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# **A grounded theory of information exclusion and information inclusion: framing the information experience of people seeking asylum**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** This paper discusses an original theory of information exclusion and information inclusion, which explains how information interactions can be structured in ways that either exclude or include people seeking asylum.

**Methodology:** This theory was developed through an ethnographic study of the information experience of people seeking asylum in the United Kingdom. Fieldwork involved participant observations, participatory research workshops, and semi-structured interviews, analysed using a constructivist grounded theory approach.

**Findings:** People seeking asylum are confronted with two main information environments: the asylum system and the local third sector. Each environment frames contrasting information access, sharing and literacy **practice** modalities: the former produces information deprivation, information sharing agency denial and a **fracturing** information literacy **practice**; the latter facilitates multiple information affordances, information sharing agency promotion, and both local and heritage information literacy **practice promotion**. Our theory of information exclusion and information **inclusion** describes how through these modalities, an information environment can either promote or preclude inclusion.

**Originality:** Previous information studies of migration tend to conceptualise social ex/inclusion as a linear journey. Our theory originally frames this as a non-straightforward and conflicting process, allowing to better understand the experience of people who are not simply either socially excluded or included, but may experience both states depending on context. It also shows that exclusion is not a matter of fact and is not fundamental to asylum systems: it is produced by specific policies and procedures, and can therefore be changed. Thus, this theory provides conceptual tools for researchers to investigate the information experience of individuals moving between conflicting **information practices**, and for civil society actors and policy makers to document exclusionary information practices and design inclusive ones.

**Keywords:** Information practices; information literacy; refugees; migrants; asylum seekers; social inclusion; social exclusion; integration.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper presents an original theory for understanding social inclusion and social exclusion from an information lens, which derives from an ethnographic grounded theory study of the information experience of people seeking asylum in the United Kingdom (UK).

Although definitions are still debated, social inclusion is commonly described as ‘the process of improving the terms of participation in society for people who are disadvantaged’ (United Nations, 2016, p.18), and social exclusion as ‘a state in which individuals are unable to participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life, as well as the process leading to and sustaining such a state’ (Ibid, p.20).

As people who fled their homes because of conflict and persecution often find themselves in situations of exclusion, granting them protection also means for host societies to facilitate their social inclusion (UNHCR, n.d.). Yet, if this endeavour is at the heart of various frameworks and initiatives, it also collides with the intensification of border control, criminalisation and rights restriction that increasingly characterises immigration and asylum policies in Europe (Mixed Migration Centre, 2019). Asylum seekers exemplify this paradoxical situation: contrary to refugees who have been granted protection, they are admitted in the country where they have submitted their claim but not yet protected. In the UK, they must regularly report to an immigration centre, can only access a specific and limited type of housing and financial support, and are generally not allowed to work. The asylum determination process can last for years (Sturge, 2022), during which they settle in and adapt to their new communities, while not knowing how long they will be allowed to stay. Thus, when it comes to people in exile, social inclusion is a contested endeavour that co-exists with exclusionary processes.

To fully understand the experience of people seeking asylum and that of other marginalised groups, it is therefore necessary to take these two processes into account. Yet, although information is an important aspect of social exclusion and inclusion (Caidi & Allard, 2005), existing theories in information science have not yet fully described how both these conflicting processes are produced and their interaction dynamics.

To bridge this gap, we put forward the theory of information exclusion and information inclusion. Stemming from a doctoral ethnographic research project, this theory explains how information interactions can be framed in ways that either prevent or promote people’s agency and belonging within an information environment. This theory provides conceptual

tools for information researchers to analyse the position of individuals in relation to their information environments, and for civil society actors and policy makers to document exclusionary information practices and design inclusive ones.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

To approach social exclusion and social inclusion from an information perspective, scholars have primarily built on the concept of information practices. This concept refers to ‘a set of socially and culturally established ways to identify, seek, use, and share the information available in various sources’ (Savolainen, 2008, p.2). It stems from practice theory (Giddens, 1984; Schatzki, 2002), an approach that considers human actions as structured by rules and norms that form the practice of a social site. Applied to information, practice theory highlights the constructed and situated nature of information activities. This allows framing the issues related to the information experience of (forced) migrants in terms of difference rather than deficiencies: they may not be able to make sense of their new environments because they are not used to the rules that structure information interactions within them. This may prevent them from accessing the information they require to fully participate in society.

Building on this practice approach to information and on empirical studies with refugees, Lloyd (2017) developed the theory of fractured information landscapes. This theory considers that when resettling in a new country, refugees enter information environments (e.g., health, education, employment) that are shaped by explicit and tacit norms that have sedimented overtime to form a shared way of knowing about how to operate in that environment. Depending on their own situation (e.g., having children, having mental health issues), people do not have the same needs, constraints and positions, and may therefore not relate to an information environment and its practice in the same way. This means that their information landscapes are different: people have a unique landscape into an environment that is collectively constructed (Lloyd, 2010). Information landscapes are fractured when there is a dissonance between people’s established ways of knowing and those that structure their new environments. To reconstruct their information landscapes, (forced) migrants engage with information literacy practices that allow them to learn the tacit rules of their new environments. Doing so, they can become socially included.

Building on these concepts, information researchers have approached social exclusion and inclusion in different ways.

In most studies, social exclusion is framed as a lack of information access and social inclusion as more adequate information provision (Caidi and Allard, 2005). Following on this approach, empirical studies have highlighted a variety of information needs and barriers, and ways for host society actors to help people to meet those needs (e.g., Kainat *et al.*, 2021; Khoir *et al.*, 2015; Mansour, 2018; Martzoukou and Burnett, 2018; Nekesa Akullo and Odong, 2017; Oduntan and Ruthven, 2019; Quirke, 2012; Shankar *et al.*, 2016).

A second approach consists in approaching social inclusion as the transitioning process through which individuals go to adapt to their new information environments, and therefore, on their information resilience (Lloyd, 2014). Studies building on this approach investigate people's information literacy practices and strategies to cope with fractured information landscapes. This can include engaging with digital technologies (Diaz Andrade and Doolin, 2016), everyday spaces (Lloyd and Wilkinson, 2016) and heritage practices (Le Louvier and Innocenti, 2021), or mitigating risks by calibrating and repositioning their activities in relation to others (Hicks, 2019). Several studies have highlighted the importance of information grounds in this process (Fisher, 2005), as places where social connections are made, information gathered and information literacy developed (e.g., Bronstein, 2017; Fisher *et al.*, 2004; Oduntan and Ruthven, 2021).

These two approaches tend to consider social exclusion as a series of obstacles (e.g., cultural differences, lack of social networks) that results from the transition from one environment to another. From there, researchers focus on how it is surmounted either through better information provision, when taking the perspective of institutions, or through information resilience, when taking the perspective of individuals. While social inclusion is framed as a process, social exclusion tends to be framed as a post-migration state on which the research does not focus. This approach is useful to draw recommendations on how social inclusion can be fostered. However, it does not allow deconstructing the systems and mechanisms that produce social exclusion. It can thus be seen as adapting people to the needs of a political system that excludes them, rather than adapting the system to the needs of people who are excluded (Labonte, 2004).

Another way to address social ex/inclusion in information science is through the lens of information poverty. This concept describes how people who hold an outsider position within a specific social world develop information behaviours such as secrecy, deception, or seeing oneself as devoid of information sources, which prevent them from meeting their information needs (Chatman, 1996). Initially coming from studies of people in low-income categories,

this concept was extended to categories of people who face information barriers and information overload (Goulding, 2001), or who ‘within a given context, do not have the requisite skills, abilities or material means to obtain efficient access to information, interpret it and apply it appropriately’ (Britz, 2004, p.192). In the context of migration, information poverty has been linked to a lack of adequate social networks (Caidi and Allard, 2005), and to language barriers, irregular legal status, and a sense of in betweenness (Bronstein, 2017). While centering on exclusion, the concept of information poverty stills frames it as a state rather than a process. It has also been pointed at for failing to recognise the individual and intersectional factors that affect migrants’ capacities to meet their information need, leading to umbrella information services that do not consider people’s individual differences (Mabi *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, with the concept of information poverty, the exclusion still lies with the individual.

More recently, studies have intended to reverse this perspective by placing the responsibility of exclusion on the societal structures that foster it. The concept of information inequity thus frames social exclusion as coming from information providers who do not consider the intersectional identities and experiences of information recipients (Mabi *et al.*, 2022). Further highlighting the nature of exclusion as a process, the theory of information marginalisation describes ‘the systematic, interactive socio-technical processes that can push and hold certain groups of people at social “margins”’ (Gibson and Martin, 2019, p.476; see also Bronstein, 2020). Information marginalisation is defined through institutional and contextual processes that negatively impact on one’s information behaviour (e.g, economic and racial inequities, overload, abuse). However, these processes are not defined as information processes. Furthermore, while this concept highlights the structural factors that create exclusion, it does not show how both exclusion and inclusion in fact happen concomitantly.

In this paper, we introduce and use a novel approach that describes the interplay between social exclusion and social inclusion as set information processes that can happen concomitantly: the theory of information exclusion and information inclusion.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The theory of information exclusion and inclusion stems from a doctoral research project (Anonymised reference), which involved a twenty-one-month ethnographic investigation into the information experiences of people seeking asylum in the North East England, UK. We built this theory inductively on the basis of this exploratory study using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006).

## Data collection

Our ethnographic immersion in the field involved four strands of data collection, described in Table 1. The research started with participatory workshops and participant observations. These were later completed with interviews with insiders and key informants. This long-term ethnographic and multi-method approach allowed us to get a more nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences and to triangulate our data.

Method	Participatory workshops	Unobtrusive participant observations	Interviews with insiders	Interviews with key informants
<b>Amount</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•3 workshops</li> <li>•2h each on average</li> </ul>	ca. 6h/week for 18 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•15 interviews</li> <li>•1h21 each on average</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•12 interviews</li> <li>•1h36 each on average</li> </ul>
<b>Aim</b>	Draw initial overview of participants' information environments, needs, sources and barriers	Investigate how people interact with information in various natural settings and uncover both explicit and implicit aspects of their experiences	Integrate the direct voices of people with a first-hand experience of asylum	Get insights from people with a global view of the issues at stake and in-depth knowledge of the local organisations
<b>Activities</b>	Mapping and diagramming	Volunteering and participation in local organisations supporting refugees and asylum seekers through advice, English language practice, music, gardening, and craft activities	In depth semi-structured interviews about their arrival in the region, the asylum process and their information and cultural practices	In depth semi-structured interviews about their work and their views on asylum seekers' information experiences
<b>Participants</b>	4 people who had sought asylum in the region	Various people who had sought asylum in the region and took part in the organisations' activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Over 18</li> <li>•10 men, 5 women</li> <li>•From Bangladesh, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sri Lanka and Syria (+ 1 stateless and 1 undisclosed)</li> <li>•8 had been granted asylum</li> <li>•7 were still within the asylum process</li> </ul>	Staff members and volunteers in local third sector organisations and local authorities supporting asylum seekers and refugees
<b>Data</b>	Diagrams, notes	Anonymised field notes	Audio record, transcript	Audio record, transcript



### ***Ethical considerations***

We addressed the challenges related to doing research with people seeking asylum using a ‘situated ethics’ approach (Nyberg, 2008). This meant constantly reflecting on the ethics of the researcher’s actions and decisions, obtaining ethical approval from the university’s ethics board, establishing ethical procedures around consent, confidentiality and anonymity adapted to the different research settings, and being involved in the community beyond the data collection phase. Details of our situated ethics strategy can be found in (Anonymised Reference).

### ***Data analysis***

Data was analysed iteratively throughout the ethnographic fieldwork, following the four stages of constructivist grounded theory analysis: initial, focused, axial and theoretical coding. Data was not initially coded for social inclusion and social exclusion; these themes emerged through the coding process.

Initial coding was conducted each time a new piece of data was collected (diagram, field note or interview) by assigning a descriptive code name to each meaningful unit of data. This process led to the creation of 1,814 initial codes for the three types of data collected (e.g., ‘not knowing that you sign up for room sharing’, ‘bringing new housemates to the refugee service’). Initial codes were compared with each other and grouped under focused coding categories (e.g., ‘being misinformed’, ‘helping others’), which were iteratively completed or transformed as new data was collected.

Axial coding then led to group these categories under two overarching themes: the asylum system and the third sector. The iterative data collection and analysis confirmed that the former was primarily referred to in negative terms, while the latter was broadly associated with positive experiences.

As the last stage of analysis, theoretical coding focused on making connections between the different codes and categories while incorporating conceptual tools from the literature. The initial and focused codes related to the asylum system and to the local third sector were connected and compared across three categories – information access, information sharing, and information literacy **practices**. **These categories have contrasting modalities, which** form the grounded theory of information exclusion and inclusion presented in this paper. Through this process, we filtered out some of our codes to focus on the main differences between the

asylum system and the third sector. This allowed us to draw a high level understanding of what exclusion and inclusion mean from an information perspective that can be adapted to other contexts.

### **Conceptual tools**

Our theory builds on conceptual tools from practice theory and information practices theory, and more specifically, on the following concepts:

- **Practice:** an array of human actions structured by rules and norms that are specific to a defined context, and which people learn, enact, reproduce and transform as they engage together within that context (Giddens, 1984). In our theory, using a practice lens allows highlighting the dialectic between structure and agency, and framing ex/inclusion as actions that are produce and reproduced, and can therefore be changed.
- **Information practices:** an array of information activities structured by rules and norms that are specific to a defined context, and which people learn, enact, reproduce and transform as they engage together within that context (Savolainen, 2008). In information studies of migration, this concept is often used in sentences such as ‘information practices of immigrants’ or ‘information practices of refugees’ to refer to people’s usual ways to engaged in information activities, which may not correspond to the usual ones in their host society (e.g., Caidi, Allard & Quirke, 2010; Komito & Bates, 2011; Lingel, 2015). In our theory, we take a different approach to information practices that does not focus on those of people seeking asylum, but on those they encounter upon arrival in their new social context. This allows us to conceptualise the structural information processes that produces social exclusion and inclusion.
- **Information literacy practices:** a collective way of knowing about what constitutes legitimate information sources, how information is shaped and enabled, and how to operationalise the appropriate information skills and activities within a specific information environment (Lloyd, 2010). While dominant conceptions of information literacy tend to consider information literacy as a universal set of measurable skills that an individual should acquire, positioning it as a practice allows accounting for its collective and sociocultural dimensions (Hicks & Lloyd, 2016). In our theory, this concepts allow us to frame the (im)possibility to enact one's knowledge about what is a valued and meaningful way of knowing within a specific community of practice.

- **Community of practice:** a ‘group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment’ (Wenger *et al.*, 2002, p.34). In our theory, it refers to the group that forms around the adoption of the specific information practices of certain information environments, such as the asylum system and the third sector.

## FINDINGS

Our ethnographic study showed that people seeking asylum in the UK were confronted with two main information environments, respectively shaped by the asylum system and the local third sector.

The information environment of the asylum system was framed by the UK’s immigration and asylum policies. Participants encountered it in interview, reporting and detention centres, asylum accommodations, and other everyday life spaces. The analysis of this information environment forms the basis of our theory of information exclusion. It is comprised of different information access (1), information sharing (2) and information literacy practice (3) modalities:

- Information deprivation (1.1);
- Information sharing agency denial (2.1);
- Fracturing information practices (3.1).

The information environment of the local third sector was framed by charities and community groups that provided immigration advice and advocacy, financial and material support, English language practice, social, cultural and therapeutic activities, and employability support. The analysis of this information environment forms the basis of our theory of information inclusion. It is comprised of the following information access (1), information sharing (2) and information literacy practice (3) modalities:

- Multiple information affordances (1.2);
- Information sharing agency promotion (2.2);
- Local and heritage information literacy practices promotion (3.3).

Together, the theories of information exclusion and information inclusion describe the contrasting information processes that contribute to either exclude or include individuals within a specific information environment.

Table 2 provides an overview of the theory of information exclusion and information inclusion. The following paragraphs descriptively explain its modalities.

	<b>Information exclusion</b>	<b>Information inclusion</b>
<b>1. Information access</b>	<p><b>1.1. Information deprivation</b> Individuals lack information concerning meaningful events in their life, or are provided with information that is inaccurate, incomplete or inadequate. This results in making these events uncontrollable, unpredictable and incomprehensible, and contributes to breaking the trust towards information providers.</p>	<p><b>1.2. Multiple information affordances</b> Access is provided to various types of information, which cater for functional, practical, social, cultural and emotional needs, in the most adequate forms.</p>
<b>2. Information sharing</b>	<p><b>2.1. Information sharing agency denial</b> Individuals are prevented from controlling the information they want to share. Their voice is devalued and they are forced to share information without consent.</p>	<p><b>2.2. Information sharing agency promotion</b> Individuals choose the content and form of the information they wish to share, and it is valued.</p>
<b>3. Information literacy practices</b>	<p><b>3.1. Fracturing information literacy practices</b> Individuals are unable to make sense of the information literacy practice they encounter or to take part in it as equal members. This prevents them from regaining agency and breaks down their sense of identity.</p>	<p><b>3.2. Local and heritage information literacy practices promotion</b> Individuals are enabled to become autonomous and active members of the information literacy practice they engage with. They rebuild information landscapes where both local and heritage information literacy practices can coexist.</p>

Table 2 - Modalities of the theory of information exclusion and information inclusion

## 1. Information access

Within the asylum system, participants experienced information access in terms of deprivation. In contrast, the local third sector information environment provided multiple information affordances. This difference resulted from the type of information interactions facilitated by the two environments, as well as the content and form of information provision they privileged.

### 1.1. Information deprivation

When referring to the asylum system, participants never talked about individuals, but about anonymous interactions. This led them to feel deprived from complete, trustful and adequate information.

Participants experienced information deprivation from the beginning of the asylum process, as most of them did not know in which city they were being sent to after registering their claim. It continued after they settled in an asylum accommodation, from where they could be moved without prior notice or explanation:

*'They just came the same day in the morning and they said "pack your bag and move, the van is waiting outside". I had only 15 minutes to pack my bag. I didn't have many things though, to leave behind, so I still managed, but I wasn't prepared. I couldn't say bye to my housemates, friends and stuff. [...] I wasn't expecting it, because when I moved from South to North I was given a letter and they told me they were going to pick me up in a week time.'* (Boubakar)

Participants showed inconsistent levels of knowledge about their rights and about the structure and length of asylum procedure. They had spent between three months and seven years within the asylum system, not knowing whether they will eventually receive protection and when they will receive a final decision; Joann was still waiting for the initial decision on his asylum claim five years after his substantive interview.

During this uncertain time, participants also experienced information deprivation in relation to detention, which could happen without prior notice:

*'My worst fear at the moment, it's every time I go to report I feel fear in my heart, oh I might not come back. Sometime before I used to pack my suitcase and carry it with me, for reporting. I had my little bag and I put my important stuff there like pictures, friends' pictures and you know what I am saying, things that are valuable to me, and I take with me just in case they detain me, then I have those things at least. [...] They detained me before twice and all this time I was detained I was never told before.'* (Boubakar)

Their sense of information deprivation worsened when receiving misleading information. This happened to Paulette, who, after being detained, was then taken to the airport four times, but was never actually sent back. It also increased when information was provided in a form that was not adequate for them. For instance, Vivienne was provided a map to find her way to her substantive interview. Yet, she could not read it and did not know the city where the interview took place. Similarly, several participants said that they were not able to understand the asylum accommodation contract they had to sign, leading to tensions when they discovered they had agreed to share a room.

Information deprivation fostered a distrust of authorities, as some participants interpreted these issues as being voluntarily designed. It could also become traumatic when an event was emotionally meaningful, such as a house move, an asylum interview, detention, or forced removal. Amongst the fifteen insiders interviewed, two said they had attempted to take their own life and three others said having thought about it:

*'When I was in the hospital, I told everything to my psychiatrist. I said the cause of my illness is that I think that they are going to deport me, and I think I'm going to die. But what kind of death am I going to have? That's why I don't have peace in my heart. I'm too scared. I'm too scared I don't know my fate.'* (Claudine)

The accumulated lack of complete, trustful and adequate information thus prevented participants from looking to the future and negatively affected their mental health.

## 1.2. Multiple information affordances

In contrast, the local third sector provided access to different types of information and in different ways. Consistent with previous research (see Beretta *et al.*, 2018), our study showed that participants favoured information access through social interactions, which often happened in the local third sector. These organisations often facilitated the emergence of information grounds by offering different types of leisure, language and craft activities. Information grounds allowed participants to access information relevant to their needs and in a form they could understand by facilitating interactions with people who had been through the same process and/or came from the same linguistic or cultural background. Beyond access to practical information, information grounds offered participants the possibility to engage in social activities where they could share casual information. For instance, Claudine explained that her local third sector organisation allowed her to ‘unwind’, and Vivienne stated:

*‘Each time I come here, it’s like a family. I meet people I like. We chat, we laugh, we meet, we prepare, we do everything.’*

By facilitating information grounds, the third sector thus allowed participants to access both the practical and emotional information they needed.

As physical spaces, third sector organisations could also experiment with forms of information provision (e.g., visual, digital, etc) that catered for different needs. For instance, charities employees explained that hanging information about mental health support on their wall was beneficial for people who did not want to disclose their distress. Similarly, leaving leaflets about support for LGBTQ+ people in the toilets allowed people to consult them discreetly. By providing multiple information affordances, the local third sector adapted to the participants’ various individual needs.

Thus, the local third sector was generally experienced as an environment where participants could access information that helped them to rebuild their lives. In contrast, the information deprivation they experienced within the asylum system led participants to experience the asylum system as a dehumanising process.

## 2. Information sharing

The second divergence observed between the **information** practices shaped by the asylum system and the third sector concerned information sharing agency. The asylum system framed an information practice where people seeking asylum were not free to decide on the

information they wanted to share, and where this information was often dismissed, taunted, not believed or used against them. In contrast, the information practice of the local third sector was generally seen as a space where participants' personal stories, knowledge and expertise were valued.

### **2.1.** *Information sharing agency denial*

During the asylum determination process, participants were often requested to provide evidence that they could not obtain. For instance, Tarek was requested to share pictures of his wedding that had disappeared during the war, and Claudine was asked for a birth certificate that she had no time to request when having to flee her country in a hurry and no way to get afterwards. For Nimesha, who had to provide DNA evidence to prove her links to her husband and children, obtaining the information requested was a long and onerous process. The asymmetry between the form of information that participants were able to share and the form of information that the Home Office considered as valid is indicative of the UK's adversarial approach to asylum. It shows that decision-makers seek to prove that claims are unfounded (Schuster, 2020) and that the burden of proof is placed on the applicants. Yet, this approach is contradictory to the European Court of Human Rights's advice to shift the burden of proof to the State to ensure the effectiveness of the right to asylum (Council of Europe, 2016).

Within the asylum system, participants often felt that they could not handle their issues by themselves or be heard without the help of an intermediary, be it a solicitor, an advocacy group, or a member of parliament. Participants also felt frustrated by not being allowed to take English classes during their first six months as asylum seekers, as it prevented them from quickly gaining the skills to share information with others in English. This would have reduced their needs to rely on interpreters, with whom some interviewees had bad experiences.

Participants also indicated being forced to share information they did not want to. This led to discomfort and a lack of privacy when sharing a room forced them to disclose personal information to their roommates. It produced a sense of being policed, when the Home Office monitored the expenses made with their asylum card and cut their support if they made purchases out of their dispersal area (The Independent, 2019; Pogrund, 2019; Right to Remain, 2019). It could also lead to a feeling of humiliation when, before receiving their

weekly money support on a card, they had to withdraw it from the Post Office and disclose their legal status publicly:

*'You see the £35 you have to get them from the Post Office. It's not like they give you a card to withdraw money, no, you have to go to the Post Office, so you have to queue, and so you queue and you present yourself. The lad who receives you, or the lass who receives you, she looks at you with disdain because she assumes that you are eating on taxpayers' money.'* (Hakuna)

Within the asylum system, participants therefore experienced information sharing as being characterised by a lack of freedom and agency, as well as by a fear that any shared information could be used against them. This had an impact on the trust they had in the system, in other people, and in themselves.

## 2.2. Information sharing agency promotion

On the opposite, the local third sector information environment was seen as shaping a space where participants' personal stories, knowledge and expertise could be valued.

Third sector organisations intended to listen to participants and answer their questions:

*[The city] has many services and also with the services the people who work in the services are also in general they help you know, they are helpful. They help if you ask any information, they can give you information if you need any support they can support you.* (Jemal)

They also organised activities and spaces that answered their requests, be it a food hygiene training access to computers, or a spot to grow the seeds they wanted:

*They gave us some space each, they ask you 'what do you want to grow?'. They give you seeds and you sow them. [...] They give me space in the greenhouse because I tried to plant my vegetables from Congo outside, by they don't grow.'* (Claudine)

By providing space for different kind of activities, such as music, gardening, cooking, knitting and other crafts, some organisations also provided different opportunities for people to teach others and share their knowledge in a way they were comfortable with. For instance, Niusha, who could not speak good English, was still able to teach a group how to knit, just by using body language and basic words like 'up' and 'down'. By facilitating this type of interactions, the third sector valued the participants' expertise and allowed them to express themselves despite the various barriers they faced.

Local third sector organisations often offered non-coercive settings, such as drop-ins that participants could join without having to share personal information or to commit in the long-term. Within these drop-ins, participants could generally engage in the activities they wanted, which allowed them to preserve their agency by choosing when and how they wanted to



share information with the group, while still being part of it. A local community library also allowed people to borrow books without having to show a proof of address or identity, which volunteers described as important to allow participants to have more control over the information they shared and to avoid feeling judged, discriminated or policed.

Findings related to the local third sector environment thus show that contrary to the asylum system, it generally facilitated two-way information flows through which participants could regain a sense of value and agency.

### **3. Information literacy practices**

By framing different ways to access and share information, the asylum system and the third sector also involved different information literacy practices. Our study showed that the asylum system contributed to maintaining the fracture in the participants' information landscapes, by preventing them from engaging with its information literacy practice. In contrast, the local third sector contributed to allowing the participants to reconstruct information landscapes where they could enact both the local way of knowing and meaningful knowledges inherited from their past.

#### **3.1. Fracturing information literacy practices**

The asylum system did not help participants to **develop the information literacy needed to make sense of it**. Yet, helping **people** to understand how the **asylum** system works could arguably make it more efficient. Although it involved regular activities, the asylum system was generally marked by uncertainty and unpredictability: participants could go reporting every week but did not know whether they could be arrested. Information provision and sharing also appeared to be patchy and uneven across participants. This made it difficult for them to understand how the system worked and why it worked that way. Thus, developing an understanding of the asylum system meant giving up on expectations:

*'It's always like that with the Home Office, like there is no set rules for everybody. It's like it's only, you only know these things when you go through it, when you experience it. Because if you don't experience it, you don't understand there is no set rules for everyone, it's every case they deal it how they want it.'* (Boubakar)

While this quote shows a degree of learning acquisition about how the asylum system works, this knowledge did not make the participants literate within the information environment, as it did not allow them to become independent agents within it.

The asylum system did not provide participants with space to enact their own established ways of knowing either. Within that environment, participants mentioned primarily receiving

negative information about themselves, and information that did not correspond to their own sense of identity. This was due to the asylum seeker label and the connotations it entailed in the UK, the tight restrictions they faced, and the obligation to go to places where they were in a clear position of subordination, such as reporting centres:

*'I remember one day because I was signing at the immigration, so if you go to sign you have to go at the time they indicated you, you have to respect the time. So one day because it was snowing I arrived maybe ten minutes or fifteen minutes early, and the man told me to wait outside. [...] Even if it's raining you have to wait outside. Even the old men, the children. [...] They don't care. My dear, I went outside. I cried.'* (Vivienne)

### 3.2. Local and heritage information literacy **practices promotion**

In contrast, third sector organisations generally enabled participants to recognise, learn and enact the rules that shaped their **information literacy** practice as individual organisations and as a network. Each organisation had its shared repertoire of information activities, which evolved in function of the staff, volunteers and participants who made the **community of practice**, as well as the financial situation, space and projects of the organisation. Participants could choose to learn this shared repertoire by talking, observing and engaging in activities with others. Doing so, they enacted the information literacy practice of the organisation. Through this process, they also learned to identify other local organisations where they could find help and meet people, progressively developing an information literacy of the third sector information environment as a whole. For a participant like Vivienne, enacting this information literacy **practice** meant running from one organisation to the other to save the money she needed to provide for her children and to organise her social life, introducing newcomers to these organisations, and helping them to navigate the rules of the third sector environment. By facilitating engagement with its information literacy practice, the third sector enabled participants to become independent and competent agents. Thus, some participants became active members and volunteers of these organisations, or even created their own organisations, as Vivienne did. Doing so, they could contribute to reshaping the third sector information environment. Others had a more limited engagement while still being part of the community.

The local third sector environment also allowed participants to enact information literacies that they mastered and found meaningful. By facilitating different heritage activities (e.g., cooking, singing, celebrating a festive event, engaging in a spiritual practice, etc), these organisations allowed participants to maintain a connection to meaningful aspects of their familial and cultural history and to communicate with others in a way they mastered:

‘An artist came to record songs from different countries and in various languages. At first, they struggled to find participants, for singing a song in front of a stranger and a recorder may be quite intimidating. It is only after lunch, when most people had left the room and only a handful of us remained sat around a table that the magic happened. A person who is very extrovert, offered to perform their song for everybody. A song that was dear to them and that they shared with passion and emotion. This chant liberated everybody. A person, who only arrived in the UK two months ago, decided to take the next turn and to sing a song for us. This initiative surprised me. They were usually very shy, probably because they were unable to communicate in English. Yet, while singing, they suddenly looked like themselves, like they inhabited their body fully. They were able to express themselves in their own language, in their own way. They could communicate with everybody without constraints, without shame.’ (Field note)

As described in Le Louvier and Innocenti (2021), such heritage practices enable individuals to adapt to their new environment through the prism of familiar ways of knowing and doing, and to create meaningful links with other people. Thus, they could allow participants to reconstruct information landscapes where both past and present **information literacy practices** could coexist.

While being able to engage in heritage practices within the third sector allowed participants to connect to meaningful ways of knowing that brought about a sense of identity, they talked about the asylum system as an environment where they had no sense of meaning or identity. Participants perceived the information literacy **practice** of the asylum system as different as well as rigid: it fractured rather than adapted to their ways of knowing and did not help them to rebuild their information landscapes by engaging in its information literacy practice. Thus, the fracture did not merely result from an initial dissonance between culturally contrasting information **literacy practices**, but was increased by the exclusion produced by the asylum system information environment.

## **DISCUSSION**

### ***The theory of information exclusion and information inclusion***

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of our theory of information exclusion and inclusion. Building on Lloyd (2010), we consider that by engaging with each other within a same information environment, people form a community of practice that shapes a specific way to relate to information. As new individuals enter the information environment, they engage with these information practices and learn to make sense of them until developing the information literacy that allows them to become full members of the community of practice. As full members, they can both reproduce and reshape the information practices of the community, thus developing the agency and sense of belonging needed to be included within it.

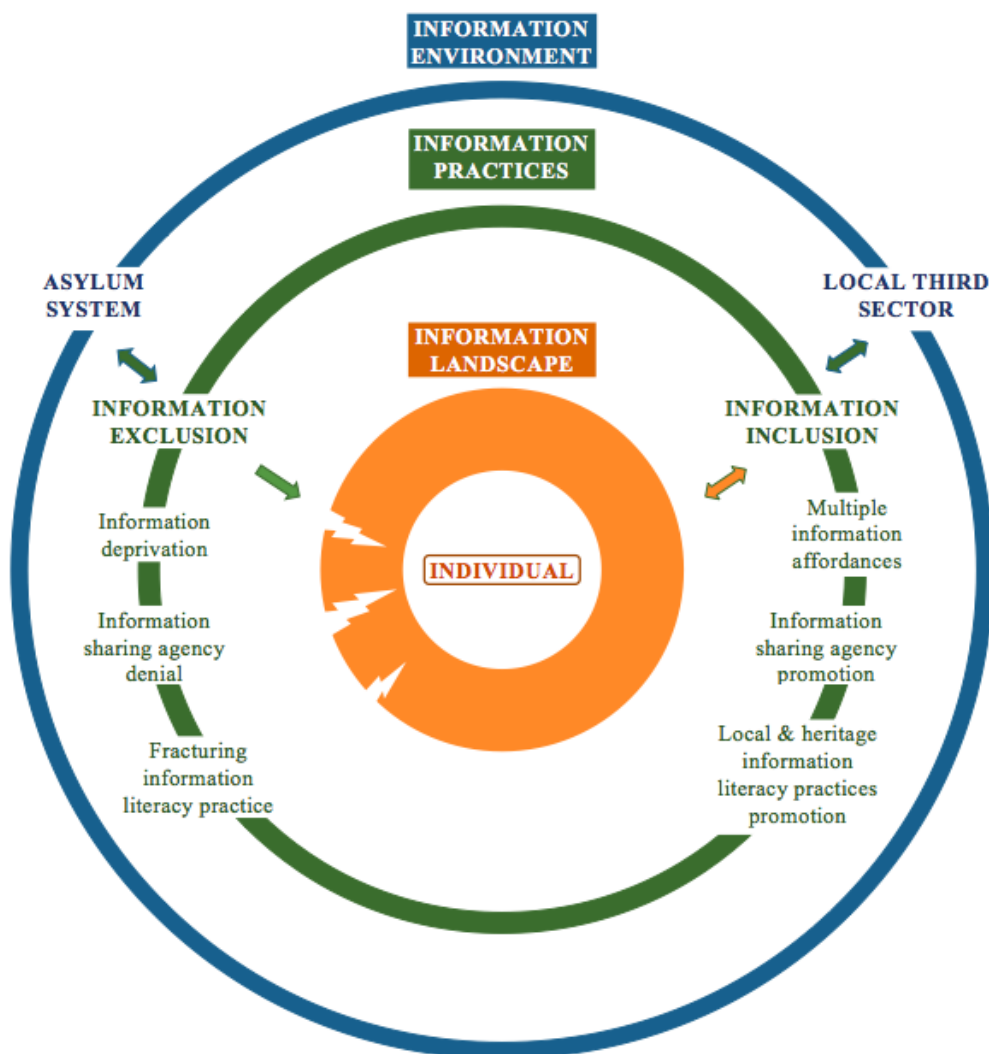


Figure 1 – Visual representation of the theory of information exclusion and inclusion

Our analysis showed that as they entered the information environment of the local third sector, participants encountered multiple information affordances, information sharing agency promotion, as well as the facilitation of both local and heritage information literacy

**practices**. This allowed them to learn and appropriate the ways of knowing specific to the local third sector's community of practice. Once they developed enough information literacy of the practice, they could both reproduce it and contribute to it, by taking responsibilities, creating their own group, enacting their heritage, etc. We define this set of **information** practices as information inclusion, as it actively contributes to enable individuals to engage in an information environment as full members of its community of practice.

In contrast, our analysis showed that when entering the information environment of the asylum system, participants were confronted to information deprivation, information sharing agency denial, and a fractured information literacy **practice**. These information practices led participants to feel deprived from their agency, and they did not allow them to contribute to its structure. Participants were forced to engage with the **community of** practice when submitting their claim, but were simultaneously maintained at its periphery. Due to the experienced absence of logic and predictability described above, participants were not able to regain the control and agency that would have allowed them to become full members of this community of practice. Thus, we define this **set of information** practices as information exclusion: the process of preventing individuals from engaging in an information environment as equal members of its **community of** practice. While this study cannot demonstrate that the macro actors of the **community of** practice **of the asylum system** purposefully decided to foster information exclusion, it demonstrates that those for whom the system is designed are not involved in the shaping of its **information** practices, leading them to experience information exclusion.

Information exclusion and information inclusion therefore describe the processes of excluding or including individuals as part of the community of practice of an information environment.

### ***Interconnections of micro and macro communities of practice***

While our theory emerged from an analysis of information environments at the micro level, the information inclusion and exclusion that participants experienced within these environments also had repercussions on their experience of the UK society as a macro level community of practice. **This was particularly visible in the numerous testimonies of mental health issues and suicidal thoughts we received, which interviewees linked to the information deprivation they experienced within the asylum process.** By fostering information exclusion, the asylum system broadened the fracture that forced displacement had already created in the

participants' information landscape. It also jeopardised their sense of belonging, agency and identity.

In contrast, the information inclusion fostered by the third sector enabled participants to reconstruct their general information landscapes by helping them to build their social capital and to negotiate the subtleties of the local **information literacy practice**. By becoming familiar with the city, its landscape, services, opportunities, people and ways of knowing, participants could develop a sense of belonging that anchored them in the local society. The local third sector also allowed them to maintain their established ways of knowing by providing them with different opportunities to enact their heritage practices. This gave them a sense of dignity and continuity that enhanced their wellbeing.

### ***Exclusion and inclusion as concomitant processes***

Our research showed that not everyone seeking asylum engaged with the local third sector to the same extent. Thus, while some participants clearly benefited from taking part in these organisations, this was not fully the case for everyone. Being literate within the third sectors' **community of** practice meant knowing how to use its resources effectively, but it could also be seen as internalising the social and spatial place that society allocated to people seeking asylum (e.g., charities, food banks, public spaces like shopping centres).

Moreover, some participants had developed a high literacy of the third sector information environment while having been refused asylum, making them very included within some organisations but excluded from key domains of society. The local third sector allowed the participants to cope with the asylum system, while the asylum environment constrained the possibilities of the third sector. Confronted to these two **communities of** practice, participants could progressively reconstruct their information landscapes, but that did not always allow them to rebuild their lives completely.

This shows that information environments do not exist in isolation and that the **information** practices they foster affect people across the different parts of their life sometimes in non-straightforward and conflicting ways.

### ***Exclusion and inclusion as information processes***

**As we have seen in our discussion of the literature, previous information studies tend to conceptualise social exclusion as an initial state that can be overcome through better information provision and information resilience (e.g., Khoir *et al.*, 2015; Lloyd, 2014; Lloyd & Wilkinson, 2016; Mansour, 2018; Martzoukou and Burnett, 2018; Oduntan and Ruthven,**

2019; Quirke, 2012; Shankar *et al.*, 2016). Thus, they explain how social inclusion can be fostered, but they do not show the societal structures that create social exclusion. Yet, to be operated, these concepts require a critical examination of the premises that underpin them (Labonte, 2004).

When they address these structures, as is the case of the concept of information marginalisation (Gibson and Martin, 2019; Bronstein, 2020), the factors of social exclusion mentioned are not described in terms of information only. In contrast, our theory of information exclusion and information inclusion describes how both social exclusion and social inclusion are produced through specific information processes.

This shift was made possible by taking a collective rather than individual approach to information practices. While most information studies focus on the evolution of individuals' own information practices as they adapt to new environments (e.g., Caidi, Allard & Quirke, 2010; Komito & Bates, 2011; Lingel, 2015), we focus on the external practices that they face within these new environments. This approach allows us to conceptualise the position of individuals within larger environments, and to show that these environments foster information practices that affect individuals in different ways.

By describing the effects of specific information practices on individuals, our theory allows highlighting the power dynamics at stake when people in exile enter new information environments. When the theory of fractured information landscapes (Lloyd, 2017) describes individuals' journey as they transition from fractured to rebuilt information landscapes, our theory considers the contradictory forces in which people are enmeshed, and describes the specific information practices that lead to both inclusion and exclusion. This allows for a deeper analysis of information environments that takes into account the hierarchies that constrain or enable the agency of their members.

When previous literature presents social exclusion as an initial state, without questioning what produces it, our theory shows that exclusion is not a matter of fact and is not fundamental to asylum systems, which initially aimed at structuring protection. It is rather a practice that is produced by specific policies and procedures, and that can therefore be changed.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have described how people seeking asylum in the UK are confronted with two main information environments - the asylum system and the local third sector. The

analysis of our ethnographic data showed that these information environments are generally characterised by contrasting ways to shape information access, information sharing, and information literacy practices. We discussed how people seeking asylum simultaneously experience conflicting information practices of information inclusion and information exclusion, and showed how these experiences either helped them to either develop agency and belonging within their new communities, or contributed to maintaining them at the margins.

This theory contributes to the literature discussing the concepts of social exclusion and social inclusion from an information perspective by describing how they are produced through specific information processes. More specifically, it provides a tool to analyse the structures that produce exclusion when other theories primarily focus on inclusion. This can provide a useful to investigate other situations of exclusion, such as that of undocumented persons.

As this theory is grounded on the analysis of a specific local context, it may not be completely generalisable. Further research will allow assessing its transferability to other contexts and refining its modalities.

Our theory has implications for civil society actors, policy makers and funders working to provide true protection to people in exile. Information exclusion provides a guideline to recognise and document exclusionary practices, and to know which ones to avoid when designing an information system. Information inclusion provides a best practices framework for shaping information practices that foster inclusion broadly. Indeed, it does not only focus on the provision of practical needs, but also highlights the importance of information grounds and of other organisations that promote heritage practices. Thus, it takes into account the different dimensions of human life, from practical needs to emotional and cultural ones.

This theory can therefore provide useful guidelines for first-line practitioners who aim to improve the living conditions and information access of people in exile by helping them to inform their advocacy work and to design innovative information strategies, tools and services.

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