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NAVIGATING A NEW LIFE: SYRIAN REFUGEES AND THEIR SMARTPHONES IN VIENNA

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The recent refugee movement triggered by the Syrian civil war has been shaped by both networked technologies and digital publics in an unprecedented way: In the propaganda and counter-propaganda of involved parties, in the response of European civil society, media, and politics, in the tactics of the refugees themselves. In fact, most refugees wouldn't have made it to the cities of Central and Western Europe without engaging in various forms of digital networks via their smartphones.

Also beyond the forced migration itself, smartphones and the connectivity they provide play a key role for refugees: The new life is characterized by the need to navigate and prevail on-site in the foreign surroundings while constantly being engaged in a multitude of digital conversations.

This interrelation between networked technologies and migration has been of scholarly interest for quite some time (Lim, Bork-Hueffer & Yeoh, 2016; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Oiarzabal & Reips, 2012; Witteborn, 2015). The technologies and platforms have radically changed migrants' socially precarious situation by allowing a new quality of long-distance relationship with both family members and the home community (Gifford & Wilding, 2013; Hunter, 2015). Information and communication technologies also help in coping with the complex and often harsh conditions for migrants without legal security (Charmarkeh, 2013; Gordano Peile & Ros Hajar, 2016; Harney, 2013; Leung, 2011; Platt, Yeoh, Acedera, Baey & Lam, 2016; Witteborn, 2012), especially in refugee camps (Maitland & Xu, 2015; Wall, Campbell & Janbek, 2017).

Yet, the complete integration of smartphones and the digital means they provide into the everyday life of refugees is until now a new phenomenon. Only where access to mobile networks is technically reliable and economically easily affordable as it is the case in Europe's urban areas, the digital can become deeply woven into the lives of resource-

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poor refugees by using always-on smartphones as the kind of everyday companions as residents do.

Accordingly, the paper presents results from a qualitative interview study with Syrian refugees who arrived recently in Vienna, the capital of Austria. It analyzes the various ways in which smartphones help refugees in navigating their new life and in facing the complexity of a foreign culture, language, social system.

The smartphone as a permanently connected companion brings a new quality in solving everyday challenges: It provides on the go access to information and tools which help navigate the new surroundings geographically. GPS and Google Maps in combination with applications for public transportation give directions to German language courses, locations of municipal administration offices or the quickest route to doctor's practices. Regarding everyday knowledge, Google also proves useful in identifying regional products in the supermarket or finding equivalents for known, but unavailable ingredients. Meanwhile, YouTube functions as a repository for tutorials ranging from food preparation to cultural peculiarities. And as the only available networked technology, smartphones are also extensively used by refugees as an entertainment center: Listening to favorite music, watching sports matches or the newest episodes of a favorite series, reading blogs and news – everything takes place on the smartphone. Yet, one of the most crucial purposes of refugees' smartphones in the new surroundings is language learning and translation. In the face of insufficient official language course capacities, the smartphone's dictionaries, teaching apps and videos, complement or even must substitute for classroom-based courses.

Lacking the option to meet family members and friends in person, refugees have also established various digital practices of "doing family": Regular group exchanges of selfies reveal beloved ones' conditions; lively chats with videos, voice messages and emoticons allow a feeling of ease and closeness; video-calls make up for other face-to-face meetings as best as possible under the given conditions. The intense communicative exchange also results in vibrant digital networks of self-help: be it mother's household remedies against a nasty European cold, solving the riddles of local asylum procedures, or counselling friends on whether to leave the country or not. Where "going online" is not a prerequisite to digital communication anymore and the device is permanently connected to flows of information and people, the device's affordances can perform new tasks. A case in point is the online status in messengers like WhatsApp. Lacking better means of verification, being online in WhatsApp is considered by the family as equivalent to physical well-being. As some family members and friends yet live in places *without* reliable internet connection, the permanent availability of those refugees who have the means to stay online non-stop is expected also because it increases the chances of digital ad-hoc live communication immensely.

For refugees like those in Vienna, all this results in a new emotional but also very technical, material attachment to the smartphones. The dependency on the functionality of smartphones becomes thus a key characteristic of refugee life where the devices form the constant basis of everyday practices in terms of both dealing with the new surroundings and with the social mesh of relationships which has shifted to the digital sphere.

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