

Signal



Signal

The use of smartphones
by Syrian refugees during
the European migration flux
in 2015

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MASTER THESIS I (THEORETICAL)

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FEBRUARY 2016

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Introduction

— In the era of informationalism



John Stanmeyer, *Signal*, 2013

In 2013 a photography of people holding their mobiles and reaching for the sky circulated around the globe and it was followed by the winning of the first prize in the prestigious World Press Photo competition. It was *Signal* by John Stanmeyer that had been taken on the beach in Djibouti City, Djibouti. It is a common stop for migrants from Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea, who want to find a better life in Europe and the Middle East. Mysterious and hypnotising, it shows people trying to catch an inexpensive signal from neighbouring Somalia. This simple gesture depicts one of the basic needs of the modern times: being connected. And it shows something elusive and transcendent as well—a profound faith in the value of human communication and its ability to reach across borders. Is the information a new religion of the modern times?

Manuel Castells in his well-known work, *The Rise of the Network Society*, starts off the prologue with a quote from Sima Qian's *Confucius* in which Confucius, when being asked if he considered himself a well-read man, denied and said: "I have simply grasped one thread which links up with the rest."¹ Not to speculate what he referred to, a simple drawing is created in one's mind—a spider's web. A net that could be endlessly woven to multiply its links. Confucius outlined a powerful structure that stores information to its unlimited exploration of the connections. These joints are first and foremost crucial for such a system to be useful and effective.

In the era of "informationalism" (this is how Castells refers to the post-industrialism), the idea of Confucius' "thread" can be quickly associated with (so far) the most powerful informational network: the Web. The Internet is an influential database with, what seems, endless pieces

¹ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p. 1

of information that creates an interconnected network. It seems to be a maze of information, where one can be easily overwhelmed and lost. The modern society is an “information society,” as the creation, distribution, manipulation, and access to knowledge are the significant economic, political, and cultural endeavour. The influence of these activities on everyday life emphasises the role of information in society. Collecting and sharing data has been a crucial action undertaken by humankind since the nomad cultures, as pointed by Erik Davis:

Information gathering defines civilisation as much as food fathering defines the nomadic cultures that precede the rise of urban communities, agricultural surplus, and stratified social hierarchies. From the moment the first scribe took up a reed and scratched a database into the cool clay of Sumer, information flow has been an instrument of human power and control—religious as well as economic and political. [...] But it wasn't until the twentieth century that information became a thing in itself. People began to devote themselves more and more to collecting, analyzing, transmitting, selling, and using the stuff. [...] In many people's minds, what was once merely a category of knowledge began to mutate into a new unit of reality itself, one that took its place alongside matter and energy as one of the fundamental building blocks of the cosmos. If electricity is the soul of the modern age, information is its spirit.²

The communication of information has been crucial not only for creating and maintaining social bonds, but also for mutual social competition that eventually led to technological, economical and social development of communities. Back in the days, surviving depended on the access to data—where to hunt, to settle, to cultivate.

When the *Whole Earth Catalog* was created by Stewart Brand in 1968, it came along with its strong motto—“access to tools,” where the most basic tool was nothing other than information. The *Whole Earth Catalog* axed around the conclusion that the globe was too complex and a guidebook was needed to understand the world at large. The magazine listed and reviewed a various range of products, from machine, tools to clothing, and books.

Not much has changed since the nomadic cultures, the discovery of the DNA,³ and the *Whole Earth Catalog* (that was followed by a creation of

the first online community, the WELL by Brand as well) apart from the means we use to pass information nowadays. The Internet and especially social media maintains the human need to communicate. “Information gathering” shapes societies and it influences everyday decisions of the global population. The technological civilisation that now blankets the globe, shapes social interactions, leads to exchange of ideas and it creates a new kind of collective action. The inborn instinct of communication is amplified by modern technologies that have become a fundamental piece of our reality. It's commonly said that “information is power,” but in a humble human scale it can be an imperative to move, to act, and to change. It can be a promise and a motivation. To fight for one's right and to seek equality—that's when the access to information really matters.

During the European migrant crisis⁴ in 2015 when Europe faced an uncontrolled flux of people, many asked how they were able to move and travel over unknown territories. Refugees⁵ escaped homes in a rush, trying to save their lives and undertook a risky journey with an uncertain end. How did they make it from the Middle East? The key to refugees' travel is a smartphone that gave them the well-needed guidance and moral support which channelled through social media from family, friends, and fellow travellers.

In my research I aim to explore how the European refugee crisis has updated a meaning of such a common tool as a smartphone. How it's usability and interoperability has been redefined by Syrian refugees who were in a constant need of updated information. To define whether the “migration of information” has had an impact on physical, residential migration and if data flow and access to information is an important part of modern times, and social, personal evolution. And last but not least, if social media has changed communication patterns.

² Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2015, p. 78–79

³ The double-helix structure of the DNA is an information system that carries one's personal data. Does it mean we are an information based species by nature?

⁴ The term of the “European migrant/refugee crisis” became widely used in April 2015, after five boats carrying almost 2,000 migrants to Europe had sunk in the Mediterranean Sea, with a death toll estimated at more than 1,200 people.

⁵ There is an obvious difference between a migrant (relocating willingly) and a refugee (pushed to flee his country). Those two terms will be used interchangeably as it's difficult to precisely differentiate each and every in the migration flux.

**An accidental
dystopia**

— The island of Lampedusa



Alessandro Bianchi, Lampedusa, Italy, 2014

Lampedusa is the largest island of the Italian Pelagie Islands in the Mediterranean Sea. Politically and administratively, the isle is a part of Italy, but Tunisia is the closest landfall to the islands, Sicily is almost twice as far. The ambiguity of Lampedusa does not only arise from its location—since the early 2000s the island has been a primary European entry for migrants from Africa and the Middle East. At the same time it remains one of the top holiday destinations. The archipelago with its sandy beaches is shared by two contrast groups: refugees and tourists. People who fled war-torn homelands and those who look for a holiday getaway. Lampedusa has become a prime transit point for migrants who try to cross the Mediterranean on overcrowded wooden fish boats that are not suited for long-distance journeys. Such a risky travel often ends up tragically and people drown at sea. The real numbers are unknown, but the United Nations Refugee Agency¹ estimates that 3,771 people died or went missing in 2015.² During the European migrant crisis the number of sea arrivals on the European territories (mostly Greece and Italy) has considerably risen to 1,015,078 in 2015. Already the number of refugees crossing the sea in January 2016 is over ten times bigger than in January 2015.³ The Reception Centre (CDA) in Lampedusa has been operating since 1998. Its capacity has been over demanded and migrants often have to sleep outdoor.

These two communities residing temporarily on Lampedusa are negatives of each other with their motivations in choosing the island as a destination. They represent contrary groups that share the same space. The difference between them is meaningful—how one can ever compare refugees escaping war and persecution, to tourists looking for a rest away

¹ The United Nations Refugee Agency is the office for United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees—the UNCHR.

² The UNHCR, *Refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean to Europe*. Accessed January 31, 2016.

³ Ibid.

from home? Both of them find themselves away from their natural habitat, in a neutral, unknown environment. Yet tourists do have a choice whether to leave or to stay at home. Ironically enough, in 2015 Rabbit Beach, located in the southern part of the island, was voted the Europe's best beach by travel site TripAdvisor.⁴

The transitory, uncooperative community of Lampedusa is a tactile representation of a society whose members of opposite groups don't interact with each other. This small piece of floating land, detached from the continents and found in the middle of what seems to be no man's sea, illustrates in miniature not only the ongoing refugee crisis in the European Union, where two opposite communities collide, but it also depicts the question of virtual democracy. Can a physical space, such as Lampedusa, provide questions for utopian ideas of social integration, the online equality and democracy in cyberspace? Or how should the non-state⁵ of the Internet be governed?

⁴ As of February 2, 2015, <http://www.tripadvisor.com/TravelersChoice-Beaches-cTop-g4#1>

⁵ As it's not a state as we know it—the Internet has no government, no territory nor citizens.

— Online democracy

The European migrant crisis is a current issue that caught the public's eye in the spring of 2015. The migration flux is an ongoing process and there're not many academic resources so far. That's why research for the dissertation on how Syrian refugees use smartphones was axed on the articles recently published in most cases online. The Internet is an interactive medium that can be promptly updated just as a new piece of information comes up. Its efficiency is also epitomised in the possibility of commenting by viewers to express their opinions. And these commentaries are what drew my attention during collecting material for the main part of the thesis. From the springtime of 2015 it was obvious and unsurprising that Western nations felt threatened by the unexpected flood of people wandering to Europe. It still remains a critical situation—for desperate refugees in a dead-end position seeking safety and asking for an asylum, for the Europeans and their distrust and reluctance to accept them, and the European Union and its membership states that have no idea how to react.

Needless to say, online readers divided into the ones that were skeptical to let migrants enter European states and those who sympathise with them, asking how they could possibly help. Viewers expressed their opinions that clearly differed, but what was unanticipated was the criticism of refugees having smartphones and using social media. One of the viewers, under the nickname of "Juvenis" commented on an article on the migrant crisis in the online edition of *The Financial Times*:

Interesting to see that the social media support and guidance for these people to invade seem to be operated by immigrants already in Europe. The worm has already burrowed deep in the apple!⁶

⁶ Andrew Byrne, "Refugees seek help on social media", *The Financial Times*. Accessed October 22, 2015.

The piece itself covers how migrants share news with each other on Facebook or by WhatsApp on what route to take, which smuggler to trust and where to find a free Wi-Fi spot. The commentary of “Juvenis” wasn’t isolated, as many similar ones were published elsewhere as well. Migrants facilitate from online data flow and in the view of the Europeans, it encourages them to come to Europe—and they don’t want that. This kind of criticism raises a question of equality in the access to technology and the online democracy. The problem is, the Web has no laws how to co-exist. The only reference might be *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* by John Perry Barlow, first published online in 1996 from Davos, Switzerland. His utopian idea of egalitarian cyberspace brutally collides with the reality of Lampedusa with its non-interacting temporal society of refugees and tourists. Barlow in *A Declaration*, writes:

Cyberspace consists of transactions, relationships, and thought itself, arrayed like a standing wave in the web of our communications. Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live.

We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth.

We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.

Your legal concepts of property, expression, identity, movement, and context do not apply to us. They are all based on matter, and there is no matter here.⁷

Barlow rejects the idea of the online supervision as he finds it limiting freedom (to the extent that eventually there would be no freedom anymore). He aims to make a clear distinction between “here” and “there.” The main argument is that there’s no matter in cyberspace, so any laws constituted in the physical world have no justification. It’s a simplification to say that virtual reality is completely different from the reality we live in (not to say we do not inhabit cyberspace). True, there’s no substance but it does not imply there’s no “fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.” No one is to argue that these two realities are the same; Barlow is right to the point that cyberspace is constructed differently and it has dissimilar components.

He wrote his manifesto in 1996 before the Web 2.0 made its debut in 2001 that emphasises the role of users in generating data. Barlow’s argumentation completely omits them. He’s more concerned with the “bodylessness” of the online community. The point is that users are in most cases physical and they live somewhere in the substantial world. Besides, emotions are equally immaterial in material and virtual reality. People do not cut off all laws, habits, feelings they have “here.” They’ve innate behaviours and a way of acting that they subconsciously extend when settling in cyberspace. Even if users try to create new personalities, or to re-create themselves upon arrival in the virtual reality, they only do it to some extent. Barlow’s proclamation is utopian in believing that cyberspace guarantees prevalent equality where we all could be fearless in expressing ourselves just because our “legal concepts of property, expression, identity, movement, and context” don’t apply there. But doesn’t it leave cyberspace unregulated in the result a utopian, optimistic anarchy? Even though any kind of “terrestrial” laws don’t apply officially “there,” in 2004 The Dreamworks filed a legal threat to The Pirate Bay, one of the world’s largest file-sharing websites, for breaking the copyrights. In the response we read:

As you may or may not be aware, Sweden is not a state in the United States of America. Sweden is a country in northern Europe. Unless you figured it out by now, US law does not apply here. For your information, no Swedish law is being violated. . . .⁸

The example of the suit filed against The Pirate Bay depicts a clear ambiguity of the ungoverned cyberspace. Its servers were located at time in Stockholm, Sweden and no Swedish law was broken. The Dreamworks charged it in regard to the American laws that has no value outside the United States. Besides cyberspace has no specific location as it has no matter. Yet The Pirate Bay’s advocacy was the location of the servers which are physical objects. So is there a physical link of the immaterial dimension? Being extremely consistent to *A Declaration*, The Pirate Bay shouldn’t have been sued in any way as it does not overstep any laws as there were none cyberspace laws. We definitely face a conflict between online and offline legal norms.

The case of hateful commentaries proves that people are willing to deny refugees the right to technology when it’s not in line with their

⁷ John Perry Barlow, *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*. Accessed January 14, 2016. <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>

⁸ Jessica L. Beyer, *Expect us: online communities and political mobilization*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 55. For further reading consult the chapter 2, *The Pirate Bay. Contribution to Mobilization*.

idea of how to use it. The lack of fairness in application of technology: smartphones and social media, is considerable. Erik Davis, when referring to *A Declaration*, quotes the German media critic Pit Schulz who called the Internet “a collective hallucination of freedom.”⁹ Is it also a hallucination of equality? Since the invention of computers, the development of information systems have been constantly baptised as a “revolution.” It imposes to expect that the “information revolution” would bring a new order of justice, and emancipation. Langdon Winner in the essay *Mythinformation*, first published in 1986, argues with the “romantic technophiles” that blindly believed the widespread of information technologies, fore and foremost a computer that plays a key role in the processing of data, would guarantee “a sweeping set of transformations in every corner of social life.” The computer enthusiasts believed that access to information enhanced democracy and equalised social power, that it would encourage participatory democracy, and social equality. Winner called this deeply enthusiastic belief:

Mythinformation: the almost religious conviction that a widespread adoption of computers and communication systems along with easy access to electronic information will automatically produce a better world for human living.¹⁰

It was expected that the popularisation of information technologies would lead to a significant shift in the locus of power—that what’s expected from any kind of political “revolution.” Information, as the main currency of the online flow is still perceived by some as the dominant form of wealth. But even egalitarian access to knowledge doesn’t guarantee equality—what one does with it is crucial.

Astra Taylor in her book *People’s Platform: taking back power and culture in the digital age*, in the chapter *Unequal uptake* discusses extensively the question of equality in cyberspace. When she refers to *A Declaration*, Taylor quotes Google’s Eric Schmidt and the State Department’s Jared Cohen that: “The Internet is the largest experiment involving anarchy in history. It is world’s largest ungoverned space.”¹¹ What Barlow considers as the power of the Internet—the lack of legal constraints—might be perceived otherwise. Nicolas Negroponte backed up Barlow’s hope by saying: “The caste system is an artefact of the world of atom.”¹² Yet, apparently it’s not. Lawrence Lessig, law professor and open culture activist, writes:

If communism versus capitalism was the struggle of the twentieth century, then control versus freedom will be the debate of the twenty-first century. If our question then was how best to control, our question now will become whether to control. What would a free resource give us that controlled resources do not? What is the value in avoiding systems of control?¹³

Taylor’s argumentation points right out to Barlow’s conviction of guaranteed equality in the virtual reality. It is an extension of physical space and people with their prejudices, beliefs, and opinions stated so clearly that they affect online interactions (and the other way round, for that matter). Though it seems to be more common to expand the laws we know from here to the Internet, these two worlds sometimes blend. According to Taylor, the main distinction between the real world and the virtual may simply be speed and scale.¹⁴ Jean-Claude Juncker during the Leaders’ Meeting on refugee flows along the Western Balkans route in Brussels on October 25th, 2015, said: “No registration, no rights,”¹⁵ obviously referring to the migrant crisis and illegal border crossing. Unexpectedly enough, as Juncker did not speak of virtual reality, this could be easily a definition of how cyberspace works as well.

Taylor fairly points out that even though anything can be found online, there are always major services that dominate cyberspace. To give some examples: Google, the leading search engine, Amazon, the major bookstore, Ebay, predominant market, and Netflix that accounts for more than 40 percent of the U.S. bandwidth usage most evenings. In *People’s Platform* Taylor refers to physicist Albert-László-Barabási who has investigated network phenomena by mapping online space and he wrote in his book *Linked* that surprisingly the most intriguing result is the complete absence of democracy, fairness, and egalitarian values on the Web.¹⁶

It might explain the tendency of monopoly in the Internet. Even two separate access marketplaces can be found: high-speed wired and second-class wireless, as proves law professor Susan Crawford.¹⁷ They vary in prices and their efficiency; mobile connections cost more, and are subject to data caps. Being online and able to log on to the Internet is not enough. It doesn’t guarantee prevalent democracy and equality. Access is only the first step to become a user, that’s all. Inequality won’t disappear just because everyone’s connected.

⁹ Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2015, p. 112

¹⁰ Langdon Winner, “Mythinformation” in *The new media reader*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003, p. 588–597

¹¹ Astra Taylor, *The People’s Platform: taking back power and culture in the digital age*, Toronto: Random House Canada, 2014. EPUB file.

¹² As declared in *WIRED* magazine, published January 12, 1998.

¹³ Lawrence Lessig, *The Architecture of Innovation*, Durham: Duke Law Journal, vol. 51, 2002, p. 1785

¹⁴ Astra Taylor, *The People’s Platform: taking back power and culture in the digital age*, Toronto: Random House Canada, 2014. EPUB file.

¹⁵ Accessed January 31, 2016. <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/euro-finance/juncker-member-states-should-pay-refugees-318914>

¹⁶ Astra Taylor, *The People’s Platform: taking back power and culture in the digital age*, Toronto: Random House Canada, 2014. EPUB file.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Despite proclamations to the contrary, the online and off-line worlds are not separate; the digital is not distinct from “real life,” a realm where analog prejudices are abandoned. While the Internet offers marginalized groups powerful and potentially world-changing opportunities to meet and act together, new technologies also magnify inequality, reinforcing elements of the old order. Networks do not eradicate power: they distribute it in different ways, shuffling hierarchies and producing new mechanisms of exclusion.¹⁸

Cyberspace is only a new space to settle where “humans” become “users,” still remaining in their physical instances. One can partly migrate to the virtual reality, but he doesn’t start from scratch “there”—many habits and behaviours influence his online activity. Though the digital world remains ungoverned, we do expect to extend laws familiar from the physical reality, as seen in the suit against The Pirate Bay. These two worlds, virtual and material blend constantly and they cannot be entirely separated. A hybrid is being created, the terrestrial cyberspace, where the online flow affects real-life actions, and it’s not possible any longer to make a clear distinction between “here” and “there.” There’s an undeniable connection in-between.

Providing the access is not a key to erase online injustice, and maybe bringing equality to cyberspace is not even important; to grant access to the Web to each and every should be the main concern. Information is, indeed, power—it is the capacity to act that has always been crucial to the personal empowerment. The case of refugees guiding their travels thanks to smartphones and social media simply proves it. And again, it manifests how the digital affect the physical, the information drives human actions, and the material world is being shaped by the online flow.

The Net, after all, is still under construction, and therein lies its strength. Rather than frustrating utopian possibilities, the Internet’s perpetual imperfections, its leaky pipes and exposed wires, may serve to keep the medium’s wilder, more alchemical, and more socially innovative possibilities alive. [...] and to remind us that utopia does not lie beyond the magic mirror, but in the virtual images we carry inside our potential, and increasingly collective, selves.¹⁹

¹⁸
Astra Taylor, *The People’s Platform: taking back power and culture in the digital age*, Toronto: Random House Canada, 2014. EPUB file.

¹⁹
Ibid.

**The European migrant
crisis of 2015**



Santi Palacios, Lesbos, Greece, 2015

— Overview

Through the centuries people were driven by a quest for a new place to settle with conditions that went in line with their personal demands. With different motivations to relocate they were willing to join the social movement of migration to chase their dreams, satisfy curiosity or, in extreme cases, save their lives.

There are many reasons to list that stand behind the decision to leave one's homeland. Based on Lee's law they can be divided into push (unfavourable about the current area of residence) and pull (the ones that attract in other places) factors. Wars, conflict and persecution have been one of the most important push factors to migrate for centuries. In life-threatening situations, people are ready to abandon their homes in order to find safety elsewhere. Such extreme conditions result in creating new, temporarily nomadic populations.

Human migration is a collective action that creates new global interconnections. It's an opportunity to form societies that are culturally open-minded. By blending various nationalities, religions and ethnicities, such communities require inner tolerance, common trust and equality in sharing the same space with respect to personal beliefs and opinions. Migration is not a threat for nationalities, countries and their heritage. Every nation was founded by people coming from "else where," contributing and investing personal values to their new home. Migration has been a human reality for centuries that has to be managed, not rejected nor denied as it's been a repetitive process in the history of humankind.

Europe in the past 40 years has become a destination that is a significant switch from being the origin of migrants. Back in the days

people were moving to different European lands or overseas tempted with wildly imaginative stories of abroad success. Migration embraces human ability to undertake life-changing decisions and risky steps to abandon familiar reality in order to start a journey into the unknown. Humans have been always “on the run,” not necessarily pushed by war conflicts, but rather by their own vivid minds and expectations full of endless hope. Yet, as mentioned above, battle zones and persecutions have been significant factors to migrate. During the time of troublesome political conflicts migration grows stronger and all of a sudden it is widely recognised by governments and the global population as if it has never happened before. Such a notable movement of people simply affects not only localities, but also worldwide nations and territories.

The European migrant crisis of 2015 is the largest movement of people Europe has experienced since World War II. The main reasons for the sudden rise of flood of migrants and refugees are the on-going war conflicts in the Middle East and Africa. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency’s annual *Global Trends Report: World at War*, published on June 18, 2015, worldwide displacement was at the highest level ever recorded at the end of 2014. It’s the highest number of displacement since 1945. Every day in 2014 on average 42,500 people became refugees, asylum seekers, or were internally dislodged. If all refugees were to form the population of a country, it would be the world’s 24th biggest. Turkey became the world’s top refugee-hosting nation with 1.59 million Syrian refugees in 2014.¹ The UNHCR estimates that the top three nationalities of the over half a million Mediterranean Sea arrivals are Syrian (48%), Afghan (21%) and Iraqi (9%).² Those rapidly increasing numbers show the magnitude of migrants’ flux to Europe. They indicate as well how desperate refugees are as they decide to take their chances on boarding unseaworthy boats to cross the Mediterranean in a dangerous attempt to reach Europe. The vast majority of those undertaking such a risk are in need of international protection, fleeing war, violence and persecution in their country of origin.

¹
As evaluated by the UNCHR’s *Global Trends Report: World at War*, published on June 18, 2015.

²
The UNHCR, *Refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean to Europe*. Accessed January 31, 2016.

— The Syrian Civil War

The war in Syria is the world’s single-largest driver of displacement now and it has been the primer catalyst for the acceleration of migration. Its remaining conflict has resulted in 7.6 million people displaced internally and 3.88 million of refugees at the end of 2014.³ The Syrian Civil War is an on-going civil war with international interventions. The unrest erupted in March 2011 with pro-democratic nationwide protests within the context of Arab Spring. Demonstrations called out for the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad. The government tried to suppress it with force that eventually hardened the protesters’ resolve. By July 2011, hundreds of thousands took over the streets across the country. The conflict had gradually transformed from protests into an armed rebellion that descended into civil war. Violence escalated nationwide with rebel brigades fighting government forces for control of cities. In 2012 the United Nations Security Council approved non-binding peace plan drafted by the UN envoy Kofi Annan but with no success of armistice. In 2015, the main sides of the conflict are: the Syrian Government, backed up by Russia, Hezbollah and Iran, led by the long term Syrian president, Basha al-Assad, the Syrian Opposition, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and Syrian Kurdistan (Royava), supported by international forces including the United States, Canada, and France. By August 2015, a death toll of over 250,000 was estimated by the United Nations.⁴

³
As evaluated by the UNCHR’s *Global Trends Report: World at War*, published on June 18, 2015.

⁴
As of January 31, 2016 no new death toll has been published by the UN since August 2015. <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12008.doc.htm>

— The European Union migration policy

The conflict in Syria started in early 2011 (as a result of Arab Spring protests) but it hasn't been until the spring of 2015 when the European migrant crisis was widely covered in media. This situation became critical due to the dramatic growth in the numbers of refugees' deaths on the Mediterranean and numerous attempts to cross borders illegally. It brought increased public attention to question how Europe should deal with these dramatic circumstances. What is essential to understand illegal border crossings is The Dublin Regulation—it determines which member state of the European Union is in charge of processing the request of asylum seekers from outside the union. On principal the first country entered (in practice Italy or Greece) is responsible for registering the asylum application and taking fingerprints.⁵ The reason behind that is to prevent asylum applicants from sending many requests to numerous EU member states. If the asylum seeker travels later to another member state, he can be transferred back to the one he has been registered in at first. Many asylum-seekers cut or burn their fingerprints to avoid being registered at the first European Union's member state. The rise of migrants and refugees travelling illegally in Europe has raised doubt about open-borders and provoked a dispute over the Schengen Agreement of joined area without border checks that only remained on external Schengen borders. The Schengen Agreement includes 26 European countries—22 of the 28 European Union member states, plus four EFTA States. It means that once in the European Union, migrants could easily move around with no limits nor supervision. On August 21, 2015 Germany suspended The Dublin Regulation for Syrian refugees which means that all deportations to other European Union's

⁵ Collecting biometric data such as fingerprints, iris scans and photographs is the basic registration system for refugees, deployed by the UNCHR since 2006. It also helps to estimate the number of people on the move.

countries would be hailed. The German decision was a recognition of the fact that member states at the external borders couldn't be left alone to deal with the large number of asylum seekers. So far no other membership state has followed Germany's decision.

According to Eurostat (a directorate-general of The European Commission), the number of asylum-seekers from non-EU countries during the second quarter of 2015 reached 228,600 of which 93% had applied for the first time. In the EU, the biggest volume of asylum applications was in Germany (38% of all applications in the EU), Hungary (15%) and Austria (8%). Demands of 46% of total applications were positive. The number of asylum requests from Syrians was 44,000 and 58% were positive. These figures consider only registered refugees and it is impossible to estimate how many of them are moving illegally around Europe.

Despite the official stand of the European Parliament on the European migrant crisis, Western governments have been reacting neglectfully to accommodate refugees and it took a drowned Syrian child, Alan Kurdi,⁶ found by the sea on the Turkish coast in September 2015, to force Europe's leaders to finally acknowledge not just the scale of the refugee crisis but also their own legal and moral responsibilities. Europe did not act united—no doubt mindful of its own brutal history, Germany has outdone all others by offering to take in half a million refugees a year, while Sweden has offered all Syrians who arrive permanent legal residence.⁷ Refugees seem to be regarded as a threat and a problem, for governments and citizens that automatically label migrants as a threat. The truth is they're escaping what people in Europe fear, the ISIS terror and the civil war where Syrians have to kill each other.

The number of asylum requests from Syrians shows how successful they were in travelling up north despite the fact that for many of them it was their first time in Europe. The question lies in their infinite determination—how does one act upon when arriving in an unknown territory? The access to information is a crucial demand of refugees on the road. A smartphone is a tool that provides the wireless Internet connection with quickly updated data and what's maybe even more important, to keep in touch with family and friends left behind. It seems to be the most valuable device for people escaping war and persecution who hopes to find safety elsewhere.

⁶ Initially the boy was reported as Aylan Kurdi.

⁷ John Lee Anderson, "Where Refugees Want to Go", *The New Yorker*. Accessed December 7, 2015.

**The most
valuable item**

— The distant–shrinking technology



Jacobia Dahm, The Balkans, 2015

During the *Lesson from the Syrian Refugees Crisis: Towards New Global Coordination* conference at The Graduate Institute, Geneva on October 27, 2015 William Swing, the Director–General at the International Organisation for Migration, named the digital revolution one of the root causes for migration. He emphasised the fact that well–beyond 3 billion people are connected to the Internet what makes almost a half of the world’s population.¹ It should come as no surprise that refugees are part of the online community as well. Swing identified the Internet as one of the “distant–shrinking technologies.” The online flow of information blankets the world with global interconnections. Every kind of information appears to be easily accessible digitally. That seems to be a key service of the Internet—in its various forms of Google, Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter or Amazon, social networking services, and news broadcasts. It’s about nothing more but seeking and finding what one needs to fish out in the endless sea of data and in the end benefit from it in both physical and virtual realities.

A smartphone enables a wireless and fast way of communication, especially valuable for long distance. Its popularity lies in mobiles’ efficiency, access to network in the most places on the globe and how handy a device is. With its development, mobiles started to transfer different kind of data, not only sound as originally it was, but also text, image, and video. Tesla predicted that wireless would be a meaningful mean for a society:

[...] very efficient in enlightening the masses, particularly in still uncivilized countries and less accessible regions, and that it [would]

¹ As of February 1, 2016 according to Internet Live Stats, around of 40% of population has an internet connection and it’s constantly increasing.

add materially to general safety, comfort, and convenience, and maintenance of peaceful relations.²

The popularity of smartphones was followed by the widespread of social media. Almost everyone can create an account, log in, send a message, tweet, share, record, take a picture and so on. Mobiles are all-purpose media devices that are handy, cheap and they enable to access online reality practically everywhere. Social media are a part of Web 2.0 that describes World Wide Web sites. A Web 2.0 site emphasises user-generated content, usability, and interoperability. It allows users to interact and collaborate with each other as creators of content in a virtual community, in contrast to Web sites where people are limited almost only to passive viewing. Examples of Web 2.0 include: social networking sites, blogs, wikis, and video sharing sites. Web 2.0 amplifies the “information gathering” we’ve been practicing all way long. And social media are all about information. Burt Herman, co-founder of Storify,³ stated in the talk with MIT Media Lab that “future of media is about building communities.”⁴ Social media make people feel that they’re not only subscribers, but members and contributors—they make masses feel important. Manuel Castells writes on the information technology that Web 2.0 sites are part of:

For the first time in history, the human mind is a direct productive force, not just a decisive element of the production system.⁵

Castells emphasises that each revolutionary technological change should be investigated in the social context it takes place and by which it’s being shaped. He declines the idea of the “technological determinism,”⁶ but he underlines that society cannot be understood nor represented without its technological tools. Smartphones and social networking sites are the most basic tools of modern society. It shouldn’t be referred to in any form as a determinism, neither technological nor social, but technology shapes life and is being shaped by it. Alex Pentland, a MIT professor, in his book *Social physics: how good ideas spread* accentuates that:

Idea flow is the spreading of ideas, whether by example or story, through a social network—be it a company, a family, or a city. This flow of ideas is key to the development of traditions, and ultimately

of culture. Further, being part of this flow of ideas allows people to learn new behaviors, without the dangers or risks of individual experimentation, and to acquire large integrated patterns of behavior, without having to form them gradually by laborious experimentation.⁷

The digital flow of information, broadcasted on social media has also a crucial role for the shaping of communities. Sharing one’s experience enables the viewers to get personal insights without the “individual experimentation.” The European migrant crisis has been lasting almost for a year so far and many waves of migrants went through. The lucky ones that have successfully reached their European destination, share information on the social media for others to benefit from their experience. Everyone knows it’s a risky journey, but maybe it’s no longer a journey into the unknown.

Syria is ranked as a “lower middle income” according to the World Bank⁸ and its citizens can easily afford smartphones. Yet there was a lot of discussions in media on Syrian migrants travelling illegally in Europe, asking for an asylum, but at the same time having mobiles—as if smartphones still remain an index of social status (it sadly resonances the idea of Thorstein Veblen from 1899 that the consumption of goods is the indicator of prestige and social position).⁹ It proves how narrow-minded and naive the Western society is to think of mobile phones in general, not to mention the rejection of possible equality to benefit from technological development. Having a smartphone does not make refugees any less eligible for aid and support. In the Arab Spring revolution in Egypt, mobiles played a crucial role in organising protests and mobilising citizens—it was considered “revolutionary and innovative.” Smartphones and social media helped the Egyptian population to raise its voice in order to bring down the totalitarian authority—so why it seems less acceptable to the Western society with Syrians making their way through Europe?

The smartphone technology is not a very sophisticated one and it’s in common use nowadays which contributes in lowering the price of a single device. The habit to change it each 2–3 years influences its accessibility—the price of slightly older models drops significantly. Mobiles are main tools everyday on the global scale, so why they should be less useful for people that are in desperate need of communication, updated information and remote access to the Internet? Smartphones are the links to the family and

² Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2015, p. 275

³ Storify is an informational network whose users curate the content of social media to create stories. Such cooperative community of storytellers brings a wide perspective to important political and social events.

⁴ Matt Carroll, “The power of brand and building community”, *A Medium Corporation*. Accessed May 28, 2015.

⁵ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Chichester: Wiley–Blackwell, 2010, p. 31

⁶ The term is believed to have been coined by Thorstein Veblen; it presumes that technological development drives social and cultural change.

⁷ Alex Pentland, *Social physics: how good ideas spread – the lessons from a new science*, Victoria: Scribe Publications Pty Ltd, 2014, p. 44

⁸ As of February 2, 2016. <http://data.worldbank.org/country/syrian-arab-republic>

⁹ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, New York: Dover publishing, 1994

10
Power banks are external pre-charged batteries.

11
Photographed by Tyler Jump in the refugee camp in Lesbos set up by the International Rescue Community. Published on September 4, 2015. <https://medium.com/uprooted/what-s-in-my-bag-758d435f6e62#zi1ekzx4i>

friends back at Syria but also the ones abroad. They are quite literally the “vital tools.” Even to the extent that Syrian refugees have taken them along on the road and also backup mobiles, chargers, and power banks¹⁰ to never be disconnected as documented in a project by The International Rescue Community *What’s in my bag?*¹¹

A mobile phone is a medium to access social media with its useful, user-generated content and it may be the key to refugees’ travels in Europe. Social media provide one thing that is crucial for them to make it into the unknown—guidance and support. Migrants are able to find necessary and useful information shared by the fellows who have already succeeded. The online flow directly affects the physical world and it drives the migration.

— A digital life-jacket

As mentioned in the previous chapters, it’s been echoed in the mass media how valuable smartphones are to migrants. Some find the way refugees operate with social media as an overstep, some see it as a modern phenomenon when technology is transformed by circumstances and by people whom it serves. The last big migration to and in Europe was just after World War II and since then mobile technology has significantly developed. The on-going influx of refugees to Europe gives the unique opportunity to investigate how technological advancement has altered migration patterns. The initial research was axed on the articles published online as the European migrant crisis had been unfolding in 2015. The aim of the research methodology was reaching and contacting people who were in the field, mostly media related such as journalists and photographers, but humanitarian aid organisations, NGOs, and volunteers as well.¹² The objective was to collect direct insights from professionals who documented the European migrant crisis and who were able to observe refugees on the run in person.¹³ The refugees’ use of smartphones and how they operate with social media places a common device and popular social networking services in a new context.

Most articles covering the European migrant crisis mentioned the importance of mobiles phones, stated by the refugees themselves. Whether it was exaggerated in the mass media or not, there’s no doubt that the ongoing crisis unveiled a new need of modern migrant: the electricity and the Internet connection. It is well-documented how migrants rely on such apps as WhatsApp, Viber, and Facebook Messenger. These are the main communication channels and Google Maps provides a necessary navigation support. It brings a new light to a smartphone’s operability.

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Every information in the following section came from personal e-mail communication. If otherwise, it’s stated.

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Initially I was also to conduct interviews with Syrian refugees in Geneva. As of December 2015 no Syrians were under support of refugees centres (foyers). What I found is also that most of Syrian refugees arrived to Switzerland directly by plane from Beirut, Lebanon thanks to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) that organises such transfers. Migrants hadn’t travel on their own so smartphones didn’t have much impact on their journeys.

Syrian refugees use smartphones to communicate with their family and friends left behind, or those awaiting them somewhere in Europe and that's no surprise as it's the most basic function of mobiles. What's more interesting is how they interact with the online community of fellow travellers or have succeeded in reaching one of the European countries. This new kind of a society is a product of modern times, Internet access and devices that enables the connection. Social media might be a modern and innovative mean to maintain a community in dispersion. The smartphone is one step before personal computers and tablets as it's more handy,¹⁴ has a longer-lasting battery, fits in a pocket and is an all-media device that can transmit different kind of data. Size matters, especially for people that have left their homes often with nothing.

Smartphones are often the refugees' most valuable possession as *What's in my Bag?* project shows. As the very first step to reach Europe is trying to cross the Mediterranean, they try to protect their devices from getting wet. Tania Karass is a freelance journalist who was covering during the summer the refugee crisis exclusively. She described how many refugees had arrived on the Greek islands with their smartphones wrapped in several layers of plastic and further protected inside waterproof cases that they wore around their necks to avoid any risk that the mobiles might have gotten wet from the waves during the sea crossing. To most people their mobile phones are valuable possessions, but contrarily to the refugees, their lives do not depend on an electronic device. In the case of refugees, a smartphone has got a new context, but the way it is used has not changed, as written by Jacobia Dahm who is a freelance photographer. In the summer of 2015 she decided to fly to Izmir, Turkey¹⁵ to follow refugees on their way to a Greek Island, and on through the Balkans. She emphasised that a smartphone has become more important for refugees, but the main motivation to use it remains the same. Smartphones do not only offer guidance, but they give hope. The refugees' mode of using a mobile modifies its meaning and its value—it's not only about being "online," but maybe keeping "alive" as well. This tool is more important as it is the main link to their old lives, keeping in touch with the beloved ones and storing digital memories. Dahm concisely stated that smartphones are indeed more crucial for refugees, whether to carry on their journey or to keep their hopes and morale high, but the main cause to use them is the same as for every mobile's owner—to stay connected, it's a common motivation. Refugees have cut off their families and they find

¹⁴ Though Tania Karass mentioned that one refugee had brought a laptop with him.

¹⁵ Jacobia had chosen Izmir as her starting point as it is where most refugees find smugglers to provide them with a boat to cross the Aegean Sea.

themselves in risky situation so clearly context changes, but it does not affect mobiles hugely, she declared:

They pull up maps, connect with their friends, send and receive poutier and check the weather. Refugees do use mobiles in different degree, but not in a kind.¹⁶

The very first thing refugees did upon arrival on dry land in Greece was to call home and let their relatives know they were alright and safe—as Karass stated:

They often call before even putting on dry clothes or eating, even though they've been without food and water in wet conditions for several hours while crossing the sea.¹⁷

She also explained that some coastal areas on Greek islands like Lesbos, are close enough to Turkey that a signal from Turkish cellphone networks could be still picked up so refugees kept on using Turkish SIM cards they'd got there. But if refugees didn't get reception they would immediately start looking for a Wi-Fi signal to send a message through smartphones' applications. They call home using apps like WhatsApp, Viber, Skype, Line and Facebook Messenger.

Nicolae Schiau, a Swiss journalist, travelled with a group of Syrian youngsters from 13 to 24 years old for almost a month. His excursion brings a brand new light to the refugees' travel throughout Europe. He claimed they were completely addicted to their mobiles.

I had also read about this interesting aspect of migrants having cellphones and people in Europe being completely amazed—"Oh, they've smartphones," and that was one of my first questions. I was travelling with 6 kids and they're completely addicted to their mobile phones. It's like everybody here, everyone has a tablet or a smartphone so it's not that different. For us it seems to be logical to have it, I've a mobile because I need one. When I told those boys—"You know, a lot of people in Europe are amazed that you've smartphones," they laughed back at me.¹⁸

¹⁶ Jacobia Dahm, e-mail message to author, January 13, 2016.

¹⁷ Tania Karass, e-mail message to author, January 3, 2016.

¹⁸ Interview with Nicolae Schiau, December 11, 2015 (see appendix).

What is surprising is that such adolescents did not benefit from the use of smartphones and social networking services as much as it was depicted in the mass media. Indeed, they did use mobiles to communicate, mostly through WhatsApp, with their friends, but they watched pictures and videos, and what seems a complete waste of battery when one's does not know where and when a next socket might be accessible, they kept on playing games. They didn't bother to save the battery if they might've been in a desperate need of information later. Nicolae admitted to be disappointed of the misuse of smartphones by the teenagers—they did not look for important, useful information. Smartphones, was accurately called by him, “une bouée psychologique,” a mental equivalent of a rescue life jacket. As the Syrians he travelled with are still young, they tried to keep on being kids as long as they could, even at such hard times—that may explain using smartphones also simply for entertaining reasons.

Karass underlines that social media are the most important means that refugees have to keep in touch with families and friends in the digital era. Facebook and Instagram help them to reconnect when they end up in far-flung location around Europe and the world, and sadly they may never all be in the same place. Many refugees “check in” on Facebook when they finally reach their end destinations in Europe. Facebook also helps refugees and their relatives to keep tabs on each other, wherever they are. Many refugee registration camps offer free Wi-Fi and phone charging stations as recognised by most of my interlocutors. Mobiles and online connections are not a luxury, but a necessity. Schiau was the only one to bring up the brand of smartphones:

They don't have iPhones, they've Samsungs. Samsung is covering the world.¹⁹

The European migrant crisis is the first migration influx in a fully digital age and the modern technology has transformed how the exodus is unfolding. Refugees do rely on the “lifeline” that keeps them in touch with families—it's obligatory to send updates as often as possible, as lack of information might mean bad news. It works for both sides of this lifeline, it's also about being sure that their relatives are safe in war-torn Syria. And the information that could be found online does encourage more people to travel on their own. The journalist Matthew Brunwasser flew to Belgrade,

Serbia to cover the crisis at its peak in August 2015. He wrote (personal communication, October 18, 2015) that refugees depended on real-time updates about routes, transport, arrest, and possible places to stay or find the Wi-Fi connection, keeping in touch with family and friends at the same time.

Travelling is not only about crossing borders, it is marked by tiredness, helplessness, hours of walking in silence that is interrupted by the sound of notifications. It is really monotonous. Amelia Iraheta volunteered in the Jungle of Calais for over two months where many refugees stayed for a long time hoping they would succeed in getting to the United Kingdom. She highlighted that WhatsApp was popular enough that the shops that sprung up in camp sold data credits. Iraheta underlines how big of an advantage a smartphone is to a refugee. It not only let refugees to call home but also allows to call someone at the camp for a help when badly beaten by police or lost and get some type of help. It was also easier to find refugees to bring them something special like food or a clothing item.

Some of the refugees we met would use WhatsApp to call home, and to text. Some would use Facebook. In fact, sometimes they would use Facebook to weave a false story about where they were so that their families would not worry. I distinctly remember one man I met telling me that he posted photos of food sometimes, or of photos of other places in France that he would find online, so that his mom would not know he was living in the Jungle. I one time let an Eritrean boy of 15 years old borrow my phone because he hadn't talked to his mother in 6 months, since he'd left on the journey that brought him to France. He cried tears of relief as she answered the phone, and I could hear her crying as well. He had been robbed in his first few days after leaving and had his phone stolen.²⁰

Sam Nemeth is a Dutch journalist who experienced for himself how refugees communicated. Nemeth met a Syrian refugees in Lesbos²¹ that was initially introduced as Ideas.²² He agreed to share his journey with Nemeth to broadcast on Facebook. Nemeth and Ideas were using WhatsApp to communicate, Ideas share with him photos and news from the road. He also has used a GPS app to share his current location, record video and audio messages that truly depict the European migrant crisis

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Amelia Iraheta, e-mail message to author, January 28, 2016.

21

Lesbos faced the uncontrollable flux of refugees from Syria, arriving from Turkey and the vacationers didn't know how to respond to it. As described by Sam Nemeth, “They discuss it when having dinner in one of the harbor restaurants, overlooking the first contact relief work. The awkwardness of the situation does not seem to get through to them.”

22

Ideas couldn't have been introduced by his real name. Later he has been granted an asylum status is known back again as Mohammed Khrata, and lives in Rotterdam, Netherlands.

19

Interview with Nicolae Schiau, December 11, 2015 (see appendix).

from the “inside.” Sam Nemeth said that on the road, refugees mostly use WhatsApp to exchange all kinds of information and experience and to communicate. When there’s a Wi-Fi connection migrants switch to Facebook and Facebook messenger as they have more advanced options of data transfer.

Migrants when travelling use mainly WhatsApp, to exchange all kinds of experiences and to communicate, also with the smugglers. The reason is mainly because WhatsApp is light and there’s no expensive foreign phone subscription needed. When they find Wi-Fi connection they mainly use Facebook, because of the extended possibilities. They use Facebook to sell or exchange commodities, search legal advice, or to find friends.²³

It was also noticed by Nicolae Schiau that refugees, instead of texting, send mostly audio messages when possible (by Facebook or WhatsApp). Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram are named by Pete Kiehart, a photographer that was covering the migrant crisis in September, in Hungary, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Austria, as the most often used by migrants. He also mentioned refugees using as well:

We also used Google Translate to communicate. I also understand that there are some apps (PDFs, essentially) that were illustrated instructions of how to go to Europe. I believe many of them are using their phones to communicate with family and friends back home, as well as communicate with their fellow travellers—border crossings and places where authorities loaded refugees onto buses were always tense moments, as families and friends could often get separated in the crush of humanity. Lastly, there is a lot of boredom on the trail—often migrants found themselves waiting in train stations or camped on the side of the road waiting for transport. I think sometimes they used their phones simply to pass the time.²⁴

Refugees came to rely on their phones as they made a passage to a, hopefully, better life. Many journalists wrote on how refugees had been using Google Maps to locate and to guide themselves in an unknown European country, “whether to turn left or right.” Illegal border crossing was more

of a challenge before Germany decided to cease applying the rules of the Dublin Regulation and in result all deportations to other EU countries have been halted. Many refugees use apps as pathfinders to show them “the best”—the least dangerous, way west. Ciril Jazbec, a photographer for The National Geographic, also mentioned (personal communication, January 5, 2016) noticing a refugee checking Google Maps to locate himself. Karass described how smartphones were often useful when, during the boat journey, refugees accidentally landed on uninhabited Greek islands. When this happens they would drop a pin and send their location (via Facebook messenger or WhatsApp) to volunteers or aid workers on nearby, inhabited islands. Those people would notify the Hellenic Coast Guard to come rescue the refugees. Schiau also recounted the time he was crossing the sea on a different boat than his “kids.” One of them kept on sending him GPS coordinates just in case the boat might sink. Sometimes people get separated at registration points, or some family members may board an earlier train. People can easily get separated so refugees will use GPS technology and smartphones to locate each other again. For nearly all migrants, this is their first time in Europe. As Paul of Donohoe of the International Rescue Committee said on refugees arriving on Lesbos:

They literally just turn left, and start walking—they’ve had it all communicated to them.²⁵

Migrants know where to go in detail as it has been communicated and shared through the online community of fellow travellers. So Google Maps might be useful, but not as much as sharing information with fellow travellers. The idea flow, as quoted in the beginning of this chapter, and share of online information prove to be an important part of migrants journey through Europe. They get what they need without risky experimentation. And social media are a perfect channel for that—free, fast, and efficient. Refugees share information where to go, to sleep, to eat; where to find electricity to charge mobiles and free Wi-Fi spots, they discuss the conditions at refugees camps. Peter Bouckaert, Human Rights Watch’s emergencies director, stated:

Most of the Syrians fleeing are educated and urban, so they have the funds and the exposure to use smartphones effectively.²⁶

25 Hanna Kozłowska, “The most crucial item that migrants and refugees carry is a smartphone”, *Quartz*. Accessed December 7, 2015.

26 Patrick Witty, “See How Smartphones Have Become a Lifeline for Refugees”, *TIME*. Accessed January 14, 2016,

23 Sam Nemeth, e-mail message to author, January 14, 2016.

24 Pete Kiehart, e-mail message to author, January 14, 2016.

But there're obviously a dark side to the data flow; migrants share information on smugglers as well. Social networking services such as Facebook and WhatsApp have become a black market for people traffickers, offering their services for unbelievably high prices. Those illicit travel agencies often delude migrants by images depicting a future travel in comfortable conditions. Obviously it has nothing to do with a rickety boat they see upon departure. Nicolae Schiau said that the rescue lift jacket smugglers "provided" to migrants was fake. Smugglers also drastically limit what people can take on board to have more room for more people—but smartphones are small devices that fit into a pocket and they're too precious to leave behind. Nemeth also confirmed refugees used WhatsApp to contact people traffickers. What's worth noticing is the fact that smugglers use common and popular services to advertise their illegal activity. Refugees in Belgrade told Matthew Brunwasser of various Arabic-language Facebook groups on which people traffickers advertise themselves. It seems ridiculous that posts offering illegal smuggling, which far more importantly is very risky for refugees, get "likes." But thanks to social services through which refugees share information, the traffickers have been losing business, because many of migrants decided to go on their own (but clearly benefiting from information shared by fellow travellers). Brunwasser said refugees shared even precise GPS coordinates.

For a smartphone to be fully effective two things are obligatory—electricity and the Internet connection. Paul Donohoe underlines these new demands and urgencies of a "modern refugee" that everyone, in addition to sorting out their shelter, food, water is trying to get electricity for their phones. Despite how much surprising it might seem, it really shouldn't be—a smartphone is a device that, if used effectively, can prove to be useful for a user. Mobiles have a limited battery durability and they need to be recharged. Wi-Fi provides the wireless Internet connection and mobiles become a medium to access social networking services with its useful information. Tania Karass described refugee camps and transit centres as "a mess of charging cables!"²⁷—big generators with electrical outlets attached and dozens of refugees huddled around charging phones. Seeking a socket, charging a phone and being in a constant need of updated information is a sign of modern times. Nicolae Schiau said that whenever he wanted to find someone, the first place to go was the charging area:

²⁷ Tania Karass, e-mail message to author, January 3, 2016.

When I was in the Calais jungle, doing nothing, waiting hours and if I was to look for people the one place I was sure to find them was the charging area. Not in the toilet nor in the kitchen, but there, next to loads of sockets to charge their phones. Charging phones has become their the first reflex.²⁸

Registration camps have charging stations for phones as they are the most important item in a refugee's possession. In September 2015, during the United Nations Private Sector Forum, Mark Zuckerberg, the chief executive of Facebook, announced that his company would help the United Nations to bring Internet connection to refugee camps.²⁹ He said the access to the Internet was an enabler of human right as the connectivity would help refugees to access support from the aid organisations and to maintain links to family.³⁰ Refugees always seek a Wi-Fi connection as emphasised by my interlocutors—in refugee camps, in public spaces, wherever there's a chance to find it. Many refugee camps provide access to it. Amelia Iraheta has worked as a volunteer in the Jungle of Calais for over two months.

In the camp there's an area that all the long term volunteers referred to as Wi-Fi hill. It was a large hill on the back end of the camp that was across from a house in which the owner had unlocked their wifi. Because of this you would see dozens of refugees at all hours of the day and night on the hill taking advantage of the free access to Facebook and WhatsApp.³¹

Jazbec said that volunteers at the Croatian-Serbian border set up a Wi-Fi network to help refugees to reconnect their phones. Karass, next to agreeing to wide Wi-Fi access in some refugee camps and reception facilities throughout Europe, mentioned Disaster Tech Lab and the UNHCR with Vodafone and other European phone companies setting up Wi-Fi in the two camps on Lesbos. Cellphone companies often set up kiosks within or just outside refugee camps to sell SIM cards. It also indicated how the European migrant crisis has affected the interaction between refugees and humanitarian aid organisations. They understood how important for refugees mobiles are and have benefited from this observation to re-define how help could be delivered. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has distributed 33,000 SIM cards to Syrian

²⁸ An interview with Nicolae Schiau in Geneva on December 11, 2015 (see appendix).

²⁹ Somini Sengupta, "Mark Zuckerberg Announces Project to Connect Refugee Camps to the Internet", *The New York Times*. Accessed December 7, 2015.

³⁰ Two and a half years ago, Zuckerberg launched Internet.org, an ambitious endeavour to connect everyone in the world to the web.

³¹ Amelia Iraheta, e-mail message to author, January 28, 2016.

refugees in Jordan and 85,704 solar lanterns³² that can also be used to charge cellphones. In Belgrade aid workers have built a web-based app for the Miksaliste aid station that provides refugees with accurate information about essential services. When refugees log in free Wi-Fi networks provided by aid workers, they are redirected to the website that encloses useful data. Pete Kiehart notices refugees looking up illustrated guidelines on how to apply for an asylum. Online guidebooks in the form of blogs were created, to name a few: Refugees Welcome Pad (that provides information on law, refugee-organisations, health and care in German and Austria),³³ Refugees Info,³⁴ Refugees Welcome (is a Berlin-based organisation that offers accommodation for refugees in private flats).³⁵ Mojahed Akil had fled Syria to Turkey and in 2014 he released a free app to help fellow Syrians in Turkey. It's called Gherbetna, which means loneliness, or exile in Arabic. It helps refugees to re-settle in Turkey by providing mobile-friendly necessary resources. In January 2016 Facebook has launched charity fundraising³⁶ to raise money for The International Rescue Committee and Mercy Corps that have been actively helping refugees. It's possible to donate money quickly through Facebook page, it also shows how much is the goal, how much has been already raised, and how many people have contributed. One can invite friends, share it on one's wall, and spread the word on social networking service. The Red Cross has launched Trace to Face. Migrants in Europe action that aims to rejoin families—it enables to upload a photo of a missing family member or post one's photo with a short description whom they're looking for.

Despite these kinds of initiatives there's still a gap in providing help to migrants. In this field there are a few professionals that could possibly help them decide where in Europe is best for them to go, or to give legal advice. Everyone knew that the refugees were coming yet no agencies were ready to give migrants advice on "what next." As described by Nicolae Schiau:

One thing struck me when we were on the train in Austria. It was the beginning of the last days because we knew that the next country would be Germany and it was supposed to be the final destination for many of them. I saw fear in the eyes of many people as they were asking themselves if it was the right choice, if they were doing right by going to Germany, and if it was the best decision. And they didn't search online for information, instead they just asked fellow

travellers. And the others gave them wrong information, refugees were completely lost, the situation was to become really hysterical. It was really terrifying and touching at the same time to see these people freaking out. They had no one to talk to, there's no United Nation agency here, no office, there's nobody to help them decide. In Klagenfurt my kids kept on changing decision on their final destination constantly—"Okay, we go to Germany. No, we go to Norway. No, we go to Germany." And they changed their minds like 40 times. They were asking me in a completely casual manner—"Should I go to Finland, to my father's family? Or should I go to Belgium?" as if they were deciding what to eat. Their decision seemed to be purely emotional as no factual information was either provided to them nor had they looked for it online.³⁷

A smartphone is not only a communication device, but also a remote database, a link to one's previous life. Tania Karass has emphasised accurately this side of the electronic device:

When you've had to leave behind all your photos and keepsakes back home in Syria with no chance of seeing them again, your phone is where you keep all your mementos. Refugees will often pull up smartphone photos of the homes they left behind, their schools, their friends. They often keep photos of the destruction they've witnessed: bombed neighborhoods, bloody and violent photos of their injuries, or the dead bodies of family and friends. I guess this is both for their own personal documentation but it also helps them justify why they left when anyone asks.³⁸

Matthew Brunwasser also said that for many people who lost their relatives during the war in Syria, mobiles remain the special link to the life they once had had. Refugees take a picture or, as a sign of modern times, a selfie upon arrival as a quick and easiest way to let their families know they've made it and they're safe. It's been widely recognised and commented but when to think of it, an image is truly a universal way of communication. And it can also accelerate the pace of it. Selfie is a sign of modern times. Nicolae Schiau also shares an interesting remark on how refugees operate with WhatsApp—they treat it as social media, they change

32
Matthew Brunwasser, "A 21st-Century Migrant's Essentials: Food, Shelter, Smartphone", *The New York Times*. Accessed October 9, 2015.

33
www.refugeeswelcomepad.wordpress.com

34
www.refugeeinfo.eu

35
www.refugees-welcome.net

36
Facebook page of Relief for Refugees

37
Interview with Nicolae Schiau, December 11, 2015 (see appendix).

38
Tania Karass, e-mail message to author, January 3, 2016.

profile photos often as if this update gives a sign they're okay. Image is a universal representation, a modern tool. A selfie is apparently the easiest way to communicate that one is okay. And being also able to update, is often a sign of being alive.

They take a lot of pictures, but above all—millions of selfies. A selfie is the most basic tool to get in touch. It's a new way of communication and it's so universal—it was really an interesting aspect to discover that I hadn't anticipated. And that's how I met my Syrians, because they were taking a selfie, so it simply meant they were about to leave. So I approached them asking—"Are you leaving guys?"³⁹

The examples discussed above are indicative of how the smartphone revolution has changed not only how refugees survive, but also how relief workers deliver aid, and the kind of aid they provide. It brings a new perspective to such a common tool as smartphone that enables the wireless social media access. With the technological development we can observe and reflect on how we have adapted our innate and taught behaviours to new opportunities. Back in the days when technology wasn't this remote, interactive and accessible, it had a more specific way of using (often determined by place, time, and a definite direction imposed by its creators). Now we can adapt it to our own aims⁴⁰—and that's what can be observed in the on-going flux of migrants from the Middle East to Europe.

Smartphones and social media are valuable means for Syrians refugees on their risky journey to a better life. No doubt, they did play a crucial role in the European migrant crisis and surely they will continue to have impact on human movement. Smartphones offer guidance, moral support, and all the necessary information that maybe should have been provided by international organisations. The development of technology has updated the needs of a modern migrant. The demand for electricity and the Wi-Fi are the main means to be connected, to feel a part of community, and to keep in touch with family and friends. As a result, mobiles and social networking sites have redefined how a modern society might look like, how it could be joined, and how its members share information. No doubt the personal situation affects the content one shares and looks for. What's important is to notice the fact that the global population shares the yearning of being connected, and search for Wi-Fi has become a modern reflex.

39
Interview with Nicolae Schiau, December 11, 2015 (see appendix).

40
Facebook is one of the most responsive social media services—its engineers have developed the Safety Check feature. It identifies users based on the location they've most recently accessed Facebook. By using it, Facebook users can mark themselves as "safe." Originally it was developed for April 2015 Nepal earthquake and it was also deployed in the wake of November 13, 2015 Paris attacks.

Closure

— Here, there, and everywhere



Yannis Behrakis, Kos, 2015

The study case of Syrian refugees using smartphones and how they operate with social media places a common device and the popular networking services in a new context. Their usage did not redefine them, but it showed where the power lies and the popularity of those—in their flexibility. Mobiles and the new media can easily adapt to people’s changing needs, but they’re also shaped by the actions of the users. They’re not only interactive technologies, but above all, they’re “responsive media.” The society’s relationship with its technology is mutual, because they influence each other constantly. The user–operability might be the most important side of modern technologies. How users activate any kind of technology seems to be rather a continuation of the process of its creation, not simply a means to an end to release and sell it to people. A device’s or service’s interoperability cannot always be predicted by its creators.

It proves something else as well: that the virtual and the physical reality cannot be regarded as separated. They’re undeniably connected—the online flow of data influenced the decisions of migrants and it encouraged them to undertake the risk. Even though for most of the refugees it was the first time in Europe, it was not a travel into the unknown as fellow travellers who had succeeded, shared their experiences. The digital flow of information has driven the physical and residential migration. It might be no longer relevant to make a clear distinction between these two realities, between “here” and “there.” Finding a border to these two seems not only compelling, but first and foremost, unnecessary. The cyberspace and the physical world are blending with each other constantly. They are simultaneously effecting each other and humankind that finds itself

in-between. What's utterly shocking, is a story of a one Syrian who did not travel with his mobile, as he had been afraid to cross checkpoints in Syria as soldiers might have demanded one's Facebook password to determine one's allegiance in the war.¹ Cyberspace is not a world where people migrate to start from scratch, it's only a new reality to settle in.

Maybe the question of the online democracy is no longer important and it should not be only regarded in terms of the egalitarian division of cyberspace. A prevalent equality is hard to provide and it will keep on remaining a purely utopian idea. Online democracy should be perceived as the granting of equal access to data flow that is proven to influence everyday life—it might be even more crucial. The European migrant crisis shows that the egalitarian access to the Web remains problematic and it's not fully acceptable by society. By denying to some the right to use the social media as they wish, we deprive the modern media of their biggest value: flexibility, adaptability, and the responsive transformation to meet users' expectations.

As any kind of concept associated with "equality," it still remains utopian—the Web can be used for "good" and "bad" reasons (as the example of people traffickers advertising themselves on Facebook shows), but the egalitarian access to cyberspace seems to be more important and valuable. Emancipation comes from the equal access to resources in the guise of data flow. Clearly it cannot be easily resolved and might be even impossible—but that's how the online democracy should be regarded, not as an unlimited freedom (or is it anarchy?), but as unlimited access to data. We're not only shaped by technology, but in some cases it may really "save us." Social media have become a guidebook and a manual for migrants.

The reaction of the Western society to the refugees using smartphones also indicated that any kind of technology or media are trapped in the popular image of it. "Othering," and exorcising refugees might be a psychological prevention from accepting the fact, that well-off people had been forced to flee a country. But it also shows that technology remains to be perceived as a social index, a privilege only for "chosen ones." Mobiles have become a link between societies that seem to fall far from each other, yet egalitarian access to technological development might be an equaliser and no one should be denied it. Furthermore, there is more than one way to use it and benefit from its innovations.

A migration of comparable magnitude has not been witnessed in 70 years, since the end of World War II. Many things have changed since then, innovation has been infused into nearly every aspect of modern life—with the exception of our response to mass migrations and refugee crises.

¹ Matthew Brunwasser, "A 21st-Century Migrant's Essentials: Food, Shelter, Smartphone", *The New York Times*. Accessed October 9, 2015.

Appendix

— Interview with Nicolae Schiau

Nicolae Schiau is a Swiss journalist and a radio producer for RTS (Radio Télévision Suisse), the biggest broadcast media in the French part of Switzerland. In October 2015 he travelled with refugees and he has created an augmented reportage on the European migrant crisis. Schiau has used social media to share real-time updates. His full coverage is available on www.rts.ch/exils. The interview took place on December 11, 2015 in Geneva, Switzerland.

Marianna Czwojdrak

You travelled for almost a month with refugees, from Kilis at Syria–Turkey border to the jungle of Calais in France. You’ve been documenting the journey on social media such as Twitter and Instagram, by taking sequences of GoPro pictures, and by simultaneously updating the website. Why did you decide to take up this trip? What was your personal motivation to do it?

Nicolae Schiau

Why? I wanted to see with my own eyes what the situation really was, because in mass media you always see refugees moving, walking, and running. So I was asking myself how they have been doing it, it’s a challenging journey to travel on your own from Syria to Europe. From the journalist’s perspective, it was also a good way to create an innovative, regarding technology, reportage. Furthermore, I wanted to give another image of this migration flux, more from the inside and I wanted to take time to do so which is a luxury in our society nowadays. One of the aims was to provide information for the audience that hadn’t had yet an opinion on



Patrick Witty, Lesbos, 2015

the European migrant crisis. It wasn't about convincing anyone if it's bad or good, I just wanted to show the reality and to let people decide what they think. From the beginning I wanted to do it in September or October, not during the summer because it was full of journalists and mass media were covering this issue quite hysterically—at the time I thought it might be better to wait a while. And I had also read about this interesting aspect of migrants having cellphones and people in Europe being completely amazed, “Oh, they've smartphones,” and that was one of my first questions. I was travelling with 6 kids (they're from 13 to 24 years old) and they're completely addicted to their mobile phones. It's like everybody here, everyone has a tablet or a smartphone so it's not that different. For us it seems to be logical to have it, I've a mobile because I need one. When I told those boys: “You know, a lot of people in Europe are amazed that you've smartphones,” they laughed back at me.

Were they trying to find information? I have to say “no,” they spend most of the time just looking at pictures, watching movies, and texting their friends. It's really necessary for them, a cellphone is “une bouée psychologique.” It's a psychological rescue life jacket. And that's true because they're really need information and they really need smartphones but, unfortunately, they don't look for the right information.

One thing struck me when we were on the train in Austria. It was the beginning of the last days because we knew that the next country would be Germany and it was supposed to be the final destination for many of them. I saw fear in the eyes of many people as they were asking themselves if it was the right choice, if they were doing right by going to Germany, and if it was the best decision. And they didn't search online for information, instead they just asked fellow travellers. And the others gave them wrong information, refugees were completely lost, the situation was to become really hysterical. It was really terrifying and touching at the same time to see these people freaking out. They had no one to talk to, there's no United Nation agency here, no office, there's nobody to help them decide. In Klagenfurt my kids kept on changing decision on their final destination constantly, “Okay, we go to Germany. No, we go to Norway. No, we go to Germany.” And they changed their minds like 40 times. They were asking me in a completely casual manner: “Should I go to Finland, to my father's family? Or should I go to Belgium?” as if they were deciding what to eat. Their decision seemed to be purely emotional as no factual information

was either provided to them nor had they looked for it online. What they used mobiles for was sometimes to see where they are. Unfortunately, I know that—

Like Google Maps, it raises a question about the illegal border crossing. It's the most basic guidance how to reach Europe they can get.

Unfortunately, they were walking and they didn't know where they were so they simply followed the others. So I was walking like, “here we go.” I did not take the same boat as the kids to cross the sea, but I was watching their route the entire night as Jamal, one of them, kept on sending me their GPS coordinates each 10 minutes. Just in case, if boat had sunk, it would have been useful. You have the information, but you don't use any special tool, you just send your coordinates by WhatsApp.

So if I am to say which is the most important network for them, or social media it's definitely Whatsapp, for Syrians and Viber for the Iraqis, I don't know why, maybe it's a cultural thing, I have no idea. That was the only difference between them.

Many articles in the press also mention that people traffickers advertise themselves on Facebook. Have you met people who used social media as a medium to find such an information, a way to get smuggled?

No, it is such a big industry—you just walk by and people ask you and offer to smuggle you, it's worse than walking in Pâquis¹ with drug dealers accosting you to buy dope, it's so easy to find this kind of information. Refugees depend more on clues they share with each other. They label a smuggler a “bad” or a “good” guy and that's the main criteria. Unfortunately I don't speak Arabic, I know such networks exist and I got a feeling, and it's just a feeling that it's slightly exaggerated by the Western press and the society, just to say refugees use smartphones and social media in a “bad” way.

In fact the journey is really monotonous, it's just like walk—shut up, sleep—shut up and go and leave my country as soon as possible. Once I saw this woman (showing me a photo)—she was on her cellphone the entire day talking to smugglers, but she knew she had some good contacts. I was amazed by her kid, saying nothing, sleeping on the bag and just waiting.

¹ Pâquis is the infamous “red light” district in Geneva.

In reality, migrants' travel is not more than this. (Showing me another picture with a boat in it) This is a smuggler that can help you to cross border... These are rescue life jackets and by the way, they're fake. It's a disaster. I was in Paris for the conference last weekend and I told them—"Create an app, create something with information," with real information for refugees to access.

I know that the UN's Department for Innovation is currently working on an app. I don't know if it's only for Switzerland, but it's supposed to simplify the process of registration.

They just lost one year doing nothing. I was so disappointed to see how money had been wasted. Needless to say, the situation is really complicated. In Calais where I was with one of the boys—he's 20 years old—he had tried to pass the fence at night but did not succeed and he started to realise it was not going to be easy. From the camp to the tunnel it's around 5 km, it's a long walk at night. He was crying and said nothing for 5–10 minutes. I wanted to give him space and then suddenly he looked at me and said: "Fuck, I'm stuck here for ever. What's my destination, I go back to Syria and be a terrorist? That is what people want." Obviously there's not much you can say after having heard that. It was my last night there so I said: "We're in the jungle, okay, let's go do something, there're restaurants there, have a nice moment," just to lift his spirit. There were sockets there and you could plug your mobile, so he was on it, reading, reading, reading, and I was quite sure he was back on the track, trying to figure his way out of there. Out of a sudden he broke the silence, saying: "I guess Sony Xperia is the best cellphone," and I was like "What?" "Yeah, it's really the best." "Is that what you're looking, which cellphone is the best one?" I must say I was a bit disappointed back then, but they're still kids.

No discussion that this hard experience definitely affects them, but they're still very young. That's clear that they just try to carry on even though normality is far away. So pretty much they mostly use WhatsApp and primarily for communication reasons?

Only and it's the priority. And they don't text, the most incredible thing is they always send voice messages. You always see people using cellphones

like this (shows me by turning it over), I don't know why, who invented this position.

Microphone is down there, that's why!

Yeah, I know (laughs), but it's still strange, it's more common for them, we don't do it that often. They enjoy discussing with the others and they don't use earphones so you always hear recordings from everywhere.

And I assume finding a possibility to charge their smartphones is a necessity—are they always looking for electricity and sockets to charge them?

Everywhere! In every bus station, even if we stopped for 15 minutes, they rushed to toilets to plug into a socket first. In Turkey there's such a big industry around this misery that they have even invented boxes where you can plug your phone to charge it and clearly you have to pay like 2 euros. In every camp, even in the jungle, as the pictures you have, this is the reality—a maze of charging cables.

You said refugees just followed each other to move, they did not use any specific guidance of social media or a smartphone. So they're travelling together in big groups and they did not cross borders illegally. Even though there's the European Union's asylum policy and The Dublin Regulation, they're moving up north, but... how?

Like this! Everybody knows where they go, everybody knows.

You travelled with them, so there's no control? No one even checked their documents nor tried to stop the influx? People know they had taken the train and they would be arriving in Vienna soon and...

No problem.

Seriously? Because in media it's been depicted as a big problem that refugees do what they want without any control.

What happened in Hungary is a disaster, because borders are now closed and there are even advertisements saying: “If you pass the border illegally, you go to jail.” Every border I crossed, I crossed as if I were a refugee, nobody in Serbia controlled me, in Croatia I was lucky because I met a journalist from the national television and I jumped in his car. And I’ve to say that in Hungary I passed as a journalist because one of my colleagues was badly beaten up there, covered in blood, fucking crazy. But if you’re to enter Austria, nobody checks you, if you’re crossing border with Germany, nobody controls you either.

This is amazing, and media are making a big issue of this flux.

Politics, it’s populism, the reality is that they know what they’re doing by letting them in a country. Then you go to registration centre, Serbia you can enter with no problems and wait for hours to go to a camp and a registration centre. Of course I cannot register myself because I’m Swiss.

So it’s pretty much up to refugees if they want to register there, there’s no one waiting for them at the border to force them to register?

No, they just follow each other and at borders there are buses waiting for them.

And these buses are organised by whom?

The government, well, you have to pay. You have to see this question in the other way—when we know they’re million of people coming on our territory, what do we want?

Move them out.

Yeah, so in Croatia is like, “Welcome, please have a cup of tea, change yourself, you want new shoes? Take these shoes, and get out.” And you’ve 5 hours to leave. That’s what I experienced. And everyone wants to go to Germany, as refugees think the government there knows what to do with them. It’s a mess. I met a guy who was a fluent French speaker from Algeria, 25 years old and he had travelled to Europe on a boat with

refugees, claiming to be Syrian. He said he had sent his passport before crossing the sea from Istanbul, to his family in Paris. He told me that in Klagenfurt and by then he knew he would be in Paris in 3 days for free. Of course, maybe, I guess bad guys took this way, for sure, it was so easy, but I don’t blame refugees, I blame the situation.

Western people are astonished that refugees have smartphones as it proves their situation wasn’t as bad as commonly imagined. Quite contrarily to the Arab Spring, when people organised protests and mobilised themselves by using Twitter and Facebook, and it was regarded as such an innovative way.

Migrants are really amused we find it surprising that they have smartphones and that they use Facebook.

True, but a smartphone itself is not a very sophisticated technology. In addition, we change our mobiles each 2–3 years that contributes in dropping prices significantly of older models.

They don’t have iPhones, they’ve Samsungs. Samsung is covering the world. I’ve iPhone 6 so they were like, “Wow” and they kept on asking me “How much?” I had these kind of questions twice a day. But they use smartphones all the time. They are addicted and they play games. I’m amazed they use Facebook and they don’t use Twitter. Absolutely not. They know it exists but they find it boring.

Well, for people I know Facebook is more common as Twitter seems to be more professional, politics or journalism related. But that’s interesting what you’ve said that they play games on smartphones—which is not necessarily a very useful function in their situation—even they have to know when they will charge it next.

They have external batteries and they share it. I was always freaking out with my cellphone. As a professional I took 4 chargers, and even then I was nervous. Migrants don’t really care, they play, they run out of battery and they wait to charge it. They take a lot of pictures, but above all—millions of selfies. A selfie is the most basic tool to get in touch. It’s a new way of communication and it’s so universal—it was really an interesting aspect to discover that I hadn’t anticipated. And that’s how I met my Syrians,

because they were taking a selfie, so it simply meant they were about to leave. So I approached them asking: “Are you leaving guys?”

So instead of writing a message, they send a picture to say they’re fine?

Simply catching a moment to share with the others. They also do what we don’t—they always change their WhatsApp profile picture, every 2 days. They use it as social media. I’m still in touch with my kids so I can tell if they’ve changed it recently—(goes through his WhatsApp conversations)—No, he didn’t change today, for sure Jamal changed it. They change just to say that they’re okay and safe.

But was it difficult at the beginning to become a part of the group, to gain their trust?

Yes, I had to show who I am, what I do, why. For sure, it was really hard. But I had to talk to the leader, “Uncle Murad,” I met him, that’s the guy you saw on the picture, but he didn’t travel along, he stayed in Istanbul. It’s better for him. When I was in the Calais jungle, doing nothing, waiting hours and if I was to look for people the one place I was sure to find them was the charging area. Not in the toilet nor in the kitchen, but there, next to loads of sockets to charge their phones. Charging phones has become their the first reflex.

We use smartphones on a daily basis, it’s almost everywhere, it’s a common tool nowadays. It’s really puzzling why we refuse the right to smartphones to refugees that are in a desperate need of updated information, a link to their family and friends. All we can ask is: “How they can afford it?”

Yeah, because we have the impression, the feeling, that we’re the only ones.

The chosen ones.

Exactly and that’s a very naive notion. The toughest question I asked was: “How did you find 1 thousand euros to pay people to smuggle you? It’s a lot.” It was a mother, carrying a baby in her hands and she replied: “How

can you ask me this? I sold my life, I sold everything, I had a 6 weeks old baby, you really think I wanted to be here? You really think it was my goal in my life? To risk my life for what?” And I just though how big of an asshole I was.

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Acknowledgments

— Thank you

First and foremost I would like to express my gratitude to my tutor Joël Vacheron who has supported me throughout my thesis with his knowledge and patience.

It wouldn't be possible to write this dissertation without people who contributed hugely to my research and helped me to collect information on the topic: Nicolae Schiau, Tania Karass, Amelia Iraheta, Matthew Brunwasser, Pete Kiehart, Sam Nemeth, Jacobia Dahm, and Ciril Jazbec.

I would like also to thank Daniel Sciboz and Ania Jęchorek.

To my parents who taught me never to be afraid to ask questions and to keep an open mind.

— HEAD
Genève

Design

Marianna Czwojdrak

Typefaces

Baskerville
Theinhardt

Paper

Recystar Nature 135

Research

September 2015—February 2016

Printed

February 2016, Geneva, Switzerland

