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Petros Chamakiotis
ESCP Business School, pchamakiotis@escp.eu

Silvia Masiero
University of Oslo, silvima@ifi.uio.no

Njod Aljabr
Jubail Industrial College, JABRN@ucj.edu.sa

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THE SHIFTING ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA THROUGHOUT REFUGEE JOURNEYS

Research-in-Progress

Chamakiotis, Petros, ESCP Business School, Madrid, Spain, pchamakiotis@escp.eu

Masiero, Silvia, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway, silvima@ifi.uio.no

Aljabr, Njod, Jubail Industrial College, Saudi Arabia, Jabrn@ucj.edu.sa

Abstract

Given an emerging literature within the Information Systems (IS) field in the role of technology in social (in)justice and forced migration, in this research-in-progress paper we present preliminary findings from a longitudinal study with Syrian refugees (2018–present), which aims to understand the role of technology in refugees' journeys from departure to destination. Our findings are articulated across three phases: in Phase 1, involving interviews with refugees sheltered in Greece, we found that social media played an important role during early stages of refugee journeys, mainly for information purposes. In Phase 2, drawing on social media data, we discovered a range of uses of social media within the refugee community, surfacing a hidden and largely unrecognised 'hybrid community'—in-person and virtual—of refugees. In Phase 3, which is currently being developed, the concept of a 'hybrid community' is being explored in relation to diverse patterns of technology use by refugees. Our analysis reveals three stages of social media use related to hybrid communities—pre-departure, while on the move, and post-arrival—showing that hybrid communities take a different form over time as per the different uses of social media at different stages.

Keywords: Social media, hybrid communities, online communities, forced migration.

1   Introduction

Forced migration, and the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) within it, has recently become a focus of the Information Systems (IS) field. While the field's interest in the topic originally came under the rubric of 'societal challenges' (Majchrzak et al., 2016), the field has 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 centred on the topic. A substantial difference between the earlier 'societal challenges' discourse and the present-day social justice focus is the recognition of how technology is actively implicated in the production of injustice, giving rise to dynamics of 'adverse digital incorporation' (Heeks, 2002). Participation of technology in unjust outcomes towards users leads to problematise an earlier logic of technology for social good, leading to a closer examination of the effective roles of ICTs in vulnerable contexts.

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. ICTs, the IS literature recognises, participate in the migrants' journey across diverse phases (AbuJarour et al., 2016, 2017, 2019; Diaz-Andrade & Doolin, 2016, 2019; Madon & Schoemaker, 2021). Despite this new focus, and studies on this wider topic outside the IS discipline, the role of social media has not been directly engaged by the IS literature on forced migration. Given the ubiquitous character of social media in situations of immediate

information needs (Borkert et al., 2018), our aim in this paper is to explore the (potentially multifaceted) role played by social media in refugees' journeys from origin to 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. Subsequently, in Phase 2, we gathered social media data from a Facebook group that Phase 1 participants signposted us to, in our 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 engaging with their own social media activity. 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'. We refer to these communities as hybrid because their members interact online pre-departure (Stage 1) and while on the move (Stage 2), and then, post-arrival, shift to a combination of online and face-to-face (Stage 3). We are currently developing Phase 3 whose purpose is to explore in greater detail the emergent concept of 'hybrid communities', building on earlier findings. Our work adds to the emerging literature on forced migration by revealing the multifaceted role played by social media, affecting forced migrants' lives in multiple phases of their journey and, crucially, playing roles at the interface between fulfilment of information needs and risk of exposure to surveillant powers. We also add to the literature on online communities by eliciting the notion of 'hybrid community' as a unique community configuration with its own unique characteristics.

In what follows, we begin with Section 2 by presenting emerging IS literature on technology and forced migration, revealing a knowledge gap as to how social media influence refugees' journeys from point of departure to point of destination. In Section 3, we present our methodological journey and in Section 4 we discuss preliminary findings from our analysis so far. In closing, in Section 5, we outline our envisaged contributions.

2   The Literature on Forced Migration and Social Media

Work on IS and forced migration (cf. Alencar, 2020) identifies multiple themes of interest across fields. Nevertheless, 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 & von Deden, 2022). With few exceptions (Gomez, 2016; Gomez & Vannini, 2017; Madon & Schoemaker, 2021), the IS literature on forced migration takes an optimistic position on the role of ICTs, viewed as an overly functional route to the inclusion of the migrant (cf. Diaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016, 2018; Schreieck et al., 2017; Brown et al., 2021). Such inclusion occurs through multiple channels: refugee entrepreneurship (Brown et al., 2021); the fulfilment of refugee needs through information platforms (Schreieck et al. 2017); and the incorporation of newly resettled refugees into host societies through an array of capabilities developed through information technologies (Diaz Andrade & Doolin, 2021).

The situation changes radically when moving from IS to interdisciplinary work (Alencar, 2020). Outside the IS literature, 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 centred, respectively, on surveillance and information seeking, problematise the extent to which ICTs act as a route for inclusion of forced migrants in host societies. The surveillance discourse centres 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 potential agent of crime.

The policing discourse is arguably linked to a wider literature on surveillance studies, where technology is constructed as an agent of surveillance rather than a beneficial instrument of 'care' towards vulnerable communities. In studying platform surveillance, Murakami Wood and Monahan (2019) argue that digital platforms are underpinned by surveillance rationalities that are inseparable from their outcomes of users, be them willingly or unwillingly enrolled into platform surveillance systems. Constantly monitored through an array of technologies, including biometric border recognition (Lyon, 2008) and mandatory registration into databases of humanitarian organisations (Schoemaker et al., 2021), refugees find themselves at the centre of surveillance technologies, with limited power to counter the control these yield on their lives. This results, states Iazzolino (2021), into 'infrastructures of compassionate repression', where a logic of care is indivisible from one of policing.

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 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 & Lim, 2010) to the emergence of fragilities in them (Madianou & 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 information seeker, the migrant transitions from the passive role of displaced individual to that of active shaper of their own condition.

Following the taxonomy proposed by Masiero and von Deden (2022), it is within the information seeking discourse that work on 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, which is curious given the attention that the IS literature at large gives to the broader societal consequences of social media usage (AbuJarour et al., 2021). Work 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).

Such a view comes, however, with problematisation. 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 & 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 exposure of the person to police authorities within and across countries (Newell et al., 2016; Milan et al., 2021). Our research question, centred on the role of social media in the migration journey, is inspired by such a problematisation, which we approach from an IS perspective. What we research, therefore, is the largely underexplored and potentially multifaceted role played by social media during migrants' journeys.

3   Research Design

Our study adopts a longitudinal approach by taking the case of Syrian refugees following the 2015 European migrant crisis. It involves three phases of data collection, two completed ones whereby we have collected and analysed the data, and a third one which is ongoing, detailed in Table 1 below.

Phase 1 was exploratory in character and aimed to unpack issues that were of importance to migrants in relation to technology during their journeys. We interviewed migrants sheltered in two sites in/near Athens, Greece, as well as staff working at the two sites, and one government official. Interviews were mostly conducted with an interpreter, when participants did not speak English, or directly in English if they were fluent. We prepared separate interview protocols for each group of participants, each containing a list of open-ended questions that would enable us to improve our familiarity with the empirical context. We asked refugee participants to tell us about their journeys and their use of technology. We aimed to create a friendly and safe environment for participants in quiet areas of their shelter/camp. Despite this, interviewees often gave very short answers resulting in a more limited dataset compared to what we had initially envisaged.

With Phase 2, we aimed to overcome this limitation by looking at social media data to explore content generated by migrants themselves. A specific Facebook group—"كراجات المشنططين" (translation: "garages of the sufferers")—was chosen following from information gathered during our Phase 1 interviews about which social media are used by Syrian migrants. We collected more than 1,200 posts created between January and July 2019, using Facebook's Application Program Interface (API). Data included the contributors' usernames, post content, the number of pictures, and post date. Despite the public nature of the posts, sensitive data were anonymized and encrypted before being stored or processed. Studying content generated by migrants themselves gave us an additional perspective by allowing us to study what was being discussed from them. Separate ethical approvals were obtained for each of the two completed phases by the University of Sussex which is where the lead author was based earlier. An additional one for Phase 3 is currently under review with the Research Ethics Review Committee (RERC) at ESCP Business School.

	Purpose	Data type	Dataset
Phase 1 (Completed in 2018)	Identification of issues surrounding technology use and refugees on the move	Exploratory, semi-structured interviews	• 10 interviews with refugees on the move • Observation of two research sites (shelter and camp) • 6 interviews with staff at the two sites • 1 interview with a government official
Phase 2 (Completed in 2020)	Exploration of refugee-related/-led social media discussions to capture refugees' perspective	Refugee-generated social media content	• 1,200 Facebook posts from 700 members
Phase 3 (Ongoing)	In-depth exploration of, and reflection on, hybrid communities, building on findings from Phases 1 and 2	Reflective, semi-structured interviews	N/A

Table 1.   Data collection: A longitudinal, three-phase study.

4   Social Media Use by Syrian Refugees

Our Phase 1 interviewees were refugees with dissimilar profiles and family circumstances, ranging in their 20s with families elsewhere, through to widowed refugees, young couples with children, and older refugees in their 50s, some of whom suffered health conditions. Some of our participants were unskilled workers who used to work in blue-collar jobs in their home country, whereas others had vocational- or university-level training in areas such as healthcare, journalism, interpretation, and

business administration. Most of them were waiting for their asylum applications to be approved with the aim of either settling in in Greece or moving to another European country, most commonly Germany or the Scandinavian countries. The vast majority lived on European Union (EU-)funding, whereas one individual worked as an interpreter while living in the shelter with his wife and child. What all Phase 1 interviewees had in common was a very painful personal journey from their country of departure up to the arrival in mainland Greece where we conducted the interviews:

> *"They [in Turkey] killed people in front of me. I went back. I tried a second time and didn't make it. The third time I managed to cross the borders… on foot"* (RP4 interview, Phase 1)

Social media were found to influence their journeys at different stages. For example, early on, before the commencement of their journeys, social media represented a rich *source of information* as a place where they could get information from other refugees who were further on in their journey. In the pre-journey stage, social media provided refugees with information concerning legal, financial, and/or safety and situational measures related to their potential journey. Such information could provide refugees with trust and confidence in the decisions they had to make. By participating in social media discussions, potential 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:

> *"Can anybody tell us about the smuggling from North of Iraq to Turkey and how much it approximately costs?"* (extract 1199, Phase 2)

Some may exploit the trust by utilising the vulnerable situation of refugees, deceiving them for financial gain. Despite such exceptions, the 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.

When migrants began their journeys, the role of social media changed from that of the source of information to a space where they could find support and guidance:

> *"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)

As migrants were 'on the move', social media played *a barrier breaker* role; they proved helpful when migrants were in vulnerable situations, such as being faced with limited financial support.

What we have seen so far is that the role of social media for migrants changes across the different stages of their journey. In the pre-departure stage, social media were used mainly for information purposes, whereas during the migrants' journeys, they were used for support and guidance when problems arose. Although social media are a technological medium, our analysis so far suggests that they are more than that; they are an emergent digital space migrants turn to for a variety of purposes, making it an integral part of their transitioned life. Once migrants reached their country of destination, the role of social media changed again to that of *a community builder*, facilitating settlement in the country of destination. Post-arrival, social media provided a means for reaching out to a wider audience, representing an emergent community 'in the making'. Post-arrival, social media can thus facilitate financial settlement, such through the marketing a newly established family business, or to answer health support enquiries. They can simultaneously reserve the privacy of refugees by also allowing private communication. This appears to be a helpful feature of social media in terms of emotional settlement, such as through 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 the, 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 in need. 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)

What we have seen therefore is that that space that served different purposes throughout the migrants' journeys is essentially a 'hybrid community'. Post-arrival at their destination, 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, our analysis elicits three stages of social media use: pre-departure, while on the move, and post-arrival. The emergence of the hybrid community we have identified suggest that interactions among migrants are purely online for stages 1 and 2, and then they are transformed to real-life communities allowing refugees that were earlier on the move to meet and develop relationships face-to-face. As we envisage the expected contributions of our study, we see our research as an active participant in the domain of digital technologies for social justice which is emerging within the IS field.

5 Envisaged Contributions and Next Steps

With our research-in-progress paper, we have shown that social media play a shifting role throughout migrants' journeys from country of origin to country of destination. We have specifically identified three stages of social media use by the refugee community: pre-departure (Stage 1), while on the move (Stage 2), and post-arrival (Stage 3). Social media may be a technological medium with a predetermined set of technical capabilities. However, building on the sociotechnical systems perspective (Bijker, 1997; Leonardi, 2012), we have demonstrated that their participants' use goes beyond mere use of those technical capabilities to the development of—what we call here—a hybrid community.

In Stages 1 and 2 interactions within the community are online, but then in Stage 3 they are both online and face-to-face (hence, hybrid). It is not an established community, but an emergent one, i.e., participants did not create it with the purpose of then meeting face-to-face, but it is how it naturally evolved over time as the needs of its participants changed. This configuration provides evidence to Schreieck's (2017) study who argues that migrants' use of social media creates ways that helps with their integration into their country of destination. At the same time, this expands our understanding of the polycontextuality of social media (Vaast and Pinsonneault, 2022) which argues that social media are not mere technologies, but contexts with embedded norms.

This research participates actively in emerging research on digital technologies and social justice. A recent MISQ Special Issue call, centred on the same topic, starts from an open recognition of social injustice and of how technology is implicated in it. The position of refugees—who cross increasingly policed borders and are subject to potentially deadly forms of surveillance—is one at the centre of technology-induced injustice, reinforced, argues Madianou (2019, 2020), by dynamics of 'technolcolonialism' where old colonial powers are reflected into biometric systems. It is in this scenery of injustices that our research is placed: subjected through diverse forms of technology-

induced harm (Manby, 2021), refugees can find, in hybrid communities, instruments of resistance that can counter the adverse digital incorporation to which they are systematically subjected.

Our study is still ongoing, and we hope to be able to conduct Phase 3 of data collection (see Table 1 earlier) in order to explore in more depth our emergent concept of hybrid communities by considering settled refugees' views. With 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 timing of writing of 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.

Acknowledgements

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