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Social Media and Forced Migration: The Emergence of a Hybrid Community

Short Paper

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Abstract

Given an emerging interest in the role of technology in social (in)justice and forced migration, we present preliminary findings from our three-phase study with Syrian refugees, whose aim has been to unpack the role played by social media in migrants' journeys from their country of departure to their country of destination. Drawing on a range of complementary datasets, we discover that social media play different roles at different stages of refugees' journeys (pre-departure, while on the move, and post-arrival), ultimately giving rise to a unique configuration which we term a "hybrid community". These communities are hybrid because their members interact online in Stages 1 and 2, and then both online and face-to-face in Stage 3. With Phase 3 of our study, we hope to explore what these hybrid communities look like, by conducting reflective interviews with refugees who are settled and may be able to offer new insights that could complement our existing dataset.

Keywords: Forced migration, social media, online communities, hybrid communities

Introduction

Following an emerging interest in the topic of "societal challenges" (Majchrzak et al. 2016) within the field of Information Systems (IS), we have recently witnessed a turn towards the more openly political theme of social justice, with conference panels (Azer et al. 2020) and Special Issue calls (Aanestad et al. 2021) explicitly centered on the topic. Heeks (2002) argues that digital technologies are implicated in the production of unintended and unjust outcomes (Heeks 2002). In this paper, we focus on the relationship between digital technologies with forced migration (AbuJarour et al. 2016, 2017, 2019; Madon and Schoemaker 2021). We see forced migration as a pertinent empirical context to explore the role of technology within a vulnerable population. An interest in social justice inspires contributions that directly engage the condition of forced migrants, covering diverse phases of migration from displacement to recognition of legal status (e.g., asylum seeker or refugee) in host countries. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), the IS literature recognizes, participate in the migrants' journey across such diverse phases.

Social media play an important part in refugee journeys and yet there are no studies that examine how social media might be influencing refugees' journeys. On the one hand, such a role is widely investigated in

the literature on forced migration: engagement with social media fulfils multiple needs for migrants, while at the same time generating risks of undue surveillance and attacks (Newell et al. 2016). On the other, the IS field still needs to explore social media as an active part of the migrants' journey, delving into the experiences social media generate in the conditions of extreme vulnerability that the journey leads to. Against this backdrop, in this paper, we are interested in how social media might influence refugees' journeys. Our driving research question is: How do refugees use social media and how does this influence their journeys from country of origin to country of destination?

To achieve our objective, we designed a three-phase study with Syrian refugees "on the move" who, at the time of Phase 1, were sheltered in Athens, Greece and were waiting on their asylum application outcome. In Phase 2, we gathered social media data from a Facebook group that Phase 1 participants used themselves and signposted us to, in an effort to overcome some of the limitations we encountered during our Phase 1 interviews, and to hear their own "voice" which we could only achieve by reading what they post on their own social media platforms. Our findings from Phases 1 and 2 suggest social media play different roles at different stages of refugees' journeys (pre-departure, while on the move, and post-arrival), ultimately giving rise to a unique configuration which we term a "hybrid community". These communities are hybrid because their members interact online pre-departure (Stage 1) and while on the move (Stage 2), and then both online and face-to-face post-arrival (Stage 3). We are currently designing Phase 3 of our study, whereby we will aim to explore more explicitly the emergent concept of hybrid communities, building on our earlier findings. We also add to the literature on online communities by eliciting hybrid communities as a unique configuration with its own unique characteristics.

In what follows, we review emerging literature on technology and forced migration, identifying a knowledge gap as to how social media influence refugees' journeys from point of departure to point of destination. We then outline our methodological journey involving Phases 1 and 2 which have been completed, and a discussion on how Phase 3 will complement our existing dataset. We then present preliminary findings (Phases 1 and 2) and close the paper with our envisaged contributions and next steps.

Forced Migration and Social Media

Literature reviews centered on interdisciplinary research on IS and forced migration (cf. Alencar 2020) identify multiple themes of interest across fields. Conversely, Masiero and von Deden (2022) note the striking underrepresentation of the topic in IS journals: their review of the Association for Information Systems (AIS) Senior Scholars' Basket of journals, augmented with two more IS outlets, finds only 13 papers with an explicit focus on ICTs and forced migration. These papers are also found to be grouped by three common threads: a sociotechnical approach to ICTs and forced migration; a focus on resettled refugees (rather than migrants in transition); and an overarching theme of social inclusion achieved through ICTs (Masiero and von Deden 2022). With few exceptions (Gomez 2016; Gomez and Vannini 2017; Madon and Schoemaker 2021), research in the IS field takes an optimistic position on the role of ICTs in forced migration, viewed as an overly functional route to the inclusion of the migrant (cf. Diaz Andrade and Doolin 2016, 2018; Schreieck et al. 2017; Brown et al. 2021).

The situation changes radically when moving from IS to interdisciplinary literature (Alencar 2020). Outside the IS field, the social inclusion discourse only contributes to a minimal part of the arguments made: two more discourses, identified by Masiero and von Deden (2022) as centered, respectively, on surveillance and information seeking, question the extent to which ICTs act as a route for inclusion of forced migrants in host societies. The surveillance discourse centers on the forms of policing that ICTs enable, with outcomes that are often detrimental, violent, and even deadly for migrants: by way of example, Newell et al. (2016) study the use of mobiles by migrants at the Mexico-USA border, highlighting the risk of police violence that mobiles expose migrants to. Pelizza (2020) similarly highlights how the interoperability of the Eurodac database for asylum seekers with national police authorities in the EU constructs the asylum seeker as a potential agent of crime.

The information-seeking discourse positions, instead, the migrant as an agent that proactively uses ICTs to communicate, research and find useful information, often on processes (e.g., employment; obtaining a visa) that are key to life in the host country. This discourse also encompasses the position of migrants who connect to families and acquaintances in the home country, with experiences that vary from strengthening of connection (Thomas and Lim 2010) to the emergence of fragilities in them (Madianou and Miller 2011).

Schreieck et al. (2017) make an open link to IS literature in their study of information seeking: studying migrants resettled in Germany, they note how a digital platform can serve as information means to enable key features of life in the host country (cf. Harney 2013). Presented as an information seeker, the migrant transitions from the passive role of displaced individual to that of an active shaper of their own condition.

Following the taxonomy proposed by Masiero and von Deden (2022), it is within the information-seeking discourse that research on the use of social media by forced migrants is usually placed. Important in other literatures (Borkert et al., 2018), the role of social media as used by migrants through the journey to host countries is currently not a focus of IS research, which is curious given the attention that the IS field at large pays to the broader societal consequences of social media usage (AbuJarour et al. 2021). The literature on media and communications offers an important starting point on the topic: as highlighted in Borkert et al. (2018), migrants have complex information needs that social media can fulfil. Social media are hence configured as a route to construction of life in the host country through vital information, provided by host country authorities but also, and increasingly, from fellow migrants who have gone through the same settling process (Schreieck et al 2017).

While depicted as useful and empowering, the use of social media can expose migrants to risks: not only those of profiling and violence by police authorities, but also commercial exploitation of data by private companies and the consequent usability of data from unwanted agents (Broeders 2007; Taylor and Broeders 2015; Mann 2018). More risks are identified by the surveillance discourse, where mobile-based information seeking by migrants is seen in the light of the exposure of the person to police authorities within and across countries (Newell et al. 2016; Milan et al. 2021). What we seek to discover is the largely underexplored role played by social media across the different stages of migrants' journeys.

Research Design

To achieve our objective, we conducted a qualitative study that would allow us to discover new insights. We took the case of Syrian refugees following the 2015 European migrant crisis, (aka Syrian refugee crisis; Wikipedia, 2022) because Syrian refugees constituted a population that was actively on the move when we began the study. We designed a three-phase research study (2018–present) to gain a multi-perspective understanding of refugees' social media use and its impact on their journeys in line with the interpretivist paradigm (Symon et al., 2018).

With Phase 1, we aimed to gain familiarity with the refugee context and an initial understanding of both their journeys in real time (i.e., as they happened) and their use of technology during their journeys. Phase 1 was therefore largely exploratory in nature. To fulfil our aim, we first made contact with a government official in Greece with expertise in the refugee crisis in question (whose details cannot be revealed due to confidentiality) and conducted a one-hour interview with them in order to gain the governmental perspective on issues around refugees, including technology use. We then visited two research sites in, or close to, Athens, Greece—a shelter managed by a known Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) operating in Greece (whose details have also been obscured for confidentiality), and a state-managed camp funded by the EU. At the two sites, we collected three types of data: (a) observations of the sites to enable understanding of the context, resulting in manual notes and photographic material (which did not involve human participants as this was not included in our ethics approval); (b) six interviews with staff at the two sites (one senior field officer, one field officer, one social worker and two interpreters at the shelter, and the general manager at the camp); and (c) ten interviews with families and single adults who were waiting for the processing of their asylum applications. Four out of ten interviews were conducted in English as these participants were fluent in English, and the remaining six were conducted with the help of an interpreter between Arabic (refugees) and Greek (lead author) who was provided the aforementioned NGO. Two interpreters were involved in total.

Given the sensitive character of the interviews and the participants' vulnerability, we took active steps to create a friendly, non-judgmental, and culturally appropriate context for the interviews to take place in quiet areas of the shelter and the camp. Each interview began by the researcher (through the interpreter when they were present) explaining the purposes of this research and its anonymous and confidential character and asking participants to sign the relevant consent form. Our interviews were semi-structured in nature, and we were open to being guided by the refugees themselves to a high degree, given the exploratory character of this phase. We first asked them to tell us their story. In most cases, this was an

emotional process and our role converted from that of the researcher into that of someone who could simply hear their painful stories. During the interviews, we asked them about the role of technology in general in their journeys. That was when social media (Facebook in particular) became the focus of nearly all interviews, leading us to understand that social media played multiple roles, presented in more detail later. Given the extensive discussion on social media and their role, social media became the central focus of our study.

Despite the value of Phase 1 findings, we encountered several problems with Phase 1 interviews: (a) many respondents provided very short answers which lacked depth (understandably, they had more important things to worry about and could not fully engage with the interview process); (b) the interpreter oftentimes simplified or changed our questions and this had an impact on the quality of the interviews; and (c) the conditions were not ideal; the refugees were truly on the move and although we tried to create a suitable context for the interviews to take place, there was still noise and multiple interruptions during each interview.

Consequently, to overcome the above limitations, we designed Phase 2 that drew on what we thought would be the best research site: the Facebook group that Phase 1 suggested the interacted the most. Therefore, Phase 2 took place a year after Phase 1, drawing on social media content generated by refugees. Phase 2 was therefore designed with the purpose of capturing the refugees' "voice" without the mediation of interviewers. To achieve this, we obtained an additional ethical approval by one of our institutions that allowed us to access public data posted by participants in a specific Facebook group, "كراجات المشنطين اللجوء" "الهجرة" (translation: "garages of the sufferers"), which had been created in 2015 and in December 2019 had more than 125,000 members. We collected more than 1,200 posts (generated by more than 700 random members) from January until July 2019. The data were collected at once using Facebook's Application Program Interface (API). In line with our ethical approval for this phase, we collected data such as the username of the contributor, the content of the post, the number of pictures, and the date of the post. Despite the public nature of the posts, sensitive data were anonymized and encrypted before being stored or processed. The first step in data analysis was to code posts as per their purpose. The content of the posts ranged from information seeking and advice provision, to announcements by the group Administrator and general comments on political news. Data from both phases were analyzed using open coding and then by grouping open codes within broader categories following a grounded theory approach (Strauss et al. 1990). Consequently, the data were categorized as per the time period in refugees' journey, resulting in the three stages we identify and analyze in the next section. The concept of a "hybrid community" emerged during our analysis when we realized how our participants felt. This was evident by less visible aspects of our data, such as the way they addressed one another within the social media platforms, as well as the trust that we found was developed over time.

Three Stages of Social Media Use in the Refugee Context

In the analysis of our data from Phases 1 and 2, we elicited three stages of social media use by refugees: pre-departure, while on the move, and post-arrival in the country of destination, highlighting the multifaceted role of social media at the different stages of refugees' journeys, ranging from being a source of exploratory information for those still in their country of origin; to a barrier breaker for refugees who are on the move; and a community builder, helping online refugee communities in transitioning into real-life communities post-arrival in the country of destination. These three roles are not mutually exclusive; each role is triggered when the need for it arises and may continue for longer. In what follows, we present the analysis of each stage and provide illustrations from our data.

Stage 1: Pre-departure

Early on in refugees' journeys, social media represented a rich *source of information* for those who utilized social media to gather information from other refugees who were further on in their journey. We use the term "prospective refugees" to illustrate refugees' intention to travel. In the pre-journey stage, social media provided refugees with information concerning around the planning of their journeys, including legal, financial, and/or safety and situational measures related to their prospective journey. This type of information provided refugees with trust and confidence in their planned decisions. By being active social media users, prospective refugees felt part of a trusted online community that was seen as the source of accurate and secure information and in which enquiries could be handled securely and confidentially:

“I want a smuggler to Europe for a family of 2 people, and my two young daughters. The girls are less than 10 years old, and the payment is after arrival.” (extract 746, Phase 2)

The trust in the community was found to allow refugees to share sensitive or illegal requests publicly. In addition to trust of the security of enquiries, online refugees’ communities also demonstrated financial trust. Social media could also, by being a source of information, facilitate protecting refugees from fraud. For example, social media were used when seeking financial information concerning the cost of travel or for warning other members of potential fraud:

“We have warned many times about the swindling, and we told everyone that you should be careful and not hasten in any step. Be sure to validate the authenticity of the news. A while ago, someone posted he arranged visits to Ukraine for 300–450 dollars, and from there, there are smugglers to Europe, and I alerted you it was all a lie. A friend of mine [...] confirmed that to me... today I was surprised that this person tricked my friends and received 150 dollars from each of them and then blocked them! I warn you again from him and from others like him. Be aware, do not hasten, and look into everything before you do something.” (extract 542, Phase 2)

As the post above illustrates, some may exploit the trust by utilizing the vulnerable situation of refugees, deceiving them for financial gain. Despite such exceptions, sympathy and care were evident in the refugees’ online community, rendering some to seek authenticity of the information on social media, and share it for the benefit of the community.

In Stage 1, social media were primarily used as a source of exploratory information as part of their planning, enabling prospective refugees to get information from others who were at a more advanced stage in their journey, whilst collecting information that, for example, could protect them from fraud.

Stage 2: While on the move

While on the move, social media continued to be a source of information and a space for our participants to get up to date. However, at this stage, information was not about planning their journeys, but about known what may be coming next and how to deal with problems:

“[Social media] are a good thing because they help us watch what’s going on in the world; for information” (RP7 interview, Phase 1)

Thus, social media provided real-time information to overcome difficulties refugees went through while on the move. In Stage 2, social media were mostly a space for them where they could find real-time guidance during difficult times. What we see, therefore, is an additional role of social media being a source of real-time support to break obstacles:

“Brothers, I need your help. I want to go from Turkey to Greece, and to Sweden from there. I got robbed on my way to Turkey and then borrowed 1500, how can I get to Sweden with this amount?” (extract 669, Phase 2)

Refugees in our study refer to each other as “brothers”, a common way to address each other in the Middle East. This shows that the cultural values are maintained, and strengthened, in the social media context, revealing a strong bond among them and a sense of community. Social media use was less prevalent among members on the move due to connectivity limitations during traveling. However, they still played a significant role. Social media played a *barrier breaker* role for refugees at this stage, who sought social media when they were in vulnerable situations, such as being faced with limited financial support. Despite these possibilities, some of our Phase 1 participants noted that these opportunities are not for all, as there are refugees on the move who are not technologically savvy, may not have the necessary equipment (some had their devices stolen or left behind), or may not be literate, and thus unable to communicate in writing:

“Actually, [social media] are very necessary now, and without them, it depends on the person. Sometimes, you have people who cannot even read and write. They cannot use the technology. But for other people, it is very necessary, for example, for jobs or for learning, yes, for contacting.” (RP8 interview, Phase 1)

Social media can be fundamental for refugees’ journey. Not only do they provide guidance to break obstacles, but also peace of mind with regards to expectations and tips to overcome challenges refugees may face while on the move. What we see therefore is that social media are not simply a tool that refugees use instrumentally (i.e., to achieve a single purpose); instead, they are a space they can turn to not only for exploratory/planning purposes (Stage 1), but also for real-time problem-solving when needed. It might be

a technological medium, but as we progress through our analysis it is beginning to look like a space to which participants assign additional features, further to its core technical capabilities, such as that of constant availability (i.e., being a space one can turn to anytime), that make it look more like an actual community.

Stage 3: Post-arrival

In the last stage of the refugees' journey, social media played an important, but different, role; that of a *community builder*, facilitating their settlement in their selected country of destination. Part of forming part of a community is to settle in. Post-arrival, refugees' priority was to settle in by familiarizing themselves with the host country, the local language, and possible job opportunities:

"You can find [a lot of] things that can help the refugees to learn, to know the tradition about Europe, about all things, about your study [...] it can be developmental for the people" (RP10 interview, Phase 1)

While the above quote highlights how social media can help individual refugees with their integration, we found that social media were used by refugees in their effort to reach out to a wider audience, representing an emergent community "in the making". Post-arrival, social media were used for a range of purposes that are common within a community, varying from facilitating financial settlement, to promoting their new businesses and answering healthcare-related inquiries. Social media were found to be able to simultaneously reserve the privacy of refugees by also allowing private communication, which was a helpful feature in terms of emotional settlement, such as when searching for a partner to start a family:

"I am looking for a girl who wants to marry, and who is reasonable and is settled in Europe. If interested, send me a friendship request or a message in private." (extract 066, Phase 2)

In this last stage, social media constituted the way with which, up to this point, online communities are transformed into real-life communities, providing longer-lasting online and face-to-face (thus, hybrid) environments that offer support and real-life interaction for those that need them. Social media are now the foundations that can help to sustain the sense of community refugees were part of previously in the face-to-face environment. They do so by providing support to refugees in real life:

"Our Syrian and Arab families in [...] Munich, we meet with you every Tuesday to put our services in your hands for all the legal problems that you face, at the following time and address..." (extract 248, Phase 2)

Social media can be fundamental for enabling the wider reach of announcements or messages, especially in the possible absence of other face-to-face connections with other refugees upon arrival. This type of activity enables not only the sustainability of the sense of "community" post-arrival, but its transformation into a real-life, face-to-face community. Social media continue to be used for problem solving and information sharing. However, in the post-arrival stage, they are primarily used to enable relationship building and a sense of a real community of refugees in the city, whereby its members are (in the process of being) settled citizens of their country of destination and are opening a new chapter in their lives.

Overall, what these findings show is that these are essentially "hybrid communities"; they are purely online for Stages 1 and 2, and then they are transformed to hybrid communities allowing refugees that were earlier on the move to still communicate online, but also to meet and develop relationships face-to-face. In a nutshell, our analysis has illustrated how social media served a range of different purposes throughout refugees' journeys, initially, serving to gather information for exploratory/planning purposes, while then taking the form of barrier breakers while refugees were on the move, and ultimately, allowing the emergence of real-life communities post-arrival in the country of destination.

Envisaged Contributions and Next Steps

Our study has begun to unpack issues surrounding the role of social media in the context of forced migration which constitutes an emerging literature within the IS field (e.g., Diaz Andrade and Doolin 2016). Despite its challenges, described earlier, Phase 1 enabled us to get an initial understanding of how social media are used by Syrian refugees, surfacing a variety of purposes for which they are used, as well as knowledge about which social media Syrian refugees used. With Phase 2 we managed to overcome some of the challenges surrounding the interviews in Phase 1 by looking at what is being discussed on social media our Phase 1 participants signposted us to, on which content was generated by Syrian refugees themselves. This then allowed us to develop a chronological understanding of social media use revealing a multi-faceted role

played by social media pre-departure, while on the move, and post-arrival at their destination, revealing of mixture between online and offline interaction across stages.

Social media use across the three stages revealed the emergence of what we may term a “hybrid community”, whereby refugees interact online during pre-departure and while on the move, and then both online and face-to-face at the post-arrival stage. Although we did not intend to study online communities, our study adds to this literature which sees online communities as spaces in which geographically dispersed individuals come together online and form a community due to similar interests in order to share knowledge or experiences (Reingold 1993). Within this literature, there is a view that online communities can be used to generate social value for their members and the wider local communities in which their members live (e.g., Chamakiotis et al. 2021). Social value within this context may take different forms, such as opportunities of reskilling for their members, ultimately having a positive impact on their local communities (Petraakaki et al. 2021). In a similar vein, the hybrid communities we have identified here show that they create value for those involved by fulfilling a variety of purposes during a difficult time. Our Phase 3 findings are likely to shed more light on this issue by unpacking how some of the elements we have seen here, such as trust, develop over time.

Our discovery is likely to extend recent literature on the polycontextuality of social media which argues that social media are not mere enabling technologies, but contexts with embedded norms (Vaast and Pinsonneault 2022). With our findings so far, we have shown that—in the context of refugees’ journeys—these contexts are, in essence, hybrid communities in which numerous roles can be performed by different members at different points in time. In Phase 3, we will aim to explore the longitudinal aspect of these communities by asking settled refugees post-arrival (Stage 3) to describe to us their journeys from start to end.

In addition, our research presents early implications for the emerging stream of literature engaging digital technologies in relation with social justice (Aanestad et al. 2021). A fundamental difference between an earlier discourse on “societal challenges” (cf. Majchrzak et al. 2016) and the present focus on social justice is the explicit recognition of how technology can participate in the production of injustice, resulting in adverse digital incorporation (Heeks 2022). By engaging the role of technology across refugee journeys, we interrogate the fairness of the digital systems in which refugees participate, mindful of the risks they incur at all stages of their journey (Newell et al. 2016). This makes our research inseparable by the novel social justice lens that IS research is taking. Therefore, Phase 3 participants are likely to offer an additional perspective through a posteriori reflection, complementing our existing dataset. In Phase 3, we will also address methodological details by conducting the interviews in Arabic; this was not possible in Phase 1 and is one of the problems we faced in that phase.

We live in turbulent times with unprecedented crises currently causing additional waves of forced migration (i.e., current war in Ukraine at the time of writing this paper). Although, clearly, this is catastrophic, with our study we hope to make a small but meaningful contribution that may help to better the role of social media for those affected in similar contexts. At the conference, we hope to get feedback on how to strengthen our study by making our theoretical contributions clearer, and possibly by extending our findings to non-academic contexts within which our findings may be of value.

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