THE EMPOWERED REFUGEE: THE SMARTPHONE AS A TOOL OF RESISTANCE ON THE JOURNEY TO EUROPE

Katja Kaufmann
Austrian Academy of Sciences and Alpen-Adria-University Klagenfurt

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Summary: For refugees from crisis regions in the Middle East, smartphones have proven to be useful on their journey to and through Europe. The paper presents results from an interview study with Syrian refugees who arrived in Austria in 2015 on how they actually used the devices on the move. It becomes apparent that smartphones are not only pragmatic tools, but actually change power relations between refugees and both smugglers and authorities.

With the mass exodus of the comparatively wealthy middle class of Syria, a new phenomenon becomes for the first time largely visible in global mass media: Refugees intently using smartphones – be it on the shores of Greece, on the move through the Balkan states or waiting for papers in some West European city. As the smartphone was originally conceived as an expensive lifestyle gadget for rich customers and has never ceased to have this image, many Europeans don't appreciate seeing refugees holding these devices in their hands while applying for asylum. But the affordances of smartphones do not restrict the devices to entertainment use. On the contrary; refugees make inventively use of the smartphones' universal functions to meet their fundamental needs as best as possible given the sheer necessity to get along on very little resources.

Although questions of empowerment and mobile communication have been prevalent for quite some time with regard to such concepts as local community dynamics (e.g. Svensson & Wamala Larsson, 2015) or transnational and diasporic everyday life (e.g. Kim, 2015; Madianou & Miller, 2012), information and communication technology (ICT) use on the move of (forced) migrants is a very recent phenomenon (see Wall, Campbell & Janbek, 2015; see also Horst & Taylor, 2014; Oiarzabal & Reips, 2012; Ponzanesi & Leurs, 2014). In order to learn more about the apparently crucial role of smartphones for refugees on their journey to Europe, we conducted semi-structured interviews with Syri-

an refugees who arrived in Austria in 2015. The study shows that under exceptional circumstances like escaping a crisis region, the smartphone proves to be anything but a gadget. Indeed, most interviewees couldn't imagine having made the journey without the help of their smartphone. They relied on it to claim their right of asylum against all odds – including the relentless European legislation forcing refugees into pursuing illegal ways.

The results indicate that the smartphone takes effect on three levels: First, it is helpful as a collection of pragmatic tools – like flashlight, GPS navigation, camera or photo storage – all contained in a single device making it redundant for the owners to take additional tools or belongings onto this physically demanding and dangerous trip. Accordingly, refugees prepare their smartphones in advance, e.g. by downloading offline maps or sea conditions apps, by taking photos from home and family as well as of their Syrian ID documents in case the papers get lost in the Mediterranean Sea or stolen because of their high black market price.

Second, the smartphone gives refugees autonomy. By apps and online services, refugees have permanent access to independent information resulting in ways to check what they were told, like the sea conditions when smugglers are eager to assure the Mediterranean Sea will be calm. The connection to other refugees further down the road moreover gives refugees the means to get detailed advice and guidance on how to make this strenuous journey through unknown countries. This allows refugees to avoid trouble to a large extent, and lets them act more independently of authorities and smugglers alike. With regard to their families and relatives, access to both location-based services and mobile messengers plays a crucial role as this enables refugees to organize themselves while on the move, thus reducing the risk of losing relatives amidst the chaos only to be separated for long years to come – a fate many refugee families in other times and/or in other places have to face. Likewise, with smartphones refugees can permanently stay in touch with those they had to leave behind in Syria giving refugees also the means to stay close to the events in their home country by independent reports from people they trust.

Third, the affordances of the smartphone combined with the refugees' corresponding use practices indeed change power relations between individuals and authorities. Refugees with smartphones don't have to start from the scratch only to make the same mistakes as those refugees preceding. They are permanently connected to flows of information and people (see also Castells, 2000) in the form of the experiences and the knowledge accumulated by thousands of refugees. The knowledge is not only limited to past events but includes updates on the things going on simultaneously in other places, at other borders, in other countries. This knowledge changes power relations most directly as it gives refugees options to act, and reduces the information superiority border controls and other authorities used strategically. The shift becomes also very palpable in the case of those who intend to make a profit out of refugees e.g. by offering money change on overpriced rates. Instead of just accepting the conditions, refugees can check the actual rates on their smartphones to then make their claim.
So in the case of refugees, the potential of smartphones as universal devices to actually change power relations and thus life stories becomes apparent once more. Here, smartphones are empowering tools that give new levels of agency to people in states of

emergency. Although it is the connective power of the Internet that lies beneath each and every one of the refugees' practices, it is only by smartphones as mobile devices that this power can actually be applied in such critical situations that often come with difficult conditions. We probably have only begun to grasp the full meaning of a mobile, connected everyday life for everyone in this world.

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