different for different members of the family. Ms H calls her partner in Guinea twice weekly and her mother in Liberia every fortnight, using an entire phone card each time.

Several participants reported that a particular family member, for example, the mother in the family, would take responsibility for communication with family and friends overseas. Prior to his wife's arrival in Australia, Mr K contacted his wife in Pakistan almost weekly. Now Mr K has minimum contact overseas, as Ms K initiates most of the calls overseas, including to her in-laws in Pakistan.

Young people who participated in the study commented that they rely on the older generation to communicate with family abroad and they themselves now had minimal contact with family and friends overseas. Ms M left her home country to come to Australia in her late adolescence. She is technologically literate and a daily user of internet and email. However, she leaves communication with extended family back home to her mother. Likewise, Master Z has more contact with friends in Australia than family back in his country of origin:

[M]y Mum usually keeps the connection with my Grandma. I talk to them occasionally, not all the time, but my Mum's kind of the person who keeps the connection. If she needs to call, she calls my Grandma, she talks to my Auntie and sometimes will call our friends just to hear what's happening. I do send emails occasionally ... I'm more comfortable with using the internet than my Mum, plus she's not really good with English. She'd rather use the phone ... Honestly I think I've lost it. I think I've lost that communication because I kind of rely on my Mum more. (Master Z)

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In the case of several participants, the expectations of family members overseas for regular contact were higher than their own. As Ms O explained, her family wants her to call more often than she was willing to do:

I don't talk to them much, because I'm busy. They want me every week to talk to them. I phoned them, I can't talk to them every week because sometimes I'm busy with family and I don't have time to call and talk to them. (Ms O)

Within this sample of participants, a mix of communication methods were used to contact family and friends overseas, including: email, video conference calling, landline phone cards, public payphones, mobiles and mobile phone cards, standard international voice call, international free talk time, and mobile text messaging.

The use of phone cards with a home phone or mobile phone featured prominently in participant stories. For many participants, the phone had become the technology of purpose for communicating with family and friends overseas.

Several participants indicated having family members in different countries necessitated different modes of communication. At the time of the interview, Ms K was maintaining contact with relatives in three countries: her brother in Saudi Arabia, her in-laws and sister in Pakistan and her parents in Afghanistan. Her extended family members are not only dispersed throughout the world, they are also internally displaced in Afghanistan. Her choice of technology to contact family members depends on the availability of good network coverage and cost for each country. Consequently, she uses telephone cards to contact family members in Pakistan, and a mobile to contact family in Afghanistan, taking advantage of a \$30 recharge card which gives her \$120 in credit.

When staying in touch with family and friends overseas, communication practices were influenced by: telecommunications coverage and recipient access to technology at the other end of the line; the quality and reliability of services; relative cost and affordability; and preferences for a particular communication technology.

Communication methods were more limited if the recipient lived in a region where there was limited internet or landline coverage, or where they did not have personal access to an email account or telephone line. Ms I arrived in Australia with her family five years ago, sponsored on a humanitarian visa. After leaving their country of origin (Sudan), her extended family were scattered throughout Uganda and Egypt. Her family has no access to the internet at all. When her family do not have access to a home phone, her only option is to contact them on their mobile phone. Mr E preferred to communicate abroad via the internet because it is cheap, but his family do not live in an area with internet access:

Sometimes I use telephone I call family because my family, the area they live is not accessed the internet. But most of my friends live in the big city like Mandalay and Yangon, they use the internet. So you can talk on the internet you know. So you don't have to pay. If you use the phone it is very expensive in Burma and it is very hard to call. But sometimes because the connection is not very good. So sometime you can't talk because the voice is not clear. (Mr E)

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Unreliable or poor communication services resulted in the use of preferred technologies. Ms Y preferred to phone her relatives in Iran, rather than use the internet, because the speed is slow and the internet service cuts out:

Because of internet problem, the speed is low and they always cut up ... their internet always cuts out. It's not good quality ... for Yahoo Messenger, we just type in like you're talking ... sometimes we write, hello, how are you, what are you doing, is everything alright? ... I tell them, I'm sorry I won't talk on internet, I'll ring your home. That's the easier way. (Ms Y)

Similarly, in explaining why she contacted her relatives in Iraq on their mobile phones, Ms Q referred to widespread perceptions of unreliable landline phone service in Iraq (in 2008):

At the moment because in Iraq there is usually the landline service is not good enough everybody talks on mobiles. So I contact there, from my landline to their mobiles. (Ms Q)

Ms H's experience of the unreliability of the postal service to Guinea means she preferred not to send letters to her partner there:

Since I came here I tried to send – it wasn't a letter actually but just documents, some papers, and I took it to the post office and sent it to him. It was 2006 sometimes and since then, he hasn't got it ... Sometimes it got there but not terribly reliable. And besides that, besides being unreliable, it takes a long time. Like if I was sending him something he would get it within three months time. (Ms H)

Several participants also commented that phone cards in Australia were of variable quality. They assessed each one for the best value for money on criteria such as talk time offered and the sound quality of each phone card.

Participant stories indicated expense and affordability of different communication technologies influenced communication practices. Mr and Mrs W could afford to be in more regular contact with family overseas at the time of their interview (2007) than they were on their arrival several years earlier. There was a decrease in cost of overseas phone calls during this time. When they arrived in Australia, making overseas phone calls was very expensive (\$2 per minute). It had progressively become cheaper and was \$1 per minute on their home phone. Since they used phone cards, it was cheaper still. They were now able to phone everyday for 5 or 10 minutes at a time (\$1 or \$2 in total). Many participants indicated they used telephone cards with a landline to call their family overseas. This was cheap and affordable. Mr R explained telephone cards are a cheap way of contacting family when you want to contact them at least once a week. It allowed for a longer conversation with their family. Before discovering phone cards, Mr R had used a mobile phone to contact his family overseas, but this had entailed shorter conversations:

A telephone card very cheap and mostly I use a telephone card when I call my family overseas ... It's cheaper than to call people in Australia by mobiles and it is very cheap for people like me who want to contact family, not every day, but once a week, but I can't use mobile to contact my family ... Sometimes I talk to them for one hour, which is quite long. I make it short sometimes, between usually around 20 or



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30 minutes. When I use the card, I don't finish it. A card can be used for almost two hours, and sometimes more than that and it depends which card I'm going to use. I use a card two times to call my family. (Mr R)

Participants weighed up the relative costs of communication methods in their decisions about which technologies to use. This included the relative cost of using landline phones, mobile phones or the internet, using various phone cards and calling different countries. Some participants indicated it was too expensive to call their family overseas using a mobile. However, Ms I chose to use her mobile to call family members overseas. She said there was not much difference in cost between using a mobile (with a calling card) and the home phone (with a calling card) to call abroad, as there are cards specifically for mobile use which have more talk time.

Ms F described how the relative expense of calling different countries with a phone card influenced her communication practices. Since coming to Australia, she has relied on the phone to keep in contact with relatives in Pakistan and Iran. A \$10 phone card buys 300 minutes of talk time, and she finds the phone the easiest technology to use. However, calls to Afghanistan are more infrequent because it is expensive: the same phone card might only allow 15 minutes of talk time.

Different communication technologies support different types of communication. Participants chose particular communication technologies to contact family overseas because these supported their desired form of communication. Mr P used broadband video conferencing in community detention to communicate with his wife and children. As well as the cost effectiveness of video conferencing, the importance of seeing his family, not just hearing their voices over the telephone, particularly after years of being parted from his family, was the prime reason for preferring this form of communication. Video conferencing also increased his level of contact with his family, as he was able to speak with his family for an hour everyday.

On the other hand, Ms Q avoided video calling her relatives because it involved too much time:

I know this and I've used it two or three times but it wastes time. The other side has nothing to do, they like to stay and spend hours. I avoid these things. I just want to do things quickly. I know it's an easy way to sit down and chat with them but it takes a while. I have no mood for things that take a while. (Ms Q)

Mr E explained why the internet was his medium of choice for his political activism. As a political activist forced to flee from his home country, Mr E is part of an active diaspora of political exiles and activists both within and outside Burma who remain connected via the internet:

I spend most of my money for internet bill you know. You can imagine, I pay for my bill 100 to 170 each month. Before I used the wireless that is why it cost a lot of money. I think I spend most of my time on computer you know. Why I spend on computer? Because once I log in and when I am online you know. All of my friends are there. My friends like my Burmese friends you know inside Burma from outside Burma. Everything happens in Burma I know something you know. For example, our connection is very bad in Burma. Oh, they are going to blog next day. I already know. You already know what is going on around the world. Like for example you and me



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talking, so we are in the internet connection. So what I did is that I talk a lot not only typing. You just talk with the Burma. So it is even cheaper than using the phone you know. (Mr E)

Communication with relatives abroad can be hindered by difficulties in accessing communication technology, for example, not having a fixed phone number or email address, or not being able to afford to use a technology. Participants manoeuvred these barriers by employing one-way communication and call back strategies, and using intermediaries as news bearers.

One-way communication, where one party takes primary responsibility for initiating or financing communication, occurred when a family member could not afford to contact the recipient overseas. Assuming primary responsibility for maintaining communication with family overseas can be financially onerous. Ms L had difficulty managing family expectations about frequency of contact. Her relatives didn't have the money to call her, and she was financially constrained by having to send money abroad while working to survive in Australia. As such, she prioritises calling her husband over other members of her family:

They need money all the time, yeah ... I have to pay my rent. I have to pay my bill. I have to send money for my husband because he's not working. I have to send money for my sister. (Ms L)

Similarly, Ms Y had difficulty managing the expectation of relatives overseas to pay for the calls:

[Y]ou can't tell them, I don't want to call overseas ... We cannot say no ... They're speaking and they're speaking, they don't care ... They don't care about your money ... this is our culture. We cannot say no. (Ms Y)

In situations where a family member overseas did not have a fixed point of contact, one-way communication could also occur in the reverse. In the few months before being interviewed, Mrs K said she had been unable to contact her parents in Afghanistan because the mobile network station in the area where they lived had been destroyed by the Taliban. During this time, Mrs K had been reliant on her mother's efforts to contact her. Her mother had persisted and tried to call her frequently, but these efforts have been unsuccessful in the past few months.

Similarly, Mr S was unable to contact his family until he was released from detention, because they did not have a telephone. He sent a letter through an intermediary to his family and put his phone number on it, after which his uncle (mother's brother) called him.

'Call back' strategies, in which a friend or relative would make a brief international phone call to request the recipient to 'call back', were employed alongside one-way communication strategies. This occurred when someone could not afford the cost of a lengthier call. Ms H's partner relied on her to contact him as his circumstances in a refugee camp made it difficult for him to afford the communication. However, if he urgently wanted to talk to her, he would call her and ask her to call back:

Like he actually got a mobile but like it's very much expensive for him. It's not easy to get money because he is in refugee camp, for example, so it's like I have to phone him. He sometimes try to phone me for one or two minutes and say 'call me,

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please'. So it's like – it's not just easy for him to call for like five minutes and also the emails is like it's also expensive where he is. He has to go to the internet cafe and it's just expensive there too. (Ms H)

A variant of this communication strategy, involving email communication in Africa, was also described. Ms G explained email communication to her family in the Congo was problematic because of the expense of using an internet cafe. Her family got around this by signalling to their relatives by phone that they had sent the email:

If we send them something by internet we have to phone them, go and look in your email address, we sent something. They just can't go to an internet cafe [all the time], costs quite a lot. (Ms G)

One participant described using call back strategies from Australia when contacting relatives abroad. When she did not have access to a phone card but wanted to contact relatives overseas, she would use the mobile phone to contact them and ask them to call her back:

We have free minutes for international. When you don't have phone card, the cheapest way is the mobile ... It's a cap plan and they give us 100 minutes free for international. If we don't have a phone card and need to speak urgently, we just use the mobile phone. Say can you ring us? Then they ring. (Ms X)

Participants also used intermediaries as brokers or to pass on news or gain news about their relatives. Ms F called her relatives in Afghanistan infrequently because phone calls to Afghanistan were too expensive. Instead, she relied on relatives in Iran and Pakistan to pass on news for her.

When Mrs K was unable to contact her parents in Afghanistan because the mobile network station in the area they lived had been destroyed, no intermediaries were available to act as a courier for her: 'I feel sad about it. There is nothing I can do about it ... no one is going to Afghanistan to send them a letter or a recorded tape cassette.' Instead she had got news about her parents from people she contacted who had just come out of that area in Afghanistan to Pakistan.

In summary, participants acquired new technologies both immediately after their release from detention or upon arrival in Australia as recognised refugees. The uptake of these technologies was both necessary and desired. Participants found they had more choice than ever before regarding communication technologies, but also realised these were needed for activities, such as jobseeking, in addition to sustaining contact with relatives overseas. The choices made about technologies were based on relative costs and recipients' access to those technologies at the other end of the line. Where recipients did not have access to preferred communication technologies, there was reliance on brokers and news bearers as in situations of conflict and dislocation. Subsequently, along with participants' newfound technological choices came financial responsibility in maintaining contact with loved ones abroad. Where family units had settled in Australia, older female members assumed the role of managing communication. Younger members of refugee families, on the other hand, were adept at taking up new technologies but would generally use these for activities other than keeping in touch with relatives.

## FAMILIES LOST, FAMILIES FOUND

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This chapter highlights the role technology has played in participants' emotional distress and well-being across all three settings: displacement, detention and settlement. Participant stories illustrated that connections between family members became especially fragile during displacement, particularly when one member of the family was dislocated and had no fixed address or means of contact. Connections between family members became especially vulnerable if a family member was no longer contactable by phone, or had difficulties accessing a phone in detention. Emotional distress was associated with the fear of losing contact, or indeed, having lost contact, and was exacerbated by having limited access to technologies with which to make contact. Conversely, participants reported that having the access and means to stay in touch with family was important to their emotional well-being.

Participants highlighted the vital role of the phone for staying in contact with family, and informing them of their family's whereabouts and safety during displacement and flight. These participants indicated that the phone was the primary means of staying in touch and it was difficult to remain in contact without it. When Ms G's immediate family was scattered between Zambia, Congo and South Africa, almost all communication ceased between family members because no one had a phone: 'We didn't really communicate because no one had a phone. We couldn't communicate, no one had a phone.'

Accounts of losing contact with family members also demonstrated the pivotal role of the phone. Mr B had not been able to contact his family after they went into hiding and were not longer accessible by phone:

Now before the three month ago, I couldn't speak to them because they hide somewhere, you know? ... Mean I have many times tried to call to them, but they hide somewhere ... I have been many times try I am call to my friend who live my same street. So they say ... your family members not here. I am asked to him where they gone, do you know, I want to know they are alright. They say I don't know they hide somewhere. (Mr B)

One story demonstrated that where the phone is the only means of staying in contact, knowledge of each family members' whereabouts may still be lost if the party with the fixed phone contact number moves location. Ms F and her husband both fled their country of origin. Her husband left first and she left with their three children three months later. After her husband left Afghanistan, they were unable to maintain contact for the next three and a half years. Initially, Ms F could not make contact because her husband did not have a telephone, and she did not know his whereabouts. After she left Afghanistan, her husband could no longer contact her because he did not know her whereabouts.

Mr J also came from Afghanistan. He observed that the worry and concern that accompanies not knowing the whereabouts of a family member is dispelled by the mobile phone. It was now possible to make contact with family members every day or every hour without a landline.

Stories of contacting family members during flight to Australia demonstrated that, for these participants, the phone remained the main technology of contact while in transit. However, once they arrived in detention, difficulties accessing the phone prevented them from maintaining contact. Ms Q was able to keep in touch with her family solely by phone during her flight to Australia:

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[W]e arrived there we contacted our family to tell them that we are safe in Jordan, because it is risky if you have to go out from Iraq. So just to make them happy that we are safe, we contact them. My husband contacted his family and I contacted my sister and my relatives ... Then when we reached Malaysia we told them that we are alright there as well. I think public phone or something like that. When we were in Indonesia at first we contacted them and we told them we would stay until end of July ... (Ms Q)

But once she arrived in Australia, she was unable to reassure her family that she was alive because she was unable to access the phone in the IDC (in 2000) where she was detained:

In the detention centre there was nothing. They kept us isolated. Completely isolated at first. So all my relatives and my husband's relatives were very worried if we are died or alive. So we stayed about 10 months in detention without any communication. I think only the last month they put landlines and I don't think we can contact overseas from them. I can't remember because I can only remember when I go out, went out from the detention centre we contacted our relatives (abroad). (Ms Q)

Even after phones had been introduced into detention centres, Mr J claimed many detainees were unable to contact families by phone to reassure them they were safe because they were not able to afford phone cards. Mr J commented on the desperation he observed in detainees who were unable to afford contact. They knew their family back home was in a state of perpetual worry and apprehension if no news had been heard of them since leaving the country. Many families knew of the dangers and risks faced in making the journey to Australia – that many drowned at sea, were killed or disappeared in the Indonesian jungles.

Mr J also observed that he felt a lot better than other detainees who were unable to contact their family. He claimed most detainees came from countries and areas where there were no telephone lines. His family was contactable by telephone. He had the means to afford phone cards which others did not.

Stories about communication in detention highlighted the emotional impact of communication restrictions in closed detention, which prevented participants, on arrival, from letting family overseas know that they were alive. During flight, the phone had been the key instrument by which Ms X could inform family of her whereabouts and safety. However, when she arrived in detention, she was put into closed detention. During this time, she was unable to phone her parents or send them a letter:

It didn't take long to arrive in Australia. Just one month. We came to Malaysia and we rang them, said we are okay, we are good. Then we came to Indonesia, then we rang them again. Okay we are good, we are fine. From Indonesia to Australia, I couldn't speak with my family for five months and they thought maybe we were dead. But we came to the detention centre and they didn't allow us to use the mobile phone. They said we should have our first interview, and it took a long time. After that they had our interview and we couldn't send a letter, we couldn't use the phone, nothing ... (Ms X)

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Ms X emphasised the emotion and relief she felt when she was finally able to contact her family after her release from closed detention:

The first time was like – I couldn't speak. I was shaking, I was crying. Mum said: 'oh don't cry, just speak, don't cry'... The other people [the security guard, the officer that we have in detention] said okay finish, finish. I said: 'No please let me speak' ... All the time they had officers in here watching us. They don't understand what we are saying but just watching us do things. (Ms X)

A couple of participants explained the fear of being traced, or the fear of placing recipients of their correspondence in danger, prevented them from contacting their families altogether. Ms D did know the whereabouts of her family, but she was afraid of the possibility of being traced if she made contact with them. Her family abroad had a mobile phone as well but she was scared of even sending an SMS to them.

Mr E did not contact his family for seven or eight years after leaving Burma. When he left, his family did not have a telephone. Mr E felt making any contact with them by post may put them in danger because they would be associated with his political activism: 'I even didn't write a letter to them because I felt that it wasn't safe for them.' When Mr E was finally able to find their phone number with the help of intermediaries, he was unable to fully explain to his family why he had not been able to contact them:

They said, 'Oh we thought you died. Why you didn't contact us?' But I said it is very hard. I didn't say I am doing politics. I couldn't contact and I didn't have number you know. (Mr E)

Some participants reconnected with family members with whom they had lost touch whilst in transit. However, others arrived in Australia with no idea of the whereabouts of their family members or having not been able to contact them for a long time. Stories about finding lost family members highlighted the role of intermediaries in helping participants trace or re-contact family members with whom they were no longer in touch. Ms I went to a refugee camp in Kenya once she was married, but did not have contact with her family for the entire eight years she spent there. She only knew of her family's whereabouts when a sister who was still in touch with other family members came to Kenya:

When they [family] in Uganda, then I have sister who came from Khartoum, to Nairobi. Then she's the one who knew that my parents are there. Yes. Then I came to her, then from Nairobi to Uganda. (Ms I)

Mr E used his virtual community networks to find and contact his family. He was only able to find their phone number when an online friend contacted someone he knew in Thailand to get the number from someone they knew in Burma.

A couple of participants spoke about the difficulties they had trying to trace lost family members while in detention. This was due to restrictions imposed on their access to communication technologies. Subsequent external assistance and support was helpful. Mr A was reliant on the Red Cross to help trace his family whilst he was in detention. He found this too difficult to do by himself:

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In detention it's quite hard to even try and locate them or even contact anybody that's overseas. Because we have limited, you know like limited resources, like you can't get as many phone cards as you want or you can't talk for long ... (Mr A)

He expected to have more chance of finding his family after he was released from detention and also more access to communication technologies:

I'll be able to contact people like my own will, you know? ... It will be much easier for me to contact people by phone ... If I have a computer in my house that would be easier too. If I don't have one, I can use the internet cafe, for as long as I want, so it would be much easier for me. (Mr A)

Stories about separation from family were inextricably linked with comments about emotional distress and well-being. Participants described the anxiety and distress of having no news of loved ones or not being able to contact them. In contrast, they described the emotional relief that came with their experiences of reconnection or reunion.

Ms O described the hardship of not being able to contact her family whilst in a refugee camp in Khartoum. She was unable to find out whether or not they were safe and well:

it's very hard ... Because you don't know their health, and exactly what the situation is for your friends and family. Like when you were in Khartoum, you can't hear about your parents. We were very young at that time. Most of the people were students. Because of the war they were cut. No way of getting home. No planes going. Only the soldiers fly ... (Ms O)

Grandmother Z told her story of being separated from her son whilst she was displaced in Iran. After he left to come to Australia she was left without news for nine months because she did not have access to a telephone. She became tearful when recalling this, wiping her tears with her scarf: 'I was neither in the sky and nor on the earth when I didn't hear any news from my son. I was fasting and crying. I have got a heart attack because of that.'

Mother Z linked the difficulties she had contacting her father with emotional distress. She described feeling anxious when she wasn't able to talk to her father in Pakistan for four months because he wasn't available at the time of the phone calls. She feared for his welfare, explaining she thought 'something might have happened to my father and no one was telling me about it.' Only after talking to her father did she feel relieved.

Participants highlighted the anticipation and emotion of being able to re-contact family after a period of separation or assumed loss. In some cases, this was heightened by family members who were not expecting a phone call, having assumed the family member/s seeking asylum were dead.

Similarly, Mr P emphasised the excitement of being able to see his wife and children for the first time using broadband video conferencing, whilst in community detention:

Is very, very sentimental. I just can't stop my ... it's very exciting and I think it was going to crying, because we haven't seen each other for about more than seven year ... it's very hard to talk to my family, to my wife and my son for the first time, yeah. It's very hard because it's too long. (Mr P)

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One participant's story illustrated the impact of rumours of a loved one's death on the experience of re-connecting with that family member for the first time. Ms F was unable to recognise her husband's voice when he first rang up. It was her first experience of using a phone. She was uncertain of the authenticity of rumours from family friends who had relatives in Australia that her husband had probably drowned on a boat which sank with a load of refugees on board when sailing to Australia. However, when she finally received a phone call from her husband, she feared it may be someone pretending to be him. As a result, she interrogated him for ten minutes with questions to which only he would know the answers before she believed it was genuinely him.

Several participants commented on the positive impact on emotional well-being of being able to sustain regular contact with close family abroad. However, Grandmother Z believed contact at a distance was not a substitute for face-to-face interaction and reunion with her family in Australia. According to Mr A, though, better connection to the world outside the IDC would also improve detainees' sense of well-being. He suggested that improved virtual access to Australian society via the internet may alleviate some of the mental health problems experienced by detainees.

In summary, across all three settings of displacement, detention and settlement, the participants identified the phone as critical in maintaining contact with family members. However, in situations of displacement, the phone alone was not enough to prevent loss of contact with relatives. Likewise, communication restrictions in detention made connections vulnerable. Participants were emotionally distressed about not knowing the whereabouts or well-being of loved ones, or at the fear of losing contact. The detention environment compounded this anxiety by making communication depend on the ability to afford contact. The lack of choice of technologies in both detention and displacement conditions further exacerbated distress. However, despite access to technology, some participants did not use the available technologies because they feared that they may endanger their families by making contact. Yet participants felt a responsibility to keep in contact, and to do all they could to find their families if contact had been lost. This meant utilising informal strategies and intermediaries more than formal avenues, such as the Red Cross family tracing service. Conversely, participants reported improved emotional well-being when they had resources to keep in touch with family abroad.



## CONCLUSION

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This study's findings document the voices of refugees and asylum seekers from a diverse range of countries, as well as asylum seeker and refugee experiences. As a pilot there are likely to be other issues and experiences surrounding the use of communication technologies amongst these groups that are not described in this report. Nonetheless, since little is known about this topic, the findings provide a useful platform from which to identify future research directions about the use of communication technologies by asylum seekers and refugees.

It should be acknowledged that asylum seekers and refugees who knew little about communication technologies and did not feel confident talking about them may have been less inclined to participate in the research. These people may have had a different perspective to offer on the use of communication technologies across all three settings. The shared experiences of participants described in this sample are not global statements about experiences that are common to refugee and asylum seeker populations. This is the realm of quantitative inquiry. Rather, these findings give a tentative insight into the experiences that asylum seekers and refugees have had using communication technologies in situations of displacement, flight, detention and resettlement, and raise issues that could be further explored and translated into practical interventions.

Chapter one affirmed that little is known about the use of communication technologies in situations of displacement in developing and/or war torn countries. Various factors inhibited access to technologies while participants were dislocated: including war and violence leading to damaged telecommunications infrastructures and poor coverage as well as government sanctions on telecommunications in periods of conflict. In this context, affordable infrastructure solutions are likely to aid communication. Mobile phones had the utility of facilitating communication in situations of conflict or dislocation, particularly, in refugee camps and in rural or regional settings that do not have basic telecommunications infrastructure. However, while the mobile phone is versatile, its limitations are clear: they are expensive, can potentially be lost, may not be able to be used in a different national network when asylum seekers flee across national borders and can be dependent on vulnerable mobile network stations in conflict zones. Satellite phones may be the only way of contacting family when telecommunication infrastructure is damaged. Nevertheless, mobile phones can ensure that family members remain contactable during flight and displacement and may protect a family member's whereabouts from being lost. Participant accounts indicated that letters are a fallback communication method in displacement settings where telecommunication services fail. However, these can be limited by the unreliability of the postal services and the threat of surveillance by enemies.

Humanitarian assistance in facilitating access to communication technology is likely to ameliorate distress and help prevent the separation of families. Humanitarian agencies could potentially have a role in the emergency delivery of letters and facilitating community access to satellite phones. Participant accounts highlighted the difficulties in communicating to the outside world from refugee camps that had limited communication services. In these settings, these agencies might effectively intervene by supporting 'indigenous schemes' for resource sharing, for example, sharing a mobile phone whilst each individual owns a SIM card. There is a role for humanitarian actors to more effectively support refugees and asylum seekers in meeting their vital communication needs so that access to technologies is widened and no longer has to be negotiated on an ad hoc basis through brokers and favours.



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Participant voices in chapter two present a historical account of experiences of immigration detention over the last seven years, from the late 1990s to 2007. However, these stories do not necessarily reflect current issues and cannot be generalised to the whole detainee population over time and across different detention centres. Nevertheless, they highlight important issues that need to be further explored and addressed.

Policies that restrict the ability of detainees to contact families may be unnecessarily punitive. This includes policies that offer token means of communication to detainees that cannot be feasibly used by the individual to contact their family members, such as faxing. Technology access policies within detention need to ensure detainees have a sufficient range of communication options as well as resources for adequate communication with family overseas and access to legal advice. Cheap phone cards for calling overseas are now available and could be provided to detainees. Stories suggest a detainee's ability to receive vital calls, such as those coming through their lawyers can be jeopardised by practical difficulties negotiating the payphone system in detention. Mobile phones have provided a crucial solution to these obstacles and should be protected in the long-term by policies ensuring that detainees retain access to these in the absence of sufficient access to other communication technologies.

Having to work for communication privileges was described in interviews as onerous by participants, particularly when they found it difficult to obtain enough 'points' to purchase phone cards with the amount of talk time needed. Those who arrive in detention without personal finances were especially disadvantaged in their ability to meet primary communication needs with the outside world if they were unable to work within the detention centre. While accounts of work for pay provided in this study refer to procedures that were in place several years ago, they raise the issue of equitable and just systems of remuneration within detention centres. A comparison of the detention centre system of work for pay with that employed in the prison systems in Australia may provide a helpful benchmark.

Vastly different experiences of accessing communication technologies in detention were described by the two participants who had been accommodated in Residential Housing Projects (RHPs) and the participant who spent time in community detention. Whilst the sample size is small and the current situation is not documented, these stories illustrate that inadequate access to communication facilities may occur in residential housing, if detainees are not compensated for their loss of access to communal facilities in institutionalised detention. This is particularly of concern if communication rights granted to detainees in IDC are denied to those in residential housing. Such a situation, for example, could affect their ability to contact family overseas by email. Further comparison is warranted of technology access across different detention contexts with that in Australian prisons.

Participants highlighted the utility of the internet as a way of gaining access to current affairs and other information in Australian society, accessing material in their own language, learning English and gaining computer skills. However, restricted access to computers appeared to limit potential for learning by virtue of the insufficient number of computers in detention and the need for persistence to use them. Furthermore, participant accounts suggested communication policies that govern

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access to computers and the scarcity of resources may inadvertently create inequities between detainees. For example, if men can more easily access the computer rooms than women, because a curfew locks down the women's dormitory, women may be disadvantaged. This is likely to result in men having more opportunities than women for developing their skills and confidence using computers. While male participants had spent more time in immigration detention compared with female participants, gendered experiences of technology use while detained could be explored in future studies.

Distrust of detention centre staff resulted in some detainees declining to use communication technologies available to them. Some participants chose not to talk on the phone or send a letter because they feared surveillance by detention centre staff. Distrust may be inevitable in situations of surveillance where the population has previously experienced trauma and emotional distress. However, the absence of transparent rules or their inconsistent application is likely to instill or reinforce fear about getting urgent communication needs met. Clear information about technology rights and the application of fair and consistent access would reduce this fear.

While the phone was the key instrument for maintaining communication networks during displacement and detention, chapter three highlights a range of new technologies that are embraced during the settlement process. Settlement organisations that seek to help refugees develop skills to resettle should not forget the support needs of refugees and asylum seekers in learning new communication technologies in Australia. Participant accounts demonstrated that refugees and asylum seekers with poor exposure to communication technologies prior to their arrival in Australia can find it difficult to learn about and use new communication technologies in Australia. One participant's account of communication practices in the Sudanese community suggested that traditional etiquette and values about conducting communication – for example, face-to-face communication – persist despite the availability of new technologies in Australia. This influences patterns of uptake of these technologies. Participant accounts also showed poor literacy and English language skills can make it difficult to learn new technologies, in particular, those that require written skills, such as SMS, email and the internet. Further research would be helpful to identify barriers to learning new communication technologies and supporting the needs of refugee populations who have recently arrived in Australia.

Settlement workers have an instrumental role in introducing refugees to communication technologies that suit their needs. New arrivals are likely to benefit from an early introduction to communication technologies such as phone cards or internet email accounts that are cost efficient for communicating with family overseas. Phone cards that enable callers to communicate cheaply to family overseas with mobile phones or landlines were highlighted by participants. However, settlement workers need to be aware that many issues influence refugee choices about the use of communication technologies for contacting friends and family overseas. These included the quality of the phone service (for example, the clarity of the phone line), internet and telecommunications coverage in the regions they were calling (particularly in regional areas, or situations of conflict); the relative cost of different communication options, whether the recipient has personal access to that form of contact and the desired level of contact.

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Computer training programs need to be tailored to take into account the needs of people with poor English literacy skills. These programs may also benefit from recognising and harnessing community members who assist other refugees to acquire and learn computer technologies. Refugee youth from communities or families with low uptake of communication technologies may be disadvantaged in their ability to learn computer skills at school, as they have less opportunity to practice these skills. Additional support may be required for youth from these communities.

Chapter four examined the relationship between access and use of technologies and emotional distress or well-being in participants. It was shown that in both displacement and detention settings, a vital communication need for asylum seekers is to be able to remain in contact with immediate family and friends, particularly to obtain news of their family's whereabouts and safety. Communication solutions that enable them to do this have the potential to reduce the number of families that lose each other and to mitigate the mental and emotional anxiety which accompanies separation or loss. Detainee voices highlighted their experience of distress when they were unable to contact their families upon arrival to let them know they were alive.

Participant stories linked emotional state to the degree of difficulty they had reconnecting or sustaining contact with family and friends. This concurs with the literature on the psychology of displacement. But future research could examine the efficacy of communication technologies in reducing the likelihood of separation from family in situations of displacement and in mitigating emotional distress during periods of separation. The benefits of communication technologies enabling networks of detainees to remain in touch after release from detention to provide mutual social support could also be explored in more depth.

The voices collected and documented in this pilot research illustrate the vital role of communication technologies in helping refugees and asylum seekers sustain their connections with family, friends, acquaintances and diasporas, and mitigating the emotional distress of separation from loved ones. They document the obstacles asylum seekers encounter in using communication technologies in displacement settings and the strategies they use to manoeuvre around these. They also illustrate the role that communication technologies can have in skill development and establishment within a new country. Additional research is required to augment our understanding of the experience of asylum seekers and refugees in these settings. Further reflections on the implications of these experiences for practical support, advocacy, policy development and research are invited.

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