

# Smartphones as personal digital archives? Recentring migrant authority as curating and storytelling subjects

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## Abstract

This article addresses the smartphone as a complicated technology of forced migration: a device that accompanies those who move, but which also records and catalogues digital traces within life contexts of conflict, uprooting, migration and resettlement. We conceptualize smartphones as personal digital archives: migrants' curation of their own stories on their own portable devices. Personal digital archives, we argue, reflect the migrant gaze and constitute mobile subaltern subjects' record of forced migration. Inductively learning from fieldwork conducted across five sites over five years, we analyse how the personal digital archive records and reflects the mediation of migration in its three dimensions: symbolic, affective, and material. By focussing on personal digital archives, we recenter the authority of migrants as witnessing subjects of their own life stories. Their archives as autonomous migrant records provide a powerful basis to reflect upon and potentially contest mainstream western journalism cultures, which too often reduces migration to a spectacle and the migrant to a dehistoricized figure with little agency or voice.

## Keywords

Personal digital archive, forced migration, symbolic, affectivity, materiality

## Introduction

A battered device with cracked screen; a shared, sturdy family smartphone; precious memories captured in photos and videos; the most expensive thing ever owned; all safely hidden in a pocket while frantically searching for Wi-Fi hotspots or sockets to charge run-down phone batteries while on the move. These are glimpses into the differentiated but deep entanglement of the smartphone and storytelling in the context of conflict and forced migration<sup>1</sup>. The smartphone as a technology of migration has attracted media attention, which peaked during the 2015-16 so-called "European migration crisis". Headlines that demonised and praised the smartphone as a luxury and a lifesaver respectively circulated across the world. Media stories that integrated migrant's own user-generated-content (UGC) into war and migration reporting became momentarily ordinary (Chouliaraki, 2017; Risam, 2018). Eventually, media interest in the

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, we amplify experiences of subaltern migrants, who were either holding refugee status, or still awaiting decisions in their asylum procedures. We see forced and voluntary migration in a continuum of experience (Erdal & Oeppen, 2018), and following Sigona (2014), we are critical of the deterrence oriented politics of labelling and categorization of migrants, and reject the hegemonic academic, humanitarian and media discourse which represents them as singular, one-dimensional masses and categorizes them within mutually exclusive and externally determined categories as *either* refugees *or* migrants.

smartphone as a witnessing device and in the migrant as storyteller faded. But the smartphone, unlike the loudness and temporariness of media interest, remains a complicated technology of mobility: a device that accompanies those who move, but which also traces, records and catalogues transnational digital footprints within the life context of conflict, uprooting, migration and resettlement. The smartphone, as a personal digital archive, synthesises all the multiple visual, audio, text-based and meta-data narratives of the self that the smartphone (and all installed apps) can contain. Like all archives, the personal digital archive's evidential workings as records are co-shaped by "transactionality" (the forms of human relationships documented) and "contextuality" (the situated creation and use of archives through spacetime) (McKemmish 2005, 14). In contrast with collective, corporate and formalized record-keeping systems, researchers working on personal archives will therefore not only be focusing on specific "evidence of actions or facts" but may pluralize knowledge by attending to "a sense of feelings, of relationships and of character" (Hobbs 2001, 133). As a gateway to the mobile subaltern subject's own stories, the smartphone has become a repository of knowledge and of the migrant gaze, carried from warzones to new destinations to tell stories of embodied violence, but also embodied joys. The aim of this article is to analyse the smartphone as a digital pocket archive for uprooted migrants and to show how the ethico-political functions of archived user generated content may be used to problematise and challenge western journalistic cultures' dominance in telling and framing stories of war and migration.

Specifically, we approach the smartphone as a digital archive - a technology, an artifact, a network - that fits in a pocket but which carries records of the pleasures and pains of at least a lifetime. As an autonomous, mobile and personal technology of prosthetic witnessing and storytelling, it generates, filters and shares testimonies of uprooting, migration, and resettlement outside representational systems of mass media. We use the concept of "autonomy" to identify the embodied, portable, and individualized appropriations of the smartphone as an artefact and as a record keeping system outside of institutionalized media production; we of course recognize that smartphone uses remain subjected to technological affordances, as well as to various conventions, rules and regulations associated with mediation and its governance. Sometimes parts of these archives are selectively remediated on social media (Nikunen 2019). As an artefact, it represents a material tool that enables subaltern authorship and archiving of stories of war and migration. As a network, it links migrants with their selective audiences, while leaving behind digital footprints for media, surveilling states, but also for future historians reconstructing the contemporary moment (Gatrell 2017). In our analysis, we deliberately avoid examples of remediated migrant UGC in mainstream media; instead, we privilege private digital archives that migrants shared and discussed with us. In this way, we hope to open up a space of recognition for autonomous archival constructions, digital narrations, and the migrant gaze, which often remain hidden in research of media representations, migration and war reporting. Thus, we here explore whether and how these subaltern archives generate narrations and affects beyond western journalistic cultures, which deem only certain speakers, discourses and archives as worthy of recognition.

In adopting this conceptual and empirical lens, we hope to contribute to the literature by understanding the migrant beyond her narrow and rare recognition as witness and storyteller integrated within the pre-existing western political economy and grammar of newsmaking (Chouliaraki 2015, 2017). Contributing to this critique, we study migrants as agents who use

their phones to tell and archive *their* stories of migration. Specifically, we develop the notion of the personal digital archive to account for the assignment of meanings to smartphones as archives of migration; we use this concept to understand how on and through the smartphone personal and public records are constituted in their multiplicity, as banal and political accounts of life on the move. While the starting point for this analysis is the role of UGC in understanding migrants as witnesses and storytellers of suffering and uprooting, we deliberately develop an analysis that locates migrants' witnessing and recording of suffering within wider technological, affective and representational systems of storytelling in the context of migration. Thus, we analyse migrants' own audio-visual representations, as these are located within complex archival systems they carry in their pockets. These include the production, representation and use of their own records of suffering, trauma, but also of survival, hope, and mundanity. Below, we discuss digital archives as records of storytelling, as much as evidence of subject constitution at the juncture of a complex array of experiences recorded, filtered and shared digitally.

This approach, we argue, offers an innovative and necessary conceptual and methodological provocation: challenging the divide in the media and migration literature between media representations of migration on the one hand, and media uses by migrants on the other. Instead we develop a three-dimensional perspective of mediation. More specifically, and as we have inductively learned from conducting fieldwork across five sites over five years (between 2016-2019 in Utrecht and Amsterdam, the Netherlands and between 2017-2019 in Berlin, Germany; London, UK and Athens, Greece; see Leurs, 2017 and Georgiou, Hall and Dajani 2020 for further details on the research process and ethics), the personal digital archive records and reflects the mediation of migration in its three dimensions: symbolic, affective, and material. We discuss each of these dimensions in detail after positioning this discussion within debates on media and migration and digital archiving.

### **Media, migration and the smartphone**

Research on media and migration has exploded in size over the last few years, reflecting the significant interest in mediation's role in politics and practices of migration. In its richness and enormous contribution, this literature has still reproduced an old divide in media and communications - that between media representation and media consumption - a divide which has also been reconfigured in the context of digital culture. Identifying how digital mediation diversifies cultures of production, circulation and narration of migration, not least on social media, media and migration research has privileged either representational meanings or practices of media use. More specifically, the first strand within the literature has focussed on how forced migrants are objectified in mainstream media as abject Others, and how digital forced migrants' self-representations might offer alternative discourses of their subjectivities. In mass media, they are commonly represented as faceless masses and vulnerable Others in representations that discursively produce narratives of humanitarian securitisation that divide them into either silent victims or aggressors threatening security and economy (Chouliaraki et al., 2017). Dominant frames, it has been argued, portray forced migrants as terrorists, financial burdens, but also as risks to women, daughters, and LGBTIQ communities (eg. Carastathis et al., 2018). As a result of the proliferation of such overdetermined stereotypical frames, the majority of western audiences construct their knowledge and "have a strong visual sense of what 'a refugee' looks

like” (Malkki, 1995, p. 10). Until recently, little was known about migrants’ own gaze - their own representations of conflict, uprooting and life in the move. The so-called “European migration crisis” destabilized this representational bias as both political and technological developments called for attention to the smartphone-carrying migrant and the selfie-taking refugee. The use of selfies has been analysed as a site of the subaltern (Risam, 2018), as a symbolic system of self-affirmation, expanding visibilities of otherwise marginalised subjects (Witteborn, 2015), but also as a tool for self-representation, which is often appropriated into an ethico-political spectacle in western publicity (Brager, 2015; Chouliaraki, 2017; Nikunen, 2019). Literature on selfies emphasised politics of voice, visibility but also of silencing: the symbolic unevenness in the distribution of symbolic power through media representations, and its, temporary at least, destabilisation through migrants’ self-representation. While this literature has contributed to understanding inequalities through a mediated normalisation of migrant pathologies, especially through exclusive categories of victimhood or criminality, it has not engaged with migrants as subjects. The prominence of texts and images meant that there has been little discussion on actors and their affective agency, and little attention to (self-) representation as a reflexive space of experience, meaning-making and affect.

The second branch in media and migration research has focused on migrant uses of digital technologies, especially the smartphone. The fast rising use of smartphones among those on the move, in camps and at points of settlement has attracted significant attention among ethnographers and other qualitative researchers, especially after “the migration crisis”. Privileging phenomenological approaches to inequality, especially in relation to voice, recognition and communication rights (Georgiou 2018; Leurs, 2017; Smets, 2018; Witteborn, 2019), such scholarship has approached the smartphone as a technology of connection - in its potentials and risks. The concept of the “connected migrant” (Diminescu, 2008) and its reconceptualisations in contexts of precarity and forced migration (e.g. Gillespie, Osseiran and Cheesman, 2018; Greene, 2019; Twigt, 2018) have driven research on connections between migrants and members of familiar, political and cultural communities (for an overview see Mancini et al, 2019). Bringing voice and the experiential side of connectivity at the core of its analysis, research on smartphone use has tended to reproduce its own technodeterminism, not least by singling out smartphones as utilitarian survival tools and lifelines. Privileging use and technology, such works risk othering migrants, by approaching their engagement with technologies as fundamentally different to other, non-migrant, users. Awad and Tossel (2019) rightly call for a non-essentialist approach to mobile subjects smartphone usages: “one that avoids simplistic definitions of some people – most notably, those labeled as refugees – in relation to particular sets of needs” (2019, p 13). Migrant smartphone scholarship demonstrates a fascination with the “experience of the new” that disproportionately focusses on migrant phone use as culturally, politically and technologically unique. However, migrants have engaged in media production practices prior to the so-called European migration crisis, even prior to the advent of digital technologies (e.g. Seuferling, 2019). For many migrants, digital agency is not tied to “the crisis” alone, but an element of their biography associated with their identity construction before, during and after their uprooting and resettlement. This literature has also mirrored the limitations of literature focussing on (self-)representation. Offering valuable insights and accounts of media use, it has often detached experience from discourse, offering little insight into the co-constitution of connectivity and storytelling, with the latter becoming an archival, testimonial and reflexive record of the migrant experience itself.

### *Personal digital archive research*

Personal digital archives have not been systematically studied in media and migration research. This is likely to be the result of research agendas that avoid migrants' everyday, non-utilitarian use of technologies, and also (self-)representation beyond its crisis-bound remediation in mainstream media. Yet, the personal digital archive reveals dimensions of mediation that often remain hidden. Innocenti identifies "new ways of communicating, creating, archiving, accessing and interpreting individual and collective memory" (2016: 274) as fundamental to debates on socio-cultural inclusion. Redwine adds that smartphones as personal digital archives "contain files that capture both the mundane and the extraordinary, and represent moments that people may want to remember forever, as well as some that a person may wish had never happened" (2015, 2). The digital "archives of the everyday" (Beer & Burrows, 2013, 53), unlike formal archives, are "peer-to-peer", affectively and ordinarily constituted, rather than institutional, top-down records (Garde-Hansen 2009, 5-6). As elements of mediation, Hartley argues, they are "probability archives" (2012, 160) of encounters captured through UGC and the prosumption of content. Their owners, curate their archives through UGC in order to make their personal performative engagements collective.

While the personal digital archive has received little attention in media and migration research, the smartphone as witnessing device has attracted significant attention (Chouliaraki, 2015; Stavinoha, 2019; Rae et al., 2018). "Self-representative witnessing is an inherently powerful form of communication", Rae et al. argue in their study of social media use among asylum seekers living in Australian detention centres, adding that "it is only when their content is picked up and reproduced by mainstream media that they are, by definition, able to reach a broader audience" (2018, 491). While there is no doubt that migrant archives' remediation in mass media has important ideological and aesthetic implications for journalism cultures (Chouliaraki 2015; 2017), migrant digital archives shape cultures of mediation in many other ways that call for attention. Most importantly, personal digital archives represent an alternative form of mediation *outside* western journalism cultures, produced and curated by migrants themselves for selective audiences and communities of users. As we will show, it diversifies the record, the actors, and the audiences of war and migration beyond established western media cultures. In order to analyse these complex roles of the digital archive, we analyse its material, affective and symbolic dimensions and consequences.

The material dimension of personal digital archiving points to the double-bind function of archives (Ernst, 2013): remembering versus forgetting, and archival inclusion versus exclusion. The enhanced documenting and storage affordances of the smartphone have led some to "celebrate the end of forgetting" (Mayer Schonberger, 2011), while others have pointed out that the rise of smartphone ownership and their increased possibilities for bottom-up personal and community archiving, have enabled users to bypass institutional archival gatekeepers (Cover 2017). While the workings of traditional archival institutions result in "fixing cultures and their memory systems", personal digital archives contain more diverse forms of storytelling and experience producing "sheer unpredictability", which could be a basis for new "cultural dialogue" (Ibrus & Ojaama, 2020, p. 65). Nonetheless, there are technological, material, personal limits to what can be stored and preserved, raising questions about the always inherently limited possibilities for the "preservation of self" through digital archiving (Kim, 2013). Furthermore,

surveillance, prosecution, and the irregular journeys migrants are forced to take often result in endangered and lost personal digital archives.

Smartphones have also been analysed as personal “technologies of affect” (White 2014, 75). As individuals archive their UGC, their phones become “repositories of feelings” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 244). A technology and an archive, the smartphone captures and contains emotions of its owner, but also of those who engage with them (Cifor and Gililland, 2016, p. x). Ahmed emphasises the importance of affect through its circulation, accumulation and endurance (2004), an analytical proposition with relevance to the smartphone: smartphones are digital artifacts that “accumulate” affective responses among their owners and others accessing digital archives, that are “circulating” among situated users, and they generate emotional responses, which may or may not “endure” over time and space (2004).

The socio-political significance of the personal digital archive is reflected in its symbolic value and its interconnection with wider economies of mediation. The digital archive can be understood within digital economies that monetise storytelling and the generate surplus value out of digitized behaviour, within surveillance capitalism. As the smartphone constitutes the ultimate tool of self-making through digital representation and compulsive sharing, it incorporates and normalises the governmentality and control of everyday life (ibid.) and surveilled migrant lives (Brekke and Staver, 2019; Bolhuis & van Wijk, 2020). Critics within media and communications and memory studies have aptly theorized the monetisation of digital archives, especially on social media platforms. In response, Yuk Hui calls for a reconsideration of personal digital archives beyond the digital industry to “politicize the question of archives” (2015, 235) and “to return agency to human individuals [and] to develop a new form of collectivity” (2015, 238, 243-244).

In our theory-driven analysis below, we draw on media and migration and memory studies research of digital archives, while recognising their limitations on privileging mainstream media and memory respectively. Our aim and ambition is to decenter the subject and technology of war and migration storytelling. Thus, we recenter the authority of migrants as witnessing subjects of their own life stories, and of their archives as autonomous records that offers potential for contesting, as well as engaging with, mainstream media and journalistic cultures.

### **Material, affective, and symbolic media? Analysing migrants’ personal digital archives**

During our research with migrants at and inside Europe’s borders over the last five years we heard stories, read testimonies and observed practices that reveal the complex value and meanings of the smartphone. In fact, this article attempts to address our own frustration and shortcomings in fully understanding (Georgiou, 2018; Leurs, 2017) the smartphone beyond its affordances of portable connectivity and digital storage of stories of conflict, uprooting, migration. Instead, here we analyse and reflect on the smartphone as a resource of knowledge and self-making, constituted through its material, affective and symbolic dimensions. What conditions - material, affective, symbolic - turn the smartphone into a resource of knowledge and self-making and why does this archive matter to individuals and groups during and after its creation? We analyse personal digital archives in these three dimensions, precisely because our

engagement with migrants and their archives across 5 sites and over 5 years reveal their multiple roles as witnessing, storytelling tools, and as affective and symbolic artefacts for individual and collective identities.

### **I. Material archives: The tangibility and portability of digital archives (phone as a vehicle (for memories )**

Smartphone archives can be seen as “vehicles of communication and interaction” (McKemmish 2005, 15) which distinctively materially mediate mobility and migration. Phone archives co-constitute memory as they have become key material vessels to produce and store personal memory objects (Özkul & Humphreys, 2015). Material smartphone archives however are also increasingly politicized migration vehicles, comparable to the “viapolitical” workings of ships and trains (Walters, 2015). A focus on smartphone archives as vehicles alongside co-constituting personal attachments thus allows for scrutiny of how they are featured in public mediation, how migrants negotiate migration governance by means of their personal digital archives, and how these archives may be politicized top-down or from below.

The tangible material exterior of the tangible mobile devices, as well as interior archived contents bear marks of living under conflict situations, separation and navigating difficult journeys, experiences of settlement, but also of non-utilitarian, banal everyday experiences including screenshotted funny face Snapchat conversations among others. In many instances it were not the communicative or messaging functions of smartphones that informants brought up in interviews, but material characteristics were highlighted. The importance for the commonly private, tangible, portable devices was in their existence, one of the few possessions carried on their bodies across borders offered proof of a previous, regular life. The devices function as personal archives of important memories, including photos of people (sometimes deceased), stories, experiences and places visited. As Ali, a Palestinian aged 21 described us in Amsterdam, although he most often uses a new phone, he keeps his old phone with his old number, with old Whats’ App groups and contents with him, it’s: “one of the transitional things that used to be always with me... t’s really old, and really like, it’s not working properly, but that’s the point of it.”

Alongside possible functional dependencies on material affordances of the many functionalities of smartphones, following the attachment theory framework (Parent & Shapka, 2020), for our interviewees in the face of major life challenges, feeling the material device in one’s pocket, offers reassurance to be in the proximity of a stable “secure base” and possible “safe haven” (ibid., p. 180). Losses of these valued artefacts may thus exacerbate ontological anxieties. In our conversations, migrants shared many painful stories about losing their devices during their journeys. In Berlin, Anas, a young man in his early 20s, describes how losing his phone resulted in “disconnection” while being on the move: “My mobile fell in the sea, in the Mediterranean. So I could not connect with my family, only occasionally used others’ phones to text them and tell them I’m ok. Until I got to Italy, they thought I was in Greece. They didn’t know I was walking across Libya and crossing the sea. I hadn’t told them”. Losing his phone meant that Anas disappeared, he was off the radar. Being unreachable caused him and his loved ones stress because he could not share updates about his safety and whereabouts.

Phone loss particularly has been studied to cause stress in relation to losing means of connectivity, however, less is known about the lived fears and “concerns of memory loss” (Özkul & Humphreys, 2015, p. 357). Eminy, from Eritrea, during his interview in Utrecht shared how he had an smartphone in Ethiopia when he began his journey, but during border crossings he was forced to hand it over: “a man with pistols. He found me, and took everything from me and others. I’ve been in many countries, coming to the Netherlands. But that’s why I don’t have pictures of Eritrea, of Ethiopia, of the many other countries”. Eminy highlighted how losing his phone also resulted in losing his archived memories of Eritrea and countries he encountered as part of his itinerary. Many lamented the loss of physical photos and digital archives of one’s loved ones, neighborhood, city, and country. Personal digital archives are materially endangered archives. During our interview in Utrecht with Bruce, a 23-year-old man from Damascus, Syria, he showed us his phone and discussed an important photo from his archive: “This was also a good day. I was chilling with a friend who was visiting from Beirut and I was showing him around. I guess 2014 something like that. The old city of Damascus is really beautiful, very rich history, so every point there was a story and it was so, so I would like to take all my friends who come to visit. Yeah, my long hair, I miss it.”



*Figure 1. Bruce’s battered phone, showing personal picture taken in Old Damascus, Syria, approx. 2014.*

But he also discussed how he felt bad about losing another set of photos he lost, of a photoshoot: “there is the picture that I’ve been missing. I lost it actually, I got it from Syria, it was my favourite and I lost it. It was of a gallery that I had and I was like so handsome. I can’t find it anymore.” Losing one’s archive is traumatic, painful, and experienced as a loss of self. Here we



see the unintended consequence of the increased outsourcing of memories to personal digital archives. Not only are media and memory co-constituting and transforming each other, digital material memory objects “carry an intense material preciousness”, and “loss of these items” can be increasingly “equated to the loss of identity, of personal history inscribed in treasured shoebox contents” (van Dijck, 2007, p. 35). For some, the material preciousness and precarity of personal digital archives has created a strong new urge to capture and document personal “evidence of me” (McKemmish 2005, 13) excessively. For example Obbay, a 20-year-old man interviewed in Amsterdam lost most of his photos after his house in Aleppo was bombed. He meticulously archives his new memory objects: “Now I’m taking a lot of selfies and saving them in many places like my flash memory, my mobile phone, my laptop, so it will stay with me in the future”.

In the public domain, smartphones also materially mediate migration controversies (Walters, 2015). Hamdi, a young Syrian man in Berlin, reminded us of the stigma that the materiality of a smartphone is attached to, when you are a migrant. He mentions the reactions he got when he bought a new iPhone: “You can’t buy this from the benefits you get from the jobcentre, no way, it is not enough, you have to work and save for them. But still, if people see you with a new iPhone and nice clothes, they automatically think you are using government money to spend on leisure items. In truth, I am working 7 days a week, 10 hours most days, and I get to spend my money the way we want. I am paying my taxes!” Hamdi’s experience reflects how the possession of smartphones became the material basis for new forms of geopolitical “symbolic bordering” (Chouliaraki and Georgiou, 2019) perpetuating migrant precarity and insecurity.

## **II. Affective archives: the embodied emotionality of digital archives**

The smartphone is an invaluable, even if risky technology, as discussed above. While experiencing risks and sometimes harm as a result of their use of smartphones, research participants repeatedly said that they cannot imagine life without them. In this section, we focus on the smartphone’s emotional and affective affordances (Twigt, 2018), ingrained in its capacity to create archives of affect, that is, to carry stories of individual and collective life on the move, of uprooting, suffering, resilience, regeneration, while being intimately attached to one’s body. Drawing on migrants’ own words and observations of their digital archives shared with us, and learning from critical and feminist theories of digital connection and affect, we move away from techno-centric, disembodied interpretations of the smartphone and instead record its deep ontological and affective meanings. We draw on Deleuze’s theorization of affect, who argues that: “from one state to another, from one image or idea to another, there are transitions, passages that are experienced, durations through which we pass to a greater or a lesser perfection” (1988, 48). We bridge the conception of affect as an embodied state that is pre-emotional and pre-representational with feminist conceptualisations that recognise affect as emerging within circuits of affective economies. Thus, inspired by Ahmed (2004) and Cvetkovich (2003), we understand smartphones as archives of feelings, full of mediated sensations that “are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception” (ibid., 7).

The embodied and representational dimension of emotion is often recorded in the digital archive, which affectively demarcates the temporality and spatiality of migration. As Appadurai notes (2019), the electronic archive is a valuable space compensating against the “indignity of being minor or contemptible in the new society...and the vulnerability of the migrant narrative” (2019: 5). Against migrant’s socio-cultural invisibility and fixity of their identities in the media, smartphones enable a counter-production of narratives: affective, open-ended and fragile record of migrant lives that expand meanings of digital witnessing as an incomplete process of writing, visualising and sharing her/histories. Literature on digital witnessing (Chouliaraki 2015) has emphasised the importance of the smartphone as a witnessing device that generates visual testimonies of torture and destruction for global audiences. As a unique record, the personal archive also diversifies testimonies of suffering and resistance and becomes a stark reminder of a dominant divide in representations of war: on the one hand, the overrepresentation of individualised emotion in the media, and on the other, the almost full absence of emotional, embodied and individually narrated stories in war archives. The migrant does more than record major historical events. As a witnessing device it constitutes a hybrid archival system that at the same time, records History (with capital ‘H’) - that is, the experience of *a people*; but also histories and herstories (with a small ‘h’, reflecting the contradictory plurality of gendered and racialised storytelling). In our research, we have seen how the pocket archive becomes a tool to safeguard a personal history through reproductions of mnemonic images of a homeland (Løland 2019, 2), but also how this same archive is used to confront history and manage change. We heard stories of the digital archive as a testament of war crimes, of a life lost, but also of an embodied transitional object supporting transition to a new life.

Shevan, a 25-year old young man from Aleppo showed us a photo on his phone and explained: “This is the old market, they call it Suk. It is very, very old in the old city. But this market doesn’t exist anymore...because they destroyed everything. So here is the window, the light comes in. I have it right now on my phone...It is something like a good memory of Aleppo.” This is a moment of a life lost. “I give up, I don’t feel my Syria still exists. I believe that my Syria is gone. Because my house, the people I know there, the streets, the friends, everything gone, everything destroyed. So for me it is torture, when I look at the photos of Syria”. The photos do not only sustain memory; they also demarcate the separation of the past from the present. As the past becomes documented, it can be archived, put aside. “Now I feel [Utrecht] it’s my alternative home. I’m happy in Utrecht and I’m happy in the Netherlands, because my country or my home doesn’t exist anymore. I still have memories, because people I know then, as I said, the street, I still have the key of my house, but there is no house”. Sharing a similar story of loss, Alma, a 19-year-old Palestinian Syrian in Utrecht explains that she cries a lot about war and her lost home. But she regularly uses her phone as a therapeutic tool for recentering life. She uploads photos on Facebook and Instagram: “I put up my dreams. With beautiful pictures”. As Gillespie, Osseiran and Cheesman put it, smartphones became ‘a place of comfort and connection, solace and sociality—a “mobile home”’...to ‘escape to’ (2018: 6).

War, trauma and uprooting as recorded in the digital archive constitute records of collective but also of individual her/histories and trajectories. Many of the personal and deeply affective her/histories documented on migrants’ phones are fully absent from archival and media representations of war and uprooting. Ali, a 28-year-old transgender Syrian person we met in Berlin keeps a record of a life in constant transformation, a difficult emotional journey. He

suffers from depression, a result of imprisonment and torture in Syrian prisons years as member of the opposition, but also a result, as he says, of not being accepted as transgendered person. As he showed us pictures from a long life of change, first himself as Ola, a woman in Syria and then photos of himself when he started taking hormonal treatments, he explained how these photos make him feel: “Pride. Unbelievable pride. I look at them and can’t believe I achieved what I have....I did it”. Ali’s affective archive is as much a record of trauma as it is of transformation. While not as traumatic, the story of Sam (27), another Syrian young man, who we met in Utrecht, reveals the value of the digital archive as a transitional technology: for remembering but also for forgetting. Sam’s memories of Syria are as much about war and uprooting as they are about personal identity. He showed us a photo, explaining: “Pictures I would never think of keeping there, this is a picture of my boyfriend and me, in our second anniversary during Amsterdam Gay Pride. These are pictures I would not keep. In Syria I would always delete them. I love looking at them every now and then. It makes me feel unique”. Ali’s and Sam’s words of a journey of uprooting but also of personal discovery and pride reflect what Kuhn (2010: p. 303) calls “active practice of remembering...a conscious and purposeful staging of memory”. Thus, active witnessing and archiving challenge one-dimensional representations of migrants only recognised within a decontextualized temporality of war.

The personal archive is a record of reflexive negotiations of the past and present, but it is also a record of collective journeys and new lives of resilience post-migration. Using their smartphones to create new memories beyond those of war and uprooting, teachers and migrant children in a multicultural school of Athens, regularly co-produce playful smartphone videos of a joyful life together. Children from different warzones, with the support of their teachers, build intertwined records of togetherness, records of joy and humour to exorcise trauma. In one of the videos, five girls enact a comedic catwalk - an agentive performative femininity they can experiment and laugh with. In another, children and teachers perform everyday life in school - a testimony of resilience rarely recorded in media representations or in archives of uprooting and resettlement. Using the smartphone to create their own memories, not only the ones imposed to them by war, the children become agentive storytellers, who tell their own stories of migration to family and friends but who also speak with a voice of authority to wider audiences, not through mainstream media, as teachers and activists share these stories as everyday registers of solidarity and co-production of a shared past and present, even in contexts of an unknown future.

The pocket archive is not only a record of life-changing experiences and the her/history-maker of the subaltern. It is also an affective record of ordinariness. It is a record that challenges the essentialization of the migrant either as a historical figure constituted through war and suffering, or as the human embodiment of an anomaly. Life as ordinary is something that many migrants are denied, both through the strict requirements set to them by media representations and migration governance that expect them to perform subjectivity either through victimhood or through resilience (Georgiou 2019). Jack, a 16-year-old Syrian young man interviewed in Utrecht, shows how smartphone use is part of identity-making. Sharing a staged image of his backpack, he explained what it represents: his desire to be seen not as a migrant but as a “regular person in the street”, while its staging against a backdrop of leaves reflected his appreciation of “the tranquility of nature”, as much as his desire to “standout” as an individual, who could compose a unique image with his phone’s filters.



Figure 2. One of Jack's favorite images, an edited photo showing his backpack in surreal street scenery, which was liked by over 100 of his friends on Facebook.

Reclaiming a right to tell his own story, a right to be ordinary, Adib, an Afghani teenager in Athens marked the end of his stay at the Eleonas refugee camp and the beginning of his new life in Germany with an audio-visual record of friendship and mischief in the streets of Athens, produced on his phone. In a two-minute photographic collage, Adib recorded a trace of a life, which at the same time is most ordinary and most extraordinary: the mundanity of teenage friendships in Athens, produced as result of war and continuous uprooting, this time to move to Germany. In his video, Adib recorded the most banal acts of walking home, only to reveal that home was a container, located in the middle of a refugee urban camp. The archived and shared record concludes with images of land left behind, filmed through an airplane window. The emotionally communicated message in the mini-film: “the next episode from Germany”. Only the story of the ordinary for many migrants is not always *just* ordinary. Adib lives a life interrupted. Apparently the next episode was never made, and, according to his friends “he isn’t doing very well”, withdrawn from connection, with his social media accounts dormant, he became digitally invisible - perhaps evidence of the obstacles and consequences of Europe’s limited welcome to a young Afghani man.

Images of mundanity that archive everyday life after migration were often shared with us, chosen for their important meanings: images of certain immobility and calm. Images of food were prominent among them. “Instagramable” meal images are not unique to migrants and, within the genre of food smartphone photography, they can also be perceived as a digital record of wellbeing, perhaps also of wealth and excess (Lewis 2018). As Lewis puts it: “food is a particularly generative space through which to understand the evolving but often hidden role of the digital in our everyday lives” (2018, 221). This mundanity of the culinary archive has a particular value in the context of violent uprooting. As a Syrian participant in London told us, her sister in Syria persistently asks for daily photos of her meals. As she explains to us: “she is worried about our wellbeing in London”. Having enormous affective value, this shared record also captures complex digital intimacies of transnational relationships - involved in reverse roles of vulnerability in the case of the two sisters in London and Syria. Like this female participant, [Seena] another young male Syrian participant [Hadi] in London explained how he carefully

curated his food photos to reassure family but not to alienate them. “After a while, we realised we have to be careful about the photos we share. My little nephew saw a pineapple in a photo and asked me: “what is this? I’ve only seen this fruit on television””. While photos of ordinariness support migrants’ effort to achieve ontological insecurity, they also reflect the emotional fragility that archives can generate, both among those producing and using them. Thus, curating these records, especially through multiple social media accounts, is a labourious effort for many who try to avoid collapse of context (Marwick and Boyd 2011) and break of relationships.

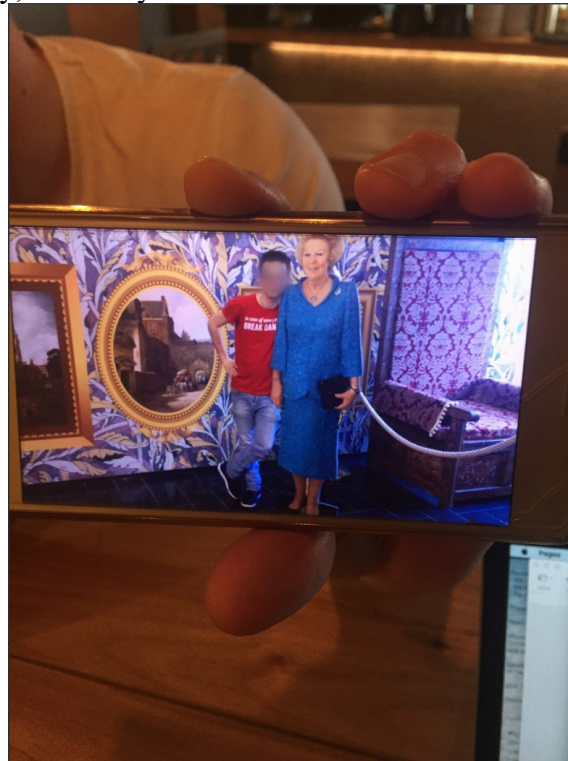
As discussed in this section, the digital pocket archive is not simply a representational record; it is an archive of affect. As an audio-visual record of life on the move, it is co-constituted with migrants’ emotional life: a record of experience that later generates emotional reactions (e.g. a testament of a home that does not exist anymore, as seen in the case of Alma), but also a digital creator of emotions to rebalance alienation (e.g. as evidenced in the fragile archives of Adib).

### **III. Symbolic archives: the politics of digital archives**

Digital archiving as a process of witnessing, recording and “tidying up” past and present experiences, supports the reflexive, even if difficult, process of self-making through and after uprooting, as we saw in the previous session. While archiving is a process of preserving the collective and individual self (Kim 2013), it is also a process of (self-)representation and engagement with selective audiences outside mainstream media. As Kaye et al. put it, an “important goal of archiving, then, is to show to oneself or others who the archiver is” (2006, 5). In the context of war and migration, the visibility of the migrant as an archiver has significant symbolic value and ethico-political implications. Migrant archives destabilise and decentre records of war and migration, “by shifting the power base of social history and taking it away from the traditional and institutional producers of media” (Garde-Hansen et al. 2009: 37). Especially since memory sharing has become “public-personal digitised memory”, constituted through peer to peer and “performative engagements with the past” (Garde-Hansen et al., 2009 *ibid*), the migrant archive has turned into public/semi-public record, destabilising the role of institutional archives and the media as the only authoritative voices that record war and migration. Thus personal digital archives need to be understood in their symbolic value, that is, the political implications of witnessing, producing and sharing representations of war and migration.

The first dimension of the personal archive’s symbolic power is the diversification of both the archiver and the archive. Saying that most migrants are archivers is truism, as her/histories of uprooting and migration are collected and curated on phones and safeguarded on the cloud. The digital archives are plural, reflecting a multiplicity of experiencing migration and *doing refugeeness*. Again and again we heard from our studies’ participants how they sustain different digital profiles that allow them to tell stories of war, uprooting and migration, not only as one personal record but actually as many personal and performative records.

The second dimension of this symbolic power is its performativity, as a tactical act of freedom but also as a risky pathway to surveillance and control. Here personal digital archives with “evidence of me” are translated into collective memory “evidence of us” (McKemmish 2005, 13). Profiles of *performed refugeeness* are expressed differently in these diverse records: collective trauma is emphasised in connections with families and friends; new neoliberal, resilient subjectivities are performed in audio-visual evidence of self-making shared on networks of new friends, employers but also authorities requiring access to evidence of migrants’ “integration”. As we have observed, many migrants strategically move between the different her/histories they produce and the performative records of uprooting and settlement. In some cases, this reflexive engagement with different expectations for “authentic” records either from their ethnic community, or from the new publics they are part of, is dealt with playful and subversive manipulation of meanings of authenticity. Showing us a photo of himself hugging a wax statue of the Dutch Princess Beatrix, Shevan explains: “I have many photos I like. I like this photo, it is funny so I like it. You know who is she? She is the Queen...Some people are funny because they still believe this is real. It is not real you know, this is not real, it is just a photo. I respect her...her husband and she, they are supporting the LGBT in life. And at the same time she looks smart, and classy, and sassy”.



*Figure 3. Shevan posing with statue of Princess Beatrix, taken in The Hague.*

Performing refugeeness also revolves around the common conundrum of survival guilt, which has specific implications for self-archiving and exposure on social networking sites. Whereas some maintain several online profiles and target their circulation of archival materials to strictly managed audiences in their attempts to avoid context collapse, others make radical choices to cut ties, for example with extended digital pre-migration networks. For Bruce, digital care labour revolving around the obligations of connectivity and maintaining a specific persona were too

much: “Before moving here, I was still using my accounts that I had back from Syria, like all the way to Lebanon. All this time I was using the same account and till I moved here, I decided like it’s kind of a heavy weight to have all that social media things for me.... So yeah, I’ve restarted all my accounts”.

The performative archive is not always controlled by the migrant though. Migrants’ symbolic power as archivers of war and migration is subjected to disciplinary processes within migration governance. From subaltern records of war and migration, the archives sometimes become incriminating records in migration governance. As Europe increasingly demands access to migrants’ most intimate communication technology, smartphones become passive and active digital footprints. Authorities increasingly use them as evidence of “authenticity” of forced migration and of willingness to transform: automatically generated content include geo-located data-traces, while active UGC includes stored photos, videos, sent and received messages, contact lists, chat groups and installed apps. Thus the record is not only invaluable for migrants, but also for the state. As Rob Cover notes, “the greater the archive, the greater, also, the production of vulnerability” (2017, 8-9). This is particularly apparent in the recent developments where alongside social media data, phones are investigated as part of asylum procedural screenings. In several European countries, including the Netherlands, Germany, and Norway, migrants are asked to handover their phones and Facebook login data. This way, government officials obtain first-hand access to personal records, including information on personal networks, travel routes, activities, interests and discussions. This digital evidence is often used to supplement other materials such as personal statements. However, researchers have shown this evidence is sometimes also used to reject asylum applications (Brekke & Staver 2019; Bolhuis & Van Wijk 2020). In our interviews, informants discussed relevant rumours they had heard, including how banal objects like region specific cigarette packets in photos can be used to verify travel itineraries. They also discussed how they negotiated social media and phone affordances to mitigate risks, including censoring and deleting material (Leurs, 2017).

It has also been striking to hear how, in the face of official scrutiny, participants mobilised media literacy skills developed through their experiences of civil war and oppression (Bruinenberg et al., 2019) to resist state control. Nineteen-year-old Abdelsaid from Damascus mentioned during our interview in Utrecht: “I had a phone and I was active on Facebook. Then someone who was a bit smarter than me saw my location. I was 15 years old. It was [also] war on Facebook so to say. So I couldn’t do anything. So I had to delete everything in one second”. In a similar vein, Sam stated that he was used to curating his archive to avoid prosecution and putting his family at risk: “Your phone and what you put in it can be linked to your personality. It can be linked to who you are. And me being gay, I was not capable of using my phone as an archive to my own memory. In my country it wasn’t acceptable. So it works as a triangle”. Personal digital archives are thus not only meaningful to owners and other publics as a result of what they contain, but archival voids, erasures, gaps and invisibilities also represent their significance: not least, individuals’ desires to avoid surveillance, control, or exploitation and thus those erasures also merit careful further attention. For many migrants, the personal digital archive raises profound questions about how the right to memory and identity interferes with the right to privacy and the right to be forgotten.

To conclude, the digital pocket archive is rooted within spatio-temporal governmental configurations of migration. As we recorded in our research, in the first phase of forced displacement, it often reflects a sense of despair and fatalism, it is a record mostly tied to death and the bleak prospect of survival. In the second phase of forced mobility it becomes a transitional object, managing separation and prospect of a new life, still torn by high risks of failure. During (re)settlement, the digital archive becomes a vivid reflection of the governmentality of digital testimony, as migrants become increasingly aware that their new life in Europe is always subjected to who, why, and with what effect surveills or appropriates their archives.

## Conclusions

By focussing on personal digital archives as witnessing, self-representational records that decentre notions of war and migration storytelling beyond the media and institutional authorities, we aimed to address one of the blindspots of existing media and migration research. Through technodeterministic approaches, the smartphone has often been elevated to the utilitarian technology of making or breaking life; through Eurocentric approaches, migrants became distinct categories, labels of uncompromising difference, which even when approached sympathetically, have been recognised only as agents who do certain things - either witness history or experience precarity. Our approach aimed to engage with migrants as politicized mobile subjects who author and curate their archives; as subjects who speak to, against, with systems of repression but also who speak to, against, with systems that make them humans - as individuals and members of communities. This analysis learned from and aimed to contribute to research on personal digital archives and more particularly studies of digital archives and witnessing in the context of war and migration (Chouliaraki 2015, 2017; Reading 2011).

We aimed to contribute to this literature by identifying the migrant archive as an autonomous record of migrant life and journeys, a record of technologies, narratives and affects that holds potential to challenge the narrow recognition of migrants in mainstream western journalistic cultures. Through our analysis we also aimed to destabilise conceptualisations of migrant uses of the smartphone for storytelling as essentially authentic and fundamentally different to other forms of mediation. In its totemic materiality, its witnessing capacities and contradictory uses and representations, the smartphone becomes both a mnemonic record and an aspirational device for life after uprooting. As such, it sits, even if uncomfortably, within the complex ecology of mediation of migration. On the one hand, digital pocket archives are constituted within wider technological and discursive economies of mediation, as for example, affordability and media norms of self-representation shape digital pocket archives through phone affordances and self-representational aesthetics. On the other hand, their autonomy directly destabilises understanding of mass media and social media as the two poles determining a binary regime of migrant representations. Digital pocket archives sustain an autonomy, precisely because they are disorganised, messy and anarchic in their compilation of different narratives of personal and collective trauma, resilience, ordinariness. As they do not fit in the neat and refined representational media grammar, digital pocket archives have a powerful ethico-political value: the stories of war, uprooting and resettlement that they record open up possibilities for documenting but also seeing the story and the storyteller beyond narrow imaginaries and



aesthetics of western journalistic cultures.

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